

# HUNGARIAN ARCHITECTURE FROM 1960 TO NOW\*

(A Survey)

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Received December 10, 1984

## Summary

A short survey is given of the peculiar situation of Hungary in Europe and of the issuing stormy historical events partly responsible for the appearance of peculiar Hungarian arts, for architectural trends fed on popular folk art, artistic traditions.

After 1960, two trends representing different approaches have acted. One is technicism incorporated by housing estates built with panel structures criticized for their rigidity. The other is the trend of "popular Post-Modernism" attempting a revival of folk traditions as a response to peculiar Hungarian conditions.

## Antecedents

Hungary is sited in a region of Europe attained by the wave of technical civilization with a still lively ancestral folk art. This circumstance offers the possibility to create a peculiar national style by synthesizing both cultural components, forwarded by a particular sensitivity arisen in the centuries of endangered national existence. A hectic mechanized civilization and the purity of folk art coexist in Bartók's music, so international and at the same time typically Hungarian. Such a synthesis was attempted by consecutive generations of architects: already by Frigyes Feszli with the Redoute in Pest (1859—64), and later by Lechner, Lajta, Kós, Zrumezky, Györgyi, Medgyaszay, Jánosky, Szivessy, Árkay and followers. Beside international romantic-historicist and modern trends, a popular-national school striving to create a Hungarian national architecture submerged and emerged again like a subterranean river. After 1945, modern, new architecture appeared to be exclusive on the scene. Those acquainted with the story know it was not. After 1950, the "socialist realism" style forcibly created by political decision involved trials with vernacular, archaizing constructions (Béla Pintér: House of Culture in Tolna, Police Station in Budafok; Zoltán Farkasdy: Arts and Crafts School). After the defeat of this experiment the victory of modern architecture seemed to be irrevocable, final.

\* Chapter of a study for the Department of Aesthetics, Loránd Eötvös University. Manuscript, Budapest, 1983.

### Rule of the technicist approach

At the initial euphoria, every modern form was a success. Hungarian architects hurried to get hold of forms regarded as backward in the time of socialist realism. Council seats, party seats, foreign trade offices, hospitals, schools, all were built with a mesh of curtain wall façades. By that time, nobody was bothered by schematism of the technicized environment. The theory of architecture seemed to be defeated together with "socialist realism", and the requirement for an architecture of social responsibility, with an aesthetic meaning, could be renounced. Typically, competency in architectural matters passed from the Cultural to the Industrial Section of the Government.

For a while, nobody wanted to handle architecture as a social, cultural, aesthetic phenomenon. Construction was directed by the competent Ministry of Building and Urban Development keeping in mind the real or alleged interests of building technology. But what does in fact architecture mean to society, whether nothing but building production is expected or problems of the "produced" built environment detached from social problems raised by it can be solved or not? Events in the subsequent period unambiguously showed the answer to be not. At the same time, those directing construction did not put these questions to themselves: sharpening contradictions attained them unexpectedly.

### Mass building — housing estates

Public opinion and specialists are unanimous in considering — and sharply criticizing — mass building products, housing factory-made residential estates as materializations of a one-sided, technicist approach. Essentials of the criticism are:

- The same ten-storey panel houses are built between hills and on plains, in the capital and in provincial towns, in new industrial settlements and in historical town cores — irrespective of the natural, or the historically developed environment.
- In conformity with principles of the Athens Charta, houses are detached in space, without creating urban places helping people to meet, social life to develop. Also communal buildings are scattered. Recent districts have no organic social centres, or familiar, sheltered spaces inviting one to walk or sit around. Semi-intimate zones are missing. Windy spaces between blocks are not considered to belong to the houses, neither are they cultivated.
- Most of the inhabitants are young married couples; there are many children, but it is not commendable for them to go playing in open playgrounds

between blocks since they cannot be surveyed by the parents who cannot contact them from upper floor of dwellings.

