



Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignáč Vécsei, Housing complex Unitas, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1930. © Jaromír Funke, Nová Bratislava, 1931.

## Friedrich Weinwurm: Slovakia's nearly forgotten contribution to the European architectural *avant-garde*

BY HENRIETA MORAVČÍKOVÁ

Work of the architect Friedrich Weinwurm represents the most consistent contribution from within Slovakia to the activities of the international architectural *avant-garde*. Friedrich Weinwurm fully matched the idea of a socialist-minded architect, organizer of public life and visionary of a new social order. The new way that Friedrich Weinwurm followed in his architectural work ran parallel to the paths of the leading representatives of the European left-wing *avant-garde*. In Slovakia, these works represented the most coherent allegiance to the program of the New Objectivity, and the vision of a Marxist-inspired architecture. As such, Friedrich Weinwurm held a key role in ensuring that inter-war Bratislava formed one of Europe's important focal points for modern architecture.

In one of his essays, the leading figures of the Czechoslovak left-wing *avant-garde*, Karel Teige, drew attention to the irreconcilability of two salient conceptions of architectural creation, represented on one side by “work on a commission in the limits of the given conditions” and on the other by “the radical and pure solution of problems that moves development forward and leads, in fact, to the overcoming of these existing conditions”<sup>1</sup>. Change in existing social conditions, the search for a new way and new radical solutions also formed the main thrust of the lifelong oeuvre of architect Friedrich Weinwurm (1885–1942). Yet, unlike Teige, he did not find the search for new ways to be incompatible with architectural realizations in the existing situation: quite the opposite, since his “work on commissions” became one of his primary implements towards realizing social change.

As such, the body of work produced by Friedrich Weinwurm forms the most consistent contribution from within Slovakia to the activities of the international architectural *avant-garde*. Friedrich Weinwurm fully matched the idea of a socialist-minded architect, organizer of public life and visionary of a new social order. In parallel, he tirelessly expounded the conception of an architecture based on objective forms determined by function and use, on standardization of layout plans, unification of construction elements and even standardization of qualitative parameters. And he was one of the few architects with a chance to test these ideas directly in actual construction. Indeed, the most original achievement of Friedrich Weinwurm lay in his ability to bring into existence this combination of a socialist program and architectural objectivity.

### An architect of the central European region

Friedrich Weinwurm was born on 30 August 1885, in Borský Mikuláš, a small village at the western edge of the then Habsburg-ruled Kingdom of Hungary, in a German-speaking Jewish family. He began his architecture studies in 1906 at the *Königliche Technische Hochschule zu Berlin*. However, after only six semesters he left Berlin to continue his studies at the *Königliche Sächsische Technische Hochschule* in Dresden, attracted by the reputation of Professor Heinrich Tessenow and his work on one of the major construction projects in Germany during the era — the garden suburb of Hellerau. Tessenow's views on architectural form, his engagement with social housing policy and no less the overall utopian atmosphere surrounding the construction of Hellerau had a decisive influence on the young Friedrich Weinwurm. Here is where his creative approach was shaped by what he encountered: from the reduction of classic forms through the truthful reflection of internal functions in the volume and appearance of the building up to the search for an entirely new architecture. After his graduation in 1911, Friedrich Weinwurm returned to Hungary, taking a post in the leading Budapest atelier Pogány Móric & Tőry Emil<sup>2</sup>.

Friedrich Weinwurm's initially successful career was interrupted by WWI. In the general mobilization, he was called up in July 1914, for front-line service in Galicia, where in October 1915 he suffered a serious head wound, bringing his military service to an end. Still, the dramatic events at the end of hostilities — the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the formation of an independent Czechoslovakia had an equally significant impact on the course of his life to come.



01 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Villa Lengyel, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1929. View of the villa and apartment block by the same authors. © Archive of Architecture oA HU SAV.



02 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Villa Lengyel, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1929. View of the patented steel frame window Kraus. © Olja Triiška Stefanović, 2014.

