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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Modernity and context – Hungarian architecture at the beginning of the Kádár-era

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***Abstract***

*The following work aims to examine the years when Hungarian architecture after the short but impressive period of so-called social-realism returned to modernism. The point in time is the turn of the fifties and sixties. This was the very period when in the history of Western architecture the first criticism of functionalist doctrine appeared. The International Style was questioned by a regional approach, and in 1956 the regular (and the last official) CIAM congress was devoted to the topic of "identity". The last social-realistic style building was published in the periodical Magyar Építőművészet (Hungarian Architecture) just a few months before, in the fall of 1955. The return of modern was a liberating process for Hungarian architects. However in that special context several questions emerged concerning general and local topics. What is the attitude of modern architecture to its old environment? Is it possible for modern architecture to have a national character? How to put into practice the – still valid – theoretical demand for socialist content and national form now by means of modern architecture? Some of these questions were very similar to those raised in America and in Western Europe. The answers were however different.*

***Keywords***

*modern architecture · national character · built environment · infill building*

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The architectural competition for the restoration and extension of the former Pest Vigadó building was announced in August 1956. At that time it was already clear for all the Hungarian architects, that the new part of the building could be designed only in modern style. If somebody hesitated, he recieved unambiguous instructions from the competition tender: "Regarding the architectural, townscape and façade forms, the best solutions are those, where the applicants use modern forms to find a harmonious contact to the monuments. ... It is desirable that the old and the new parts of the building create a harmonious compositional unity – based either on contrast or on any other principle - both in the exterior and the interior" [2]. As a consequence of the 1956 revolution the deadline was extended and the jury published the results in September 1957. The newspaper Népszabadság covered the event on the front page. It published the list of the winners and also the drawing of the building that won first prize. (Fig. 1)

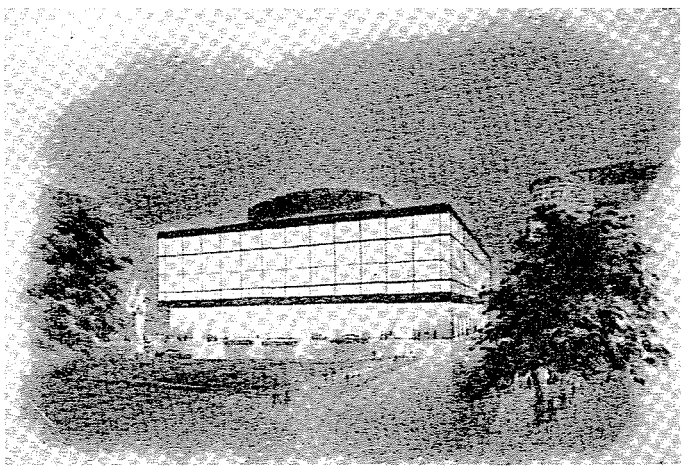

**Fig. 1.** First prize winner entry of the Vigadó competition. Architects: Károly Weichinger, Károly Jurcsik, Csaba Virág, and János Bonta.

The outlook of the building had an unexpected effect on the public. The ambiguous editing generated the first storm, as the picture of the new building came out under the title: What will the new Vigadó look like? The readers could think that the new one would replace the old building. The misunderstanding was cleared up but failed to pour oil onto troubled waters.

The anonymous journalist of the Népszabadság wrote in the next day's issue that this information was poor consolation as even so the building is what it is: "a box, created from reinforced concrete and glass without any imagination." [31] The reasoning of the jury, that the modern building just by the old monument may occur as the counterpoint in music and the new part emphasizes the beauty of the monument, did not convince the journalist. The old Vigadó building is beautiful, the counterpoint of beauty is ugliness, and the designers could reach this ugliness with the new building – declared the author.

This was an attack against the newly emerging modern architecture which could not have been ignored by Máté Major, the main theoretician of the profession. The competition entries for the Vigadó were exhibited in the headquarters of the Association of Hungarian Architects and an open debate was also organized. Both events were announced in the Népszabadság.[25]. It was again Máté Major who held a lecture in defense of modern architecture, the text of which was published in the literary and critical periodical Kortárs in December [22]. The article was written to influence public opinion. Major declared that the core of modern architecture is that its forms arise from the new materials and the new technology, and "the realization of the play of forces in the clear structures" are what produces the aesthetic pleasure. The alternative of up-to-date architecture is out-of-date architecture, weep for the past. Máté Major suspected the followers of dogmatic, social-realistic architecture behind the critical remarks on the Vigadó project, he also made this clear. As a consequence of this fear he shifted into the radical devaluation of the traditional architecture. "Here in this square we need at last an architectural stress that represents its age clearly, well and to a high quality, which, like a magnet attracts glances and distracts attention from the aesthetic insignificance of the surrounding buildings."

