



István Janáky, Palatinus bath, Budapest, Hungary, 1936-1937. Portico of the main building, renewed by Archikon in 2017.
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Revisiting *interbellum* architecture of Hungary

BY ANDRÁS FERKAI

Though there are fans of the “Bauhaus style” and the term is largely used by the real estate market (in an incorrect way), modern architecture cannot arouse interest and sympathy in the majority of Hungarian society. Far from being a closed chapter, interwar architecture does not stand in the lime-light of Hungarian historiography either. This paper tries to find causes of this indifference and highlight achievements in historiography and preservation. Its aim is in particular to report on new scholarly publications as well as case studies that are occasionally good examples but more often controversial.

Historiography

The moment the curators of the *Shaping the Great City* exhibition visited the Hungarian Museum of Architecture in 1998, and pushed aside all archive materials the staff prepared for them, was astonishing. It turned out that they only were interested in Bauhaus related architects and works of the CIAM-group from the period. All the rest (the majority of our architecture, in fact) did not fit into their concept. By that time, our historiography exceeded long since the phase in which only progressive architecture mattered. Publications of the 1980s already broke with the monolithic view of the Modern Movement and observed how the International Style was domesticated. When preparing a large topographic survey of Budapest building stock¹, I realized that the majority of the production is far from pure Functionalism. Hungarian Modernism is heterogeneous: besides foreign influences, there are atypical and hybrid styles plus local and national aspirations. Lately, Art Deco laid claim to a certain portion of modernism². The other feature of modern architecture in Hungary is discontinuity. The promising debut with splendid rationalist buildings and pioneering ferrocement structures before the Great War was cut by the conservatism of the 1920s. The Modern Movement gained ground at the end of the decade and spread well into the WWII when few European countries had any modern architecture at all.

A splendid album entitled *Light and Form*³ presents the best of this production with vintage photographs, as a recompense for the absence of comprehensive monographs. Books on New Budapest or Hungarian Modernism comparable to the volumes published by the MIT Press on Czech and Rumanian modern architecture and the like are yet to come. Scholarly monographs on leading modern architects, with but a few exceptions, are also missing. No doubt, this lag may contribute to the indifference of people and even historians towards Modernism. Public taste that prefers 19th century historicism also may have a share in this problem.

Even the aversion to mass architecture of the socialist period may be transferred to the previous era.

The scant amount of historical studies on Modernism offer a critical reading of both life works and building types under scrutiny. Two architects’ monographs and some articles on mass housing of the period, the speculatively built apartments, must be mentioned. For lack of extensive social housing, apartment blocks constitute the majority of modern residential buildings in Hungary. An emblematic area of middle class rented apartments in Budapest is Újlipótváros with the grand Szent István Park complex in its center. Inhabitants have been proud of its modernity and tended to call its architecture “Bauhaus-style”. At the 7th *International docomomo Conference* (Paris, 2002), I stressed the discrepancy between modern imagery of the apartment houses and their floor plans. The terrace of nearly forty apartment houses that surrounds a new public park facing the Danube, bears all the superficial marks of modernity, smooth and colored elevations, corner-windows, even roof-terraces on the top, yet some contemporary architects did not consider them modern, since they were not designed from inside out. Indeed, the generic type of floor plans rather was the outcome of building regulations and interests of the investor than the decision of architects. Recent studies, therefore, investigate real living conditions in these houses, instead of describing aesthetic values and the “illusion of comfort” in them⁴. While the typical dwelling was the two-room-and-hall flat the number of one-room flats increased. The latter was equipped with a bathroom, sometimes with a hall or kitchenette and what is really absurd, a servant’s room. These minimum flats were leased not only by bachelors but couples often with a child or other relative. It happened that tenants even took in lodgers. This “hedge-hopping of bourgeois needs”⁵ reflects well the weakened financial status of the middle-classes after the Great Depression which was more or less successfully disguised by spectacular facades and luxurious entrance halls.