### A building art to match its age

After WWI, Friedrich Weinwurm settled in Bratislava, which had become the *de facto* capital of the Slovak section of the new republic. Yet for a German-speaking Jewish architect at the start of his career, the situation was far from ideal. The social situation in the new state was highly complicated, economic conditions were slow to improve, a significant proportion of German and Hungarian capital had left the region and domestic investors still lacked the funds for major building investments. Moreover, public commissions were almost exclusively directed towards Czech architects. As a result, Friedrich Weinwurm's client base was predominantly composed of the local Jewish community: it was the Jewish commercial and professional middle class who commissioned Friedrich Weinwurm in the early 1920s for his first single-family houses and villas in Bratislava, Žilina and Nitra. These dwellings are characterized by a highly unostentatious conception of form, great functionality, a complex interior space and a reserved visual aspect in relation to their surroundings. Exactly these houses formed the basis of Friedrich Weinwurm's first solo exhibition, which he arranged in 1924. The exhibition had a wide and favorable reception: the critics of the time announced that Friedrich Weinwurm's buildings "are the image of our age" and mentioned as the goal of his artistic journey "clear, internally shaped simplicity"<sup>3</sup>. Further underscoring the effect of the exhibit is the architect's own essay published at the same time in the Vienna bimonthly *Moderne Welt*, where he clearly formulated his requirements for a new architecture<sup>4</sup>. In characterizing the "building art to match its age" [*zeitgemässe baukunst*], he compared the organization of interior functions in the modern residence to a machine, where the external appearance is the "unchangeable result of the internal organization"<sup>5</sup>. The choice of illustrations only strengthened the uncompromising tone of the text: the simplified stereotomic volumes were given smooth facades and flat roofs with open terraces. In this spirit, Friedrich Weinwurm designed and realized nearly twenty buildings through the 1920s,

including, alongside many private residences, several of Slovakia's first modern public buildings, such as the "Ring" department store in Žilina (1924-1926), or the Astória Café (1925-1926) and the Jewish Hospital in Bratislava (1925-1934). In fact, the massive increase in commissions led Friedrich Weinwurm in 1925 to form a partnership with the architect Ignác Vécsei (1883-1944), with whom he worked right up until the forced liquidation of the office in 1940. During this period, Friedrich Weinwurm was not only the most productive but also the most influential figure in Slovakia's architectural scene; from the mid-1920s onward, his works inspired many successors who naturally assumed his functional schemes, formal vocabulary, or even technical solutions. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we could assert that Friedrich Weinwurm played, through his radical emergence into the architectural scene and uncompromising critical writings, a similar role in the process of opening the paths to a new architectonic culture to the one often ascribed to Adolf Loos<sup>6</sup>.

### The objectivity that we follow today

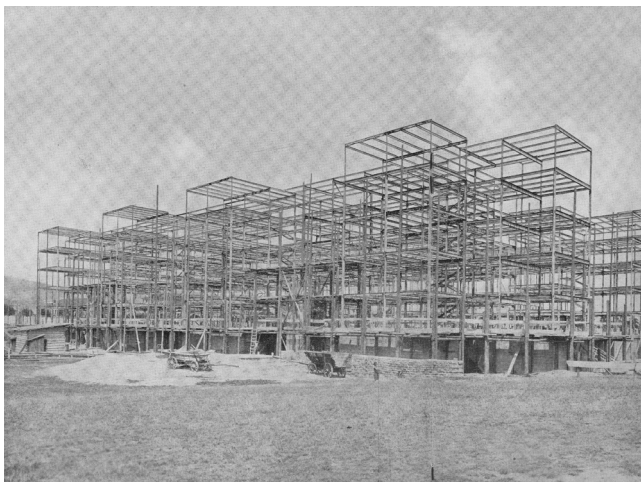
Friedrich Weinwurm's oeuvre was, following the sense of his authorial program, strictly devoid of ornament and strongly subordinated to function. In his villas and houses, we find none of the characteristic modernity-signals of functionalist architecture, such as glass walls, ceiling skylights or open galleries. The spatial concept of most of the villas he designed is marked by thorough functional separation, a traditionally conceived arrangement of living areas (with the possibility of creating larger common areas through mobile walls or door openings) and, contrastingly, unusual and imaginative treatments of staircases. The villas utilized the most modern construction plans and materials, and boasted ingenious built-in furniture, such as wardrobes, storage areas or work-tables, along with exceptional hygienic facilities integrating all the latest technologies of the era. Friedrich Weinwurm made no secret of his rejection of decorative interiors and was convinced that once "a new value emerged... then people would escape from unnecessary furniture"<sup>7</sup>.



03 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Villa Lengyel, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1929. View of the interior decorated by Josef Hoffmann. © Olja Triaška Stefanović 2014.



04 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Villa Tománek, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1929. © Archive of Architecture oA HU SAV.



05 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Housing complex *Nová Doba*, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1933. View of the steel skeleton structure. © Archive of Architecture oA HU SAV.