The "public opinion" missed only the keeping of architectural unity in the square where the Vigadó project was designed but the papers that followed the Major-writing in Kortárs mentioned more problematic issues. Imre Szalai questioned not the need for modern architecture, but he found the entries wanting in "folk inspiration". "Who could deny that the defended design which is intended to join the romantic building of Vigadó might be built either in Vienna, in Brussels or in Buenos-Aires" [28]. That is to say the inherently good design fails not only in having connection to its surroundings but also in missing the national character. As understood by Imre Szalai the national character is not equivalent with the use of the so-called national formal elements. He does not give practical advice either, only stands by the respect for tradition instead of subduing them. In another replying article Ferenc Vámos, the architectural historian connects Frigyes Feszl, the architect of the Vigadó to Ödön Lechner and Béla Lajta. He gives this line as an example of the successful linking up of modernity and national character. "The essence of composing is just like at the age of Béla Lajta: keeping connection to the consciousness, the will of the Hungarian society. This way of composition hides the secret of how we will reach the demand of social-realism" [33]. The instruction is clear: the lost thread of national architecture that spreads from the Romantic Movement through Art Nouveau up to the modernism of Lajta is still here, we should only resume it.

However in 1958 there was nobody who wanted or dared to do that. Practicing architects yearned for the forms of contemporary western architecture too much, while the theoreticians got the official directives in this subject. The guiding principles for the cultural policy of the MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers Party) were published in July 1958 [21]. The statement of the paper was that the main obstacle of the cultural and ideological development is nationalism that must be opposed by a national culture based on socialism. "The newly born culture is socialist in its content and national in its form. It preserves and comprises all that progressive cultural treasures, which have been collected through the development of hundreds of years in national works and in values adopted from other nations. Using the best results and inspired with the socialist ideal it develops the synthesis of popular, national and humanistic character on a higher level." The restored principle of culture that is socialist in content and national in form inhibited the inequality of the two parts. This relation of superiority and inferiority became manifest in several writings in 1959. In the propositions of the Central Committee of the MSZMP bourgeois nationalism was confronted with proletarian internationalism and socialist patriotism had its place only within this later one, subordinated to it. "Basic idea of socialist patriotism is that in our time the way for long-lasting national progress is socialism." [5] In this context, emphasizing of national quality could be understood as an attack against socialism and that was exactly what politics did. In the field of architecture it was Máté Major who first applied political and ideological principles on architecture as early as in 1959 [23]. Form follows first of all materials, construction, technology and function in modern architecture, that is why socialist architecture has not differed yet from capitalist architecture except the local conditions. "Developing socialist content that is the socialist way of life, thought and message will help us to reach the stage of the national form - the difference in people, society and ideology that separates our architectural forms from the capitalist West over its locality. It will produce its outline and the socialist architecture will emerge as a new, specific, historically ready higher level of development." The message of this citation and of the whole paper is that the national form should grow out of socialist content organically, in other words the two concepts can not be separated. National form will develop from socialist architecture, so until that time it does not have to be looked for, especially not in the past.

In spite of the fact that in this way the question of national culture was answered both ideologically and architecturally, the issue emerged in the early sixties again - in the spirit of détente. Parallel to the historian debate between 1960-1963 and the art historian debate between 1961-1962 on national-