New monographic volumes shed light on the less-known aspects of famous architects' life-work. A large book on Farkas Molnár⁶, graduate of the Weimar Bauhaus and leader of the Hungarian CIAM-group, first surveyed the whole oeuvre including art, architecture as well as his theoretical and propaganda work. For a new reading of his career, chapters discuss how this avant-garde artist desperately tried to introduce rational building in Hungary and was confined by political conditions to small private commissions and eventually compelled to compromise. In this process, however, there are bright moments such as the ingenious fan-shaped family house in Mese Street (1937) clad with diagonal and corrugated Eternit plates or the first project for the oval Holy Land Church in Budapest (1938) meant to be covered with a paraboloid in section concrete shell cupola (engineer: István Menyhárd).

Another elaborate book with a collection of essays on modern buildings by Lajos Kozma, a similarly many-sided talent of the older generation, tries to look behind the scenes and disclose the architect's way of thinking about living. He has been known as the designer of luxurious villas and apartments with custom-made furniture, and his writings portray him as a functionalist. His definition "the house as an article for personal appliance" is consonant with Le Corbusier's term "living-machine". Kozma's uniformly designed interiors, however, have more to do with the Gesamtkunstwerk idea of earlier times. They "in effect allowed relatively little scope for the owner's individual taste and personal effects"⁷. Moreover, as another essay proves it, Kozma arranged not only the interiors as directors do scenes but also photographs taken of them. A funny sign of the cooperation of architect and photographer are those "wandering" objects that appear on the photographs of various flats⁸.

The author of the latter essay recently published her thesis in which several layers of modernity intertwine: aviation, airports, aerial photographs and photomurals that all meet in the streamlined building of Budaörs Airport (Virgil Bierbauer and László Králik, 1937). In the passengers' hall a photo frieze by Mrs. Elemér Marsovszky psyched up passengers to the flight⁹. The dissertation placed the airport in a broad international context and confirmed its significance within the genre. When UNESCO requested **docomomo** International to propose a tentative list for the World Heritage List, Budaörs Airport was raised as a nominee, but members of the ISC/Registers were frightened on the spot by the decayed condition of the building. The structural concrete was reinforced in a brutal way that destroyed the gracious spatial effect of the hall and sliced the photomontage. The terminal building and the large hangar were granted monument status in 2000, yet there are no funds for a restoration, and this can lead to its falling into ruin soon.

Preservation

In my contribution to **docomomo**'s *Modern Movement Heritage* (1998)¹⁰, an account of the state of affairs in preserving our recent heritage was given. No more than two accurate reconstructions could have been reported:

a shop front and a semi-detached house the exterior of which had been meticulously restored while the interiors were freely adapted to the new function of a branch bank. Whilst there are some more good examples now, conditions have obviously worsened since. The preservation of significant buildings would require a shared recognition of their cultural and social value, yet this consensus is missing more than ever. Scholars and specialists in vain joined forces to propose authorities nearly two thousand sites of the 19th and 20th centuries to be included in the national list of monuments¹¹, not a tithe was actually accepted. Most people still do not like modern buildings and cannot understand why they should be protected. Their bad state of repair, after many decades of neglect, and technical deficiencies discourage investors. Players in the economically driven world are not concerned with heritage unless they are forced to do so or are subsidized by the state. The government ruling since 2010 has been interested in using EU support but have regarded experts and long proceedings of the National Office for Monument Protection as a hindrance for spending these funds and hence, disbanded the office. Its former functions had been delegated to the prime ministership and to government customer services. Subsidies related to heritage go mainly to the reconstruction of medieval castles and manor houses and not to 20th century buildings. Consequently, modern monuments are seriously endangered and, indeed, we are losing more and more of them.