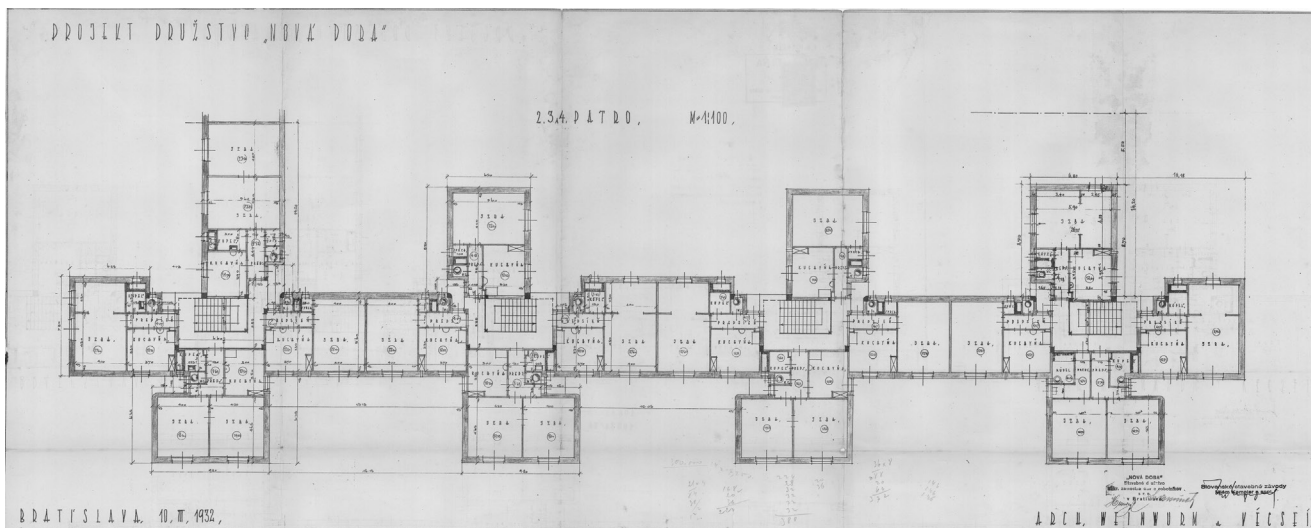
06 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Housing complex *Unitas*, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1930. © Josef Hofer, Archive of the City of Bratislava.

In his argumentation, he even went as far as to publish, in the Prague journal *Bytová Kultura*, a praise for repossessors, defining them as the persons who “with the agreement of the law, force one... to retain from one’s furnishings only those objects that are absolutely necessary, and sell the rest. As such, they essentially help people to arrive at a new arrangement of their flats — i.e. towards modern living”<sup>8</sup>. Friedrich Weinwurm openly cast doubt on the role of the architect in furnishing the client’s residence, assigning this task entirely to trained craftsmen and the individual taste of the residents themselves. As such, it closely matched Friedrich Weinwurm’s ideas of modern construction, where an increasingly crucial role would be held by standardization and unification, limiting authorial creativity.

An intriguing instance of the division of labor between architect and decorator, or more accurately the connection between the era’s most divergent principles in regarding modern architecture, is found in the Bratislava villa of lawyer Arpád Lengyel. The house was completed from Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei’s design in 1929. While the spatial design of the villa bears a resemblance to Loos’s concept of the *Raumplan*, the materials used were extremely simple, while the technology was notably innovative. For one instance, Friedrich Weinwurm here employed for the first time his prototype of a steel-framed window, which he designed for the Bratislava metalworks Kraus and later became used on a massive scale in modern architecture across all of Czechoslovakia. For the interior, though, offers were submitted by two equally renowned Viennese architects, Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffmann. The client selected Hoffmann, who then covered the main living area with walnut-faced paneling and installed heavy upholstered furniture. Several items of furnishings, light fixtures and tableware were produced by the Wiener Werkstätte, or designed by Hoffmann himself specifically for the Lengyel family<sup>9</sup>. However, this form of interior was far from pleasing to Friedrich Weinwurm. He published the villa only once, and only with exterior photographs<sup>10</sup>.