- Sizes and layouts of dwellings do not reflect social composition and real needs of inhabitants. Dwellings follow the scheme of nuclear (elementary) families. There are few big dwellings for families with several children or for several generations living together, but there is also a shortage of flats for single people or newly-weds.
- In general, flats are built as statistical averages rather than as variations in real life.
- Schematic purport assumes a schematic aspect. Houses wear uniforms. Façades are constructed with repetitive identical elements both horizontally and vertically. The onlooker is lost in an out-of-scale infinity of elements, feels inert, surrendered to the technical power that created this environment. A housing estate lacks features, individuality, something to emotionally adhere to, at a risk of loss of identity consciousness of its inhabitants.

This criticism reflects our actual approach to this problem. But it would be unjust and historically wrong to ignore conditions at the beginning of industrialized building. On the one hand, an overwhelming housing shortage exerted social pressure on the managers of building. On the other hand: this housing shortage seemed to be relievable — at least in cities — by mass production tools. Reckoning with limited labour, and with even less — diminishing — skilled labour, nothing was left but intensive industrialization, concentration of forces. In the period of oppressive housing shortage, only a modest satisfaction of average needs could be attempted. The insufficient capacity granted monopoly to the building industry. Means became purpose. All these explain the errors committed without exempting anybody from responsibility.

Keeping this fact in mind, the criticism released by mass media is overheated and ignores conditions of that time. Namely the fact is not to be lost from the eyes that industrialized building helped hundreds of thousands of families — dwelling earlier in shops, shacks, subleases, co-tenancies — to housing-estate dwellings much over the average installation level in this country. In the actual economic situation, our country is constrained to keep centrally funded industrialized housing within narrow bounds. But the actual practice of decentralized, handicraft building, making up a high percentage of housing, wastes material, impairs quality, disperses labour, and also, delays the final elimination of housing shortage. Industrialized building is not the equivalent of wrong practice in the past. The essentials of mistakes were not rooted in technology and mass production but in the exclusive economical-technical approach to social demands. The extremes of a stiff,

bureaucratic practice of industrialization and of spontaneous, decentralized handicraft building have to be bridged by an optimized solution fit to utilize an improved technology and an improved technical background.

### Salgótarján, Kecskemét, Zalaegerszeg

Besides housing factory constructions, positive examples of some lesser towns without housing factories have to be quoted. In spite of standard buildings, the development in Salgótarján adapted to the featured terrain produced variegated, even pleasant townscapes. The courage to demolish the outdated town centre and to construct another one is exemplary. The most outstanding Hungarian architects and sculptors were commissioned, who constructed an individual, plastic, expressive town centre. Well-known means of modern architecture were generally applied. Blocks of flats built with an industrialized method more flexible than panel construction obtained pleasant, loggia-enriched façades.<sup>1</sup> In Kecskemét, revival of the old town centre, reconstruction and rehabilitation of monuments, and adding new buildings to the old city succeeded in a successful union of old and new.<sup>2</sup> Variegated, expressively shaped blocks of flats built with cradles according to the tunnel technology created a lively, densely woven, urban environment in Zalaegerszeg.<sup>3</sup> All these exemplify the possibility for enterprising customers and endowed architects to join and to break through confines of entrepreneurial bureaucracy, of creating a humanely built environment, while still making use of technical facilities.