Another difficulty is that expertise is missing. Hungary had long taken part in the activity of **docomomo** International but recently the cooperation has weakened and transmission of knowledge broken. Few Hungarian architects make an effort (or can afford) to participate in **docomomo** activities, conferences and seminars. It is mainly technological experience that is missing but most architects are also not familiar with the principles either. The similarity of modern and contemporary architectural forms obscures the importance of authenticity. Renovating architects tend to replace original materials with new ones to such an extent that listed buildings lose their character. In the case of a terminal building for streetcars on Móricz Zsigmond square, Budapest (József Schall, 1943), the winner of an ideas competition only kept the slender *pilotis* and the thin ring-shaped reinforced concrete slab on the top of them. The three pavilions underneath were replaced by new ones where exposed concrete superseded smooth stone cladding and curved glass panes the original aluminum-coated curtain walls. A former sketch of a pavilion surrounded by curved glass proves, the architect argues, that the original designer might have a similar idea in this case too, only the severe war-years prevented him from realizing his dream. The **docomomo** manifesto indeed admits the priority of the idea against materials but never has encouraged architects to turn a modern monument into a contemporary artefact with no respect of façade proportions and detailing.

A far more acceptable attitude is that of Tamás Tomay, an architect highly sensitive to Modernism, who extended some 1930s villas on the Buda hillside by adding new parts



01 János Beutum, Balassa House, Budapest, Hungary, 1935. The building was restored by Margaréta Mészáros, Ákos Pfmeter and Ágoston Szóke. © Ágoston Szóke, 2009.



02 Károly Weichinger, Pánczél House, Budapest, Hungary, 1932. The building was reconstructed by MM Művek (Miklós Miltényi). © Bujnovszky Tamás, 2010.



03 Virgil Bierbauer and László Králik, Public airport, Budaörs, Hungary, 1935-1937. Terminal building seen from the runway. © Fortepan.hu 132.877. Hungarian Museum of Transport. Kolbányi Collection. Unknown photographer, 1938.



04 Virgil Bierbauer and László Králik, Public airport, Budaörs, Hungary, 1935-1937. Reinforced structure of the passenger hall. © Ferkai András, 2001.

in a contemporary manner. The coexistence of the two substances is convincing in the case of Kajos House (Peter Kaffka, 106, Pasaréti Street, 1931. Reconstruction: 1999), but less felicitous at the duplex house in Kavics Street (Lajos Kozma, 1933. Reconstruction: 1996) where the two-story villa, enlarged both vertically and horizontally, is literally lost in the new bulky and intrusive mass.

A significant modern house at the Napraforgó Street model housing estate (György Masirevich, 1931) was recently renewed. The floor plans and the double-height living room with gallery were basically retained but some parts like the bathroom were redesigned with trendy pixelated mosaic walls. Single-pane glass walls of the living room have been preserved but a second layer was put behind to improve thermal and sound insulation. The thick white French windows behind the slender black metal frame of the original glass walls compromises the look of the building. A replacement window installed within the existing frame would have been more favorable. The greatest mistake of the reconstruction is a new exterior steel stair leading to the rooftop transformed into a roof terrace. The architect proudly imparts that he used the stair of another house in the same street as a model. This one, designed by József Fischer, was alone equipped with a roof pavilion and an exposed stair leading up to it. This sort of imitation is more than dubious in a conservation area. For that very reason, it is beyond my grasp how this reconstruction could be awarded a prize by ICOMOS Hungary.

Napraforgó Street, a Werkbundsiedlung-like model housing estate mirrors every problem of our modern heritage. Nearly thirty years after the regime change, a portion of the twenty-two houses have not been renovated yet, and several reconstructions do not match the expected quality or have resulted in the loss of original details. Fences and lamp posts once were uniform in the street, now every owner decides in what form to reconstruct them. Unlike at the Werkbund estates abroad, there is no local regulation and coordinated preservation here, every reconstruction is unique and designed by different architects. Consultation is prescribed with the local inspector and plans have to be based on previous research. Yet the scientific documentation with a proposal for the reconstruction is financed by the client which guarantees the clash of scholarly and private interests. I undertook research and scientific documentation for three houses in Napraforgó Street. At the first building



05 Virgil Bierbauer and László Králik, Public airport, Budaörs, Hungary, 1935-1937. Passenger hall. © Marsovszky Eleménné és Társa, 1937. From *Magyar Művészet* 6, 1938, 180.



06 József Schall, Streetcar terminal, Budapest, Hungary, 1942-1943. © Marsovszky Eleménné és Társa, 1943. Private collection.