Greater publicity, though, was given to many other of Friedrich Weinwurm’s villas from the 1920s. Many were published in the German architectural journal *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau*, in the Brno magazine *Salon* or the Prague revue *Žijeme*. Two of them, the villa of Florián Tománek in Bratislava (1928-1929) and the villa of the Verő family in Nitra (1924-1927), were even included in the monograph *Moderne villa’s en Landhuizen in Europa en Amerika*, published in Amsterdam in 1930<sup>11</sup>. Both villas perfectly matched the ideas of the “New Objectivity” [*Neue Sachlichkeit*] and moreover innovatively managed to integrate exterior spaces into the functioning of the house, so that they no longer formed merely a supplement to the interior layout but indeed a fully integral component.

At the end of the 1920s, Friedrich Weinwurm’s attention focused increasingly on social questions. It was during this period that the idea of “objectivity” first began to appear in his writings, to indicate a creative method that “step by step, reveals the march of thought — to create elements... that would appear to everyone equally objective, practical, and of course aesthetic”<sup>12</sup>. An “objectivity far removed from modernist games” is how Friedrich Weinwurm’s work of this period was characterized by the important German architectural theorist Leo Adler<sup>13</sup>. Still, the term “objectivity” no longer applied exclusively to indicating the functionally-grounded method of design, but also a socialist approach towards architecture. It is clear that precisely these social and political connotations of the term induced Friedrich Weinwurm to use it as a designation for his own creative method. The way in which Friedrich Weinwurm introduced and explained this concept was, to a certain extent, a kind of response to Teige’s argumentation of the split between working on built commissions and the development of radical new visions. The conviction that “every person has the right at least to a roof over his head” forced Friedrich Weinwurm to “search for the right formal vocabulary and construction elements that for everyone would be equally useful and aesthetic”<sup>14</sup>. This authorial program was enacted with uncompromising thoroughness in all types of



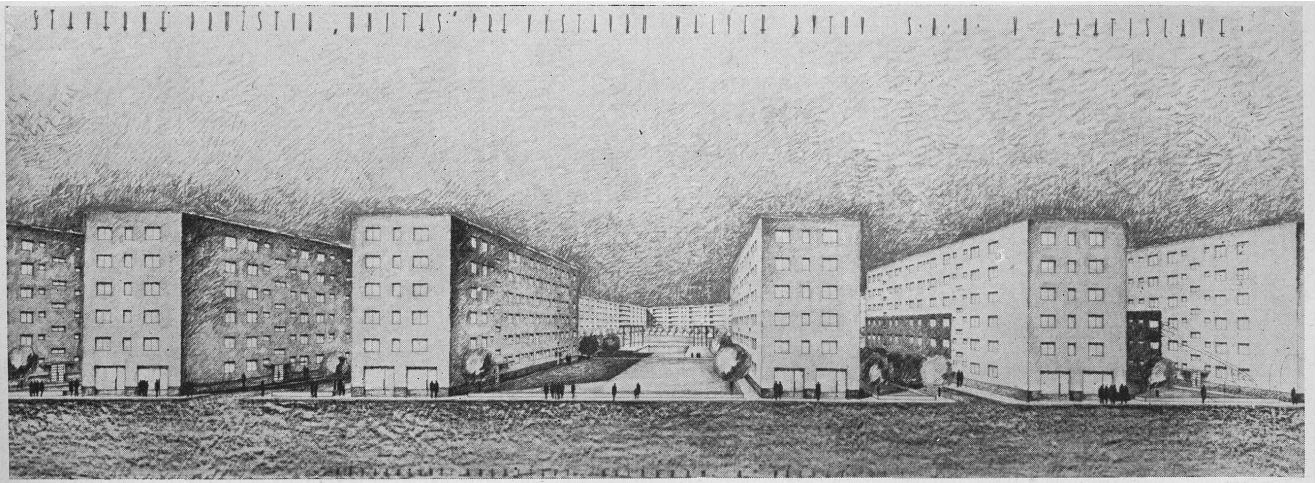
07 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Housing complex *Nová Doba*, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1932. Ground plan of the typical floor. © Archive of the City of Bratislava.



08 *Unitas*, almanach stavebného družstva Unitas, Bratislava, Stavebné družstvo Unitas, 1931. Cover. © University Library, Bratislava.



09 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Housing complex *Nová Doba*, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1934. © Josef Hofer, Archive of the City of Bratislava.



10 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Housing complex *Unitas*, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1930. © Archive of Architecture oA HU SAV.