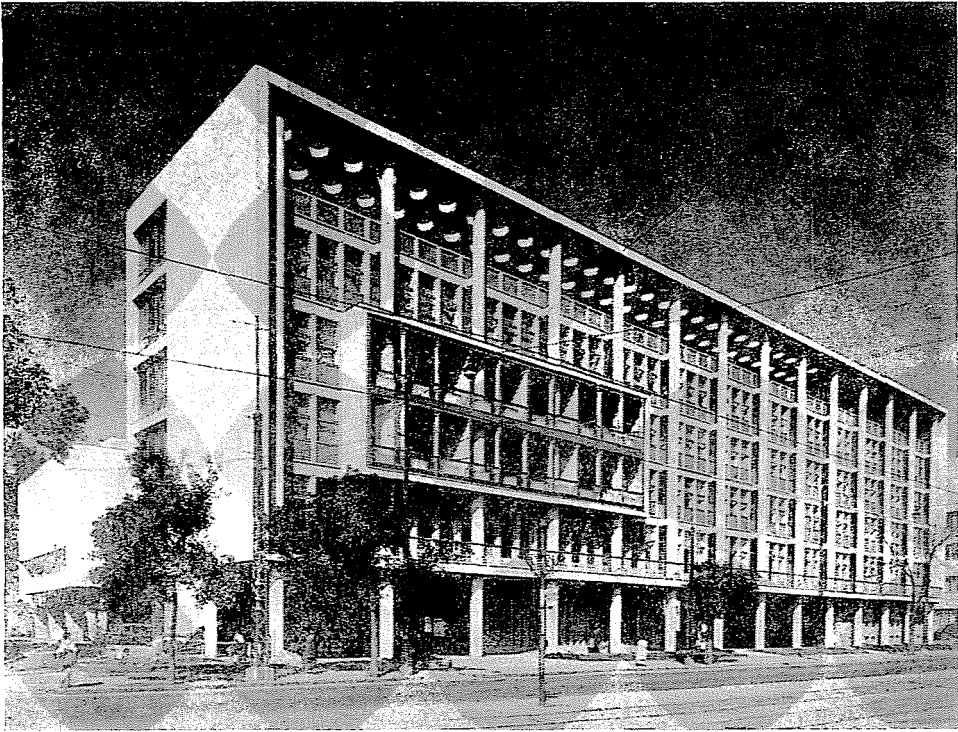
### Constructions with private means

No style can be spoken of but spontaneity of customs, fashions reflecting tastes of architecturally ignorant customers and half-educated builders, nor is tradition cultivated. At the beginning, village fringes featured tent roofs, or for upstarts, mansard roofs. The fine order of "pectinate" settlements is fading off. Recently, with increasing prosperity, two- or three-storey "chalets" with loft apartments emerge. In towns, especially in Budapest, flat-roof, four-storey standard houses multiply, with little modifications. Land use is abominable: these four-storey houses are built on lots for single-family houses, densely side by side. The remaining lot parts are divided by fences

<sup>1</sup> Main square buildings in Salgótarján: Hotel Karancs, 1963, György Jánossy; House of Culture, 1965, György Szrogh; shopping center, 1968, József Finta; blocks of flats, 1965, Géza Magyar; sculptures: Miklós Radnóti by Imre Vargha; Liberty statue by József Somogyi.

<sup>2</sup> Architect in chief of Kecskemét: József Kerényi.

<sup>3</sup> Zalaegerszeg town centre: György Vadász, 1978.



*Fig. 1.* Seat of the Trade Union of Building Workers, Budapest, 1949. Architects: Imre Perényi, Gábor Preisich, György Szrogh

and by bleak concrete paths to garages. No order is left: pitch roof is neighbouring flat roof, Bauhaus-style cubes chalets in mountain style — not to mention fantastic fences. In addition to being injurious to taste and lacking culture, they are wasting material. The riverside jungle of lean-to holiday backhouses, log cabins forms a transition to the subject of environment pollution.

### Recent alternatives

Are there any alternatives to the aforesaid? Little at the beginning of the period. Few architects attempt to add domestic hues to the internationally known spectrum of modern forms. Among them, the activity of Károly Jurcsik and his team seems to excel,<sup>4</sup> in particular, the outstanding House of Culture

<sup>4</sup> Károly Jurcsik and team: Office building, Szekszárd, 1969; House of Culture, Orgovány, 1969; department store, Budafok, 1977.



Fig. 2. College of Applied Arts, Budapest, 1953. Architect: Zoltán Farkasdy

in Orgovány. Simple, natural materials, brick masonry wall, with a thin lime-wash, natural pinewood doors and windows, clear-cut logical ground plan and mass moulding. Not a single detail reminds of Hungarian rural architecture, affinity is due exclusively to natural simplicity, clearness, bright colours.