07 József Schall, Streetcar terminal, Budapest, Hungary, 1942-1943. The building was reconstructed by Hetedik Műterem (Levente Szabó, Zsolt Gyüre). © Bujnovszky Tamás, 2015.

(by Fischer) the disclosed color scheme was messed up by the contractor, and original windows were removed despite recommendation at the second house. The third client concerned proposals for the exterior while the complete interior had been transformed earlier. Though there are a few appropriate reconstructions in Napraforgó street, exemplary ones are to be looked for elsewhere. The most successful one is Balassa villa (20, Dobsina Street, János Beutum, 1935) where both façades and interiors regained their original splendor in 2009 (Margaréta Mészáros, Ákos Pfemeter and Ágoston Szőke). In the case of Pánczél villa (20, Töröcsvár Street, Károly Weichinger, 1932), the building has been slightly adapted to the needs of the new owners without seriously affecting its character (Miklós Miltényi, 2010).

It is far more difficult to deal with large public buildings. Two modern churches (Franciscan Church and convent by Gyula Rimanóczy, Pasaréti Square, 1934; Catholic Church in Városmajor Park by Aladár and Bertalan Árkay, 1932–36) are more or less intact, whereas office buildings, department stores and hospitals have kept their original façades at best. A reconstruction fraught with risks finished in 2017 on Margaret Island (Archikon, Csaba Nagy Károly Pólus). The Palatinus Bath, originally inaugurated eighty years earlier (István Janáky, 1937), had been Budapest's first open-air pool. The directorate decided to install a heated indoor pool and a wellness section in the listed building so that the pool park be able to welcome the public all year-round. New pools were to be sunk into the basement of the south wing that contained previously dressing rooms. Works caused such grave structural problems that the whole wing had to be demolished and rebuilt according to the original exterior. It looks exactly like before from the outside but the white-washed brickwork is all round new. The restoration gave back the Italianate building its original colors and lightness, even the perished fresco above the entrance hall by István Pekáry had been repainted. In this respect, Palatinus Bath

is an unrivalled example where the bright and light spirit of Modernism is felt again.

Notes

- 1 András Ferkai, *Buda építésze a két világháború között* [Buda's architecture between the two World Wars], Budapest, MTA Művészettörténeti Kutatóintézet, 1995.
- 2 Zoltán Bolla, *A Magyar art deco építészet 1–11* [Hungarian Art Deco architecture], Budapest, Arítion, 2016, 2017.
- 3 Plank Ibolya, Virág Hajdú, Pál Ritoók, *Light and Form. Modern Architecture and Photography 1927–1950*, Budapest, Vince Kiadó, 2010 [2003].
- 4 Judit Valló, "Belbudai modern bérbázis és lakóik az 1930-as években" [Tenement houses and their inhabitants in inner-Buda in the 1930s], *Tanulmányok Budapest múltjából* 35, 2011, 245–273.
- 5 Eszter Gábor, "A polgári lakásigények mélyrepülése — Az egyszobás cselédszobás lakás" [The hedge-hopping of bourgeois housing needs — the one-room flat with a servant's room], *Budapesti Negyed* 63 (Spring 2009), 91–122.
- 6 András Ferkai, *Molnár Farkas*, Budapest, Terc, 2011.
- 7 Éva Horányi, "The New House — Lajos Kozma's Buda Villas", in Éva Horányi (ed.), *Modern Buildings by Lajos Kozma*, Budapest, Terc, 2006, 103.
- 8 Plank Ibolya "Decorative Pictures — Photographs by Zoltán Seidner of Lajos Kozma's Interiors", in Éva Horányi (ed.), *Modern Buildings by Lajos Kozma*, Budapest, Terc, 2006, 28–67.
- 9 Plank Ibolya, "Budaörs Airport and its Photomontage — Symbols of Modernism", *Acta Historiae Artium* 58, 1, Budapest, MTA, 2017, 167–275.
- 10 Allen Cunningham, *Modern Movement Heritage*, London, E&FN Spon, 1998.
- 11 Pál Lővei (ed.), *A műemlékvédelem táguló körei* [Expanding circles of historic preservation], Budapest, Országos Műemlékvédelmi Hivatal, 2000.

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