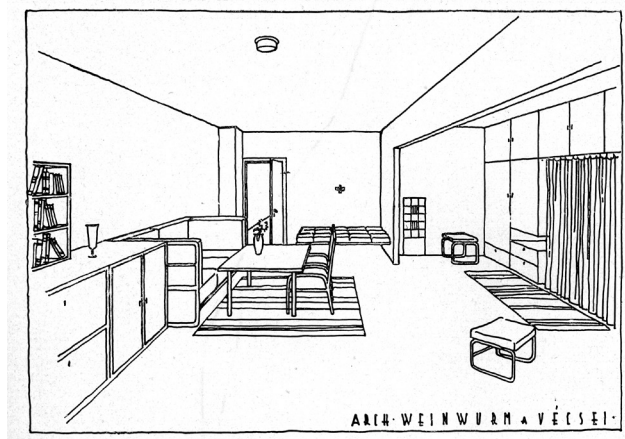
his commissions, whether the design of villas for the social elite or social housing for the masses.

### The new way

At the same time that the critics were praising the “quiet self-evidence” of Friedrich Weinwurm’s villas, the architect was hard at work on two designs intended to provide a radical solution to the housing question<sup>15</sup>. The construction of the residential complex *Unitas* (1930-1931), from the very beginning, enjoyed a reputation as a “massive experiment in sociology”<sup>16</sup> — not only because it was initiated by the Social Democratic party and aimed to test a model for cooperative apartment construction, but even more because its design strove to test all of the latest ideas for modern housing. Friedrich Weinwurm planned the complex as a row structure with semi-public spaces in between, a radical refusal of the traditional solid urban block. The individual buildings were conceived with entrances from open balconies, which Friedrich Weinwurm felt constituted, in terms of “layout and construction hygiene at this time, the only possible” as well as “the most economic structural solution”<sup>17</sup>. More radically, the choice of the open-access typology reflected the conviction that with expected social changes and the dissolution of the traditional family, the private residence would transform itself into more of a hotel-like typology. This particular aspect of the project — “collectivization of housing” — in *Unitas* was noticed even by Karel Teige<sup>18</sup>. With only one building design repeated throughout the complex, it also formed the outcome of the consistent application of the principles of standardization. Friedrich Weinwurm himself regarded “standardization in the relation of one individual to another as an exceptionally important factor, since it is based on the idea that one person does not have any demands that the other does not”<sup>19</sup>. Yet another manifestation of this egalitarian spirit appeared in the design for standardized furniture planned for the interiors of all the flats.

The success of *Unitas* encouraged the Slovak Social Democrats as well as Friedrich Weinwurm himself to start on the realization of an even more complex and extensive

residential complex, with the fitting title *Nová Doba* [new era]. The original plan of constructing 162 small and minimal flats with retail, storage and workshop sections in the parterre, eventually grew three times in size. In *Nová Doba* (1932-1942), Friedrich Weinwurm again revealed his forward-looking intellect not only in the urban plan, but equally in the floor layouts and construction methods. The greatest innovation was the steel-frame structure, used in Bratislava for the first time in a residential building. An assembled steel skeleton, it was hoped, would not only hasten construction but allow, through the unification of individual structural elements, a simultaneous reduction in cost. The realization of *Nová Doba*, no less than its precursor *Unitas*, attracted great attention from architectural critics. In an ethos of building a more just society, the reviewers welcomed *Nová Doba* as “hitherto the most important crystallization of all efforts towards a new human residence”, as “...the result of a cruel if not bloody revolution in thought and architectural practice” and as the revelation of “a massive shift in the interest of architecture from the individual toward the collective”<sup>20</sup>. As for Friedrich Weinwurm, he too argued for his construction in terms of universal human values: for him,



11 Friedrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei, Housing complex *Unitas*, Bratislava, Slovakia, 1930. Drawing of the living space. © Archive of Architecture oA HU SAV.

“no longer important is the fate of the individual, but the fate of the social, dependent on... economic laws and the organizational relations of person to person, person to labor and person to the surrounding ruling forces”, i.e. that “collectivism” needed to be seen as an unavoidable “principle for organizing society”<sup>21</sup>.

The residential complexes *Unitas* and *Nová Doba* represented the first unified instance in the Central European cultural-geographic context of housing estates with small and minimal flats, conceived in the intent of functionalist principles, using construction innovations and modern row-planning, and realized as a cooperative project. For these basic pillars for the idea of social housing in Slovakia, both complexes were included in 1994 in the first draft of the Top Register of **docomomo** Slovakia. Today, after over eighty years of functioning, they remain vital structures, naturally stimulating community life, as it undergoes a contemporary renaissance in the new urban environment, and as such could serve as a model example for urban rental housing.