Soon also Imre Makovecz emerged — by that time, with wayside inns.<sup>5</sup> Materials are natural stone, whitewashed brick masonry, thatched roofing. Interiors exhibit daring carpentry timberwork; inside and outside we find expressive forms deduced from Hungarian rural architecture, individually interpreted. Already these first designs by Makovecz point out his original

<sup>5</sup> Early works by Imre Makovecz: Sió inn, Szekszárd, 1964; wine cellar, Balatonszepezd 1967; inn, Csákányos, 1968.



*Fig. 3.* Large-slab living house, Pécs, 1969. Architect: Ernő Tillai

talent, at the same time they are another alternative to technicist architecture. Though, these inns of a sentimental, romantic mood are not very convincing; they are touristic attractions, failing to answer basic problems of the architecture of that period.

### Some representative public buildings

The overwhelming majority of Hungarian architects continue to design in the spirit of modern technicism. There is nothing against such industrial, agricultural, transport buildings and the like where it is sensible and justified. But there is a domain of built environment scrutinized and qualified by the public also aesthetically, with an increased sensitivity, including, for instance, hotels and public buildings. Also modern architecture develops and more or less follows the architecture in developed countries; however, no original creations arising from, and representing, Hungarian conditions come about. Modern Hungarian architecture is typically imitative, hence provincially epigonous — even if it follows fashion at a high level. For instance, a hotel with a covered inner courtyard, like that by John Portman in America, has been built in Roosevelt Square. Similar is the office building — also in Roosevelt Square — applying stainless steel ball joints for load transfer, like some office buildings in the USA. But it is injurious to the environment because of its scale, colour effect, townscape effect.

In general, the defeat of modern architectural thinking becomes manifest where accommodating to the environment would not only be wise but even obligatory, such as on the Danube bank where once hotels smoothly followed the river bend. Now, they are replaced by self-contained monumental plastics. Hotel buildings by József Finta are of a high level in themselves, representing an international taste but failing to fit the context of building-up of Pest. Facing the Danube, turning their back to the city, they look as closed, foreign bodies; Hotel Forum turns a secluded, grim face even to the Danube. They are in no relation either to each other or to their next neighbours. The successful melting of new buildings into a historical environment — e.g. in the Buda Castle district — as to scale and mood was completely forgotten when designing one of the world's greatest river fronts.

### Breakthrough of popular post-modernism

As concerns architectural problems of housing and of representative public buildings, no development trend from present home conditions toward the future can be recognized. Traces of organic development are sometimes





Fig. 4. Hotel Duna Intercontinental, Budapest, 1966—1969. Architect: József Finta

disclosed in experiments to be called — in lack of a better denomination — popular postmodernism. These experiments namely deviate from the trend called postmodernism in Western states and aim at creating a peculiar Hungarian architecture. The first initiatives are due to the mentioned Imre Makovecz. A real upswing was born through a group of young architects in Pécs. “Their methods are not those of the Post-Modernists; they are not selecting elements of past architectural styles and applying them randomly; their architecture is not an architectural game for the design cognoscenti to amuse themselves at incestuous conferences, drinking parties and in the pages of fashion maga-