### Bratislava: an authentic focal point of modernity

Friedrich Weinwurm, as a tireless defender of modern architecture and social progress, significantly influenced the architectonic scene of the inter-war period in Slovakia. The principles of his work, whether regarding architectural form, spatial organization or the construction of individual building elements, were followed by an entire generation of architects. The atelier Weinwurm & Vécsei, with nearly a hundred realized designs, shaped the visual environment of many Slovak towns, though most notably inscribing itself on the form of inter-war Bratislava. The new way that Friedrich Weinwurm followed in his architectural work ran parallel to the paths of the leading representatives of the European left-wing avant-garde. In Slovakia, these works represented the most coherent allegiance to the program of the New Objectivity, and the vision of a Marxist-inspired architecture. As such, Friedrich Weinwurm held a key role in ensuring that inter-war Bratislava formed one of Europe's important focal points for modern architecture.

Yet nonetheless, the captivating figure of Friedrich Weinwurm almost entirely vanished after WWII from architectural history. Many factors were in play: from the Slovak state's persecution of its Jewish citizens during the war, latent anti-Semitism persisting in Slovak society even after 1945, the deliberate reduction of the role of individual personalities in history as promoted by the program of Marxist art history, the post-Communist blanket condemnation of the left-wing avant-garde or Modernism in general, and no less the standard European historiography with its exclusive focus on Western centers, ignoring what emerged on the purported margins of the “cultural world”.

Today, a broader and more inclusive view of Europe's cultural heritage, as well as such organizational networks as **docomomo** International, have allowed architectural history to take into consideration such previously marginalized figures and locations as Friedrich Weinwurm and modernist Bratislava.

### Acknowledgement

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### Notes

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- 2 Henrieta Moravčíková, *Architect Friedrich Weinwurm*, Bratislava, Slovart, 2014, 11-25.
- 3 Gizela Leweke Weyde, “Dario Rappaport – Fritz Weinwurm”, *Grenzbote*, 23.10.1924, 3.
- 4 Fritz Weinwurm, “Zeitgemässe Baukunst”, *Moderne Welt. Illustrierte Halbmonatsschrift für Kunst, Literatur, Mode*, n. 10, Vienna, 1924, 19-20.
- 5 *Idem*, 19.
- 6 Henrieta Moravčíková, *op. cit.*, 33-49.
- 7 Bedrich Weinwurm, “Cesta budúcnosti – Ako budeme bývať”, in Antonín Hořejš (ed.), *Obytné domy stavebného družstva Nová doba*, Bratislava, 1933, 10.
- 8 Bedrich Weinwurm, “Exekutor, hybná síla moderního zařízení” *Bytová kultura*, Prague, December 1934, 41.
- 9 Henrieta Moravčíková, *op. cit.*, 139-149.
- 10 “Nová vilová štvrť v Bratislave”, *Slovenský staviteľ*, Bratislava, 1931, 91-96.
- 11 *Moderne villa's en Landhuizen in Europa en Amerika*. Amsterdam, Kosmos, 1930, 158-163.
- 12 Friedrich Weinwurm, “Das heutige Schaffen” in *Sborník modernej tvorby úžitkovej*, Prague, 1931, 37.
- 13 Leo Adler, “Bauten von Fritz Weinwurm, Pressburg”, *Wasmuths Monatsbeft für Baukunst und Städtebau*, n. 2, Berlin, 1928, 61.
- 14 Friedrich Weinwurm, *op. cit.*, 37-38.
- 15 Hans Josef Zechlin, “Tschechoslowakische Baukunst”, *Wasmuth's Monatsbeft*, n. 11, Berlin, 1930, 518.
- 16 Antonín Hořejš, “Unitas”, *Žijeme, Obrázkový magazín dnešní doby*. Praha, Orgán Svazu čsl. díla. 1931-1932, 232-234.
- 17 Fritz Weinwurm, “Kleinstwohnungsbauten ‘Unitas’ in Bratislava”, *Forum*, n. 2, Bratislava, 1931, 53.
- 18 Karel Teige, *Nejmenší byt*, Praha, Václav Petr, 1932, 103.
- 19 Fritz Weinwurm, “Das Mensch und seine heutige Wohnung”, in *Unitas, almanach stavebného družstva Unitas*, Bratislava, Stavebné družstvo Unitas, 1931, 31.
- 20 Antonín Hořejš, *Nová doba, 2. Etapa*, Bratislava, 1936, 10.
- 21 Fritz Weinwurm, “Das Mensch und seine heutige Wohnung”, *op. cit.*, 10.

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