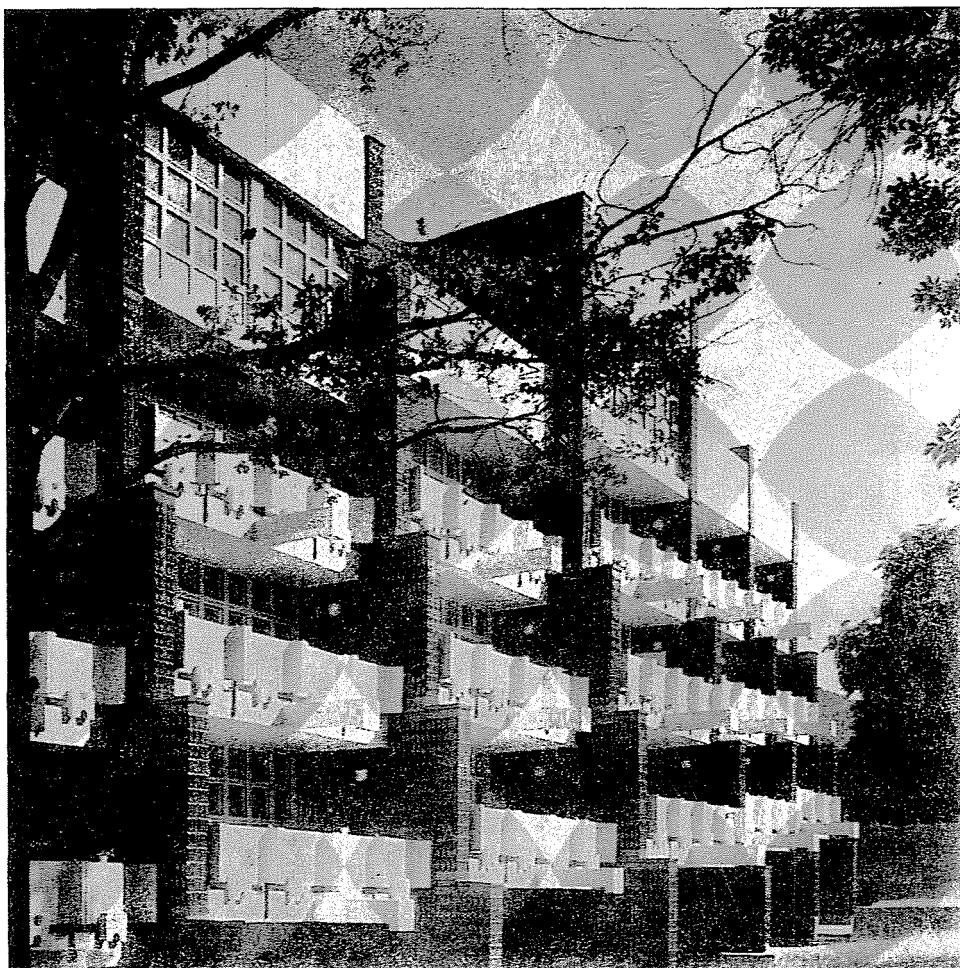


Fig. 5. Living house, Árnas Street, Budapest, 1975. Architect: György Vadász

zines. It is not like Post-Modernism, an architecture designed almost specifically for publication, but an architecture of social purpose and quiet contemplation.”<sup>6</sup> Their sense of responsibility is shown by attempting to tackle the most difficult problems, the revival of panel houses, hopelessly schematic blocks of the Paks housing estate (1973—78). These experimental, so-called “Tulip-houses” raised arduous debates.<sup>7</sup> Rightously to a degree since orna-

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Glancey: Group Pécs. *Architectural Review*, Volume CLXX. Number 1018, December 1981.

<sup>7</sup> The so-called “Tulip debate” started in “Élet és Irodalom”, continued in “Magyar Építőművészet”. “New Architecture, New Society 1945—1978”. Selection from architectural debates, documents of recent decades. Arts and Theory. Editors: Máté Major and Judit Osskó. Corvina Publ. 1981. pp. 387—445.



Fig. 6. Springhouse, Pécs—Orfű, 1979. Architect: György Csete

ments meant to be organic were restricted to wall surfaces except in plastic doorways. Playful, curved loggia sidewalls and displaced building blocks were more effective to lend expressivity and liveliness to the building. In the mournful battlefield of standard buildings, the most successful work of the young architects from Pécs is a school complex in Kaposvár.<sup>8</sup> The most promising and perspective creations are those with a character defined by the original, natural construction design experimented on self-made models rather than by natural-organic ornaments.<sup>9</sup> The finest example is the spring shelter in Orfű<sup>10</sup> “This building grows out from the ground like some oversized bulb with a hint that it might suddenly burst open and blossom into some monstrous flower.”<sup>11</sup>

The kite-dome experiment has been realized in construction as a clubhouse by Péter Oltai.<sup>12</sup> Among these organic constructions, the most monu-

<sup>8</sup> József Nyári, 1975—

<sup>9</sup> Spatial fabric, stretched cloth structure, 1973; stretched chord structure, 1973; kite-dome, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Springhouse, Pécs—Orfű, Gy. Csete, I. Dilánszky, 1971.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Glancey: Imre Makovecz. *The Architectural Review* Vol. CLXIX, No. 1009, March 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Club-house, Pécs-Balokány, 1979, Péter Oltai.

mental and successful one is likely to be the dome church in Csepel-Halásztelek.<sup>13</sup> "Designers and constructors of the church had been helped by the patron saint of engineers. They have created something unique, functionally new."<sup>14</sup>

In the meanwhile, also Imre Makovecz, catalyst of the movement, took a step forward to organic architecture. He designed buildings for summer camps in forests, in a natural environment, trying to integrate nature. Outside coatings look like bark or hides of animals. The hut of the Tokaj youth camp (1978), carpentered by the young people themselves under his guidance, looks like a perching bird from outside, while its inner, unconcealed framework supports the vault with stretched wings. His most successful buildings are those exploiting his motion tests. Among them, the finest is the mortuary in the Farkasrét cemetery, with codesigner Gábor Mezei. The timber ribs remind one of the great whale abdomen: "Metaphorically, the rib-cage theme interprets the biblical myth of Jonah, a prophesy of Christ's Resurrection and of the resurrection of the dead through trust in God."<sup>15</sup> However appropriate the direct, naturalist references to natural organisms seem for these exceptional buildings, a correctness of this method to solve actual, everyday problems seems doubtful. These doubts were dispersed by the recent House of Culture in Sárospatak, especially through the raised attraction by timbered inner spaces. The building receives its visitors with raised brows, eyes opened wide, open arms, as if Makovecz were a follower of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. The building assumes a friendly, human face which, transposed into the conventionalized structure, elicits the desired emotional response. It becomes disturbing only if it shifts to naturalism like here, by representing eyelashes. In spite of its shortcomings, the House of Culture in Sárospatak is one of the most significant creations of recent Hungarian architecture.

Although not quite appropriately, let the activity of urban-type post-modern architects be mentioned here, together with the popular trend, as it is rather affine to the former. Special mention is due to György Vadász, confronting the rich spectrum of forms of Hungarian Art Nouveau with the barrenness of technicism. Living houses in Árnas út exhibit ceramics with bluish, glittering surfaces, typical of Hungarian Art Nouveau, together with intricate construction nodes learned from the Japanese, decorative water-spouts, parapet boards.<sup>16</sup> His endeavours are somewhat more sober, more tempered in an office building in Budapest,<sup>17</sup> and in blocks of flats of the already quoted Zalaegerszeg town centre.<sup>18</sup> The closeness of endeavours by

<sup>13</sup> Church, Csepel-Halásztelek, 1976, György Csete, Jenő Dulánszky, Szenderffy.

<sup>14</sup> Katalin Bossányi: "Three New Trends — Three Risks." (In Hungarian: Népszabadság, December 31, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Living houses, Árnas út, Budapest, by György Vadász, 1975.

<sup>17</sup> MEDOSZ seat, Budapest, by György Vadász, 1978.

<sup>18</sup> Blocks of flats in Zalaegerszeg town centre, by György Vadász, 1978.

György Vadász to popular Postmodernism is clearly shown by the Mohács Battle monument — leaning wooden gravemarkers on the battlefield, “budding” stone flowers recessed into the ground, a sentimental, popular creation, accessible to anybody.<sup>19</sup> Among church-buildings, the Roman Catholic church<sup>20</sup> in Farkasrét, Budapest, by István Szabó, a beautiful, expressive creation using the interaction of architecture and attendant arts, exhibits the unambiguous influences of Art Nouveau.

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<sup>19</sup> Mohács Battle monument, by György Vadász, 1976.

<sup>20</sup> Roman Catholic church, Farkasrét, Budapest, by István Szabó.