ism, there were some edited articles in the periodical Magyar Építőművészet dealing with the traditions of Hungarian architecture. Imre Kathy wrote the keynote article. He started with the statement that contemporary Hungarian architecture could not be compared with the quality of French, Italian, Scandinavian or American architecture [16]. The reason for this he found in the break of the thread represented by Ödön Lechner and Béla Lajta, who applied and continued the "constructing ideals and forms saved in Hungarian peasant architecture" at the turn of the century. Art Nouveau architecture did not only meet the requirements of modern architecture, that is materiality, sincerity, usability and functionality, but it also had a national character. Imre Kathy called attention on the importance of tradition in general, but with a special emphasis on Art Nouveau and folk architecture as worthy to follow in its approach and rich forms. He touched two questions. First, whether do we have to point to some epoch to follow its tradition, and the second, that if so, which epoch should this be. The replying articles mentioned mainly the less awkward part of the issue, the evaluation of Art Nouveau architecture. The authors came essentially to the conclusion that the Art Nouveau was an important period in our architecture and it is worth surveying it. One of the contributors stated that its influences still can be felt, however "although its problems are similar, often even coincide with our problems, our answers are quite different"[3, 19, 34]. In his second article Imre Kathy broadened the circles of the past as a usable resource for contemporary architecture. "National tradition for us includes – starting with the Asian deserts through European Middle Ages and the turn of the century up to now – all that spiritual, artistic and architectural results which represent the creative spirit of the Hungarian nation in its particularity" [17]. But he still insisted on his point of view that traditions should be continued. László Császár disagreed and he stated that we have to get to know contemporary international architecture completely and only after that we may think about the additional values we can enrich the general features with [6]. Tradition for Császár means the expression of taste and atmosphere. Accordingly determining particularities of Hungarian architecture are the following: beauty of pure masses, deep and wise patience, and the lack of nervous disquiet boasting and bluff. Hungarian character can not be connected to a certain period of architecture but to the measures used. The mentioned values "are hidden in proportion, rhythm, colours, composition of colours, forming of masses and spaces, finishing, texture and in the Hungarian architectural and natural landscape." After all we do not have to look for the measures either: "In this way elaboration of particular Hungarian architecture relying on the traditions is rather an intuitive than a rational work. The creator's architectural and aesthetic requirements as an immense necessity will force it to come into being." In his article László Császár declared an approach that was acceptable also for the official ideology. Architecture always had its national characteristics, which will emerge within modern architecture as well, but all this will happen by itself, by instinct, by intuition, so it is worthless to deal with this issue.

After this debate the revaluation of Hungarian architectural tradition was removed from the agenda for a while. But there was another problem still alive that touched the wider issue of modernity and context, how to fit modern architecture into the built environment. This appeared both as theoretical and practical question at the turn of the decade. From 1958 on the government started a programme for infill development in Budapest. In the background there were also of course political considerations: the new houses at last healed the wounds caused by the war in the city and they contained higher quality flats than the average housing estate, so they clearly demonstrated the increase in living standards. "They bring a new colour, a fresh atmosphere into our capital that we love and whose image is very dear not only to the people living in Budapest but to the whole country" [7].

While the public – especially in places with historical atmosphere like the Buda Castle district – would have accepted even the straight restoration of damaged buildings, the professionals were offered two choices. The new, modern building makes an attempt to fit into its environment or just the opposite it creates a sharp contrast to it. Theory took a stand on the first version. "Building up the city plots is not the task when architecture could introduce characteristic and representative solutions of our age. This is rather a late completion of the already existing city-structure and cityscape" [8]. Modern buildings built by contemporary technology were different from their environment also in materials and details, so the adjustment was the question of the more general aesthetic characteristics such as the mass, the proportion, the rhythm, the plasticity of surfaces [12]. It was Aurél Budai who completed a more detailed survey on this problem. Starting from the principle of subordination he came to the conclusion that in the "new within the old" case "we can save the atmospheric value of the old especially, if the new that appears within it is less stressed and it fits well into the overall view"[4]. With the decrease of the scale, the demand of adjustment decreases as well. The new building has to be subordinated to the cityscape, the skyline, spacial structure of the city and the compositional units. "But if - on the way from the larger to the smaller formal units - we reach the level where the new form is not any more striking in the characteristic formal unity of the old, we are allowed to use the more strongly up-to-date forms of modern architecture. This modernity does not disturb the aesthetic effect of the 'characteristic old' that appears in the larger formal unit." The authors of the above mentioned articles illustrated their writings with plenty of architectural examples, so as to be easier to understand. Without questioning the priority of principles, the practical means recommended for the architects were undoubtedly collected through the analysis of the already existing, successful buildings.

The new buildings in the Buda Castle played the role of the positive example in Hungary. The more often cited building of this time was the apartment house built on the double plot (Úri

utca 32. and Tóth Árpád sétány 24.) by the architect Zoltán Farkasdy in 1959. The first reviewer of the house stressed the harmonious connection of old and new within the building, but did not mention the problem of fitting to the environmental context [11]. "The front facing to the bastion is perhaps the nicest part of the whole building in its form. The nice rhythm of loggias and windows on the attic flats, the artistic construction of the whole façade, the robustly structured baroque walls of the ground floor with raw surfaces, and the decent colouring of the new part of the façade – all this makes the house an excellent modern example in the row of the bastion buildings. The Úri street façade strives to emphasize the historic detail of the gothic gateway with its simple articulation, but its colouring is less successful than the above appreciated front facing to the bastion"(Fig. 2.) In another review the author touches also the problem of environmental context but only in a caption [12]. "The house No.32 frames the gothic gateway, and its façade - with the horizontal lane mouldings and with the vertically connected modern window mullions – is in harmony with the rhythm of the adjoining two-storey buildings."(Fig. 3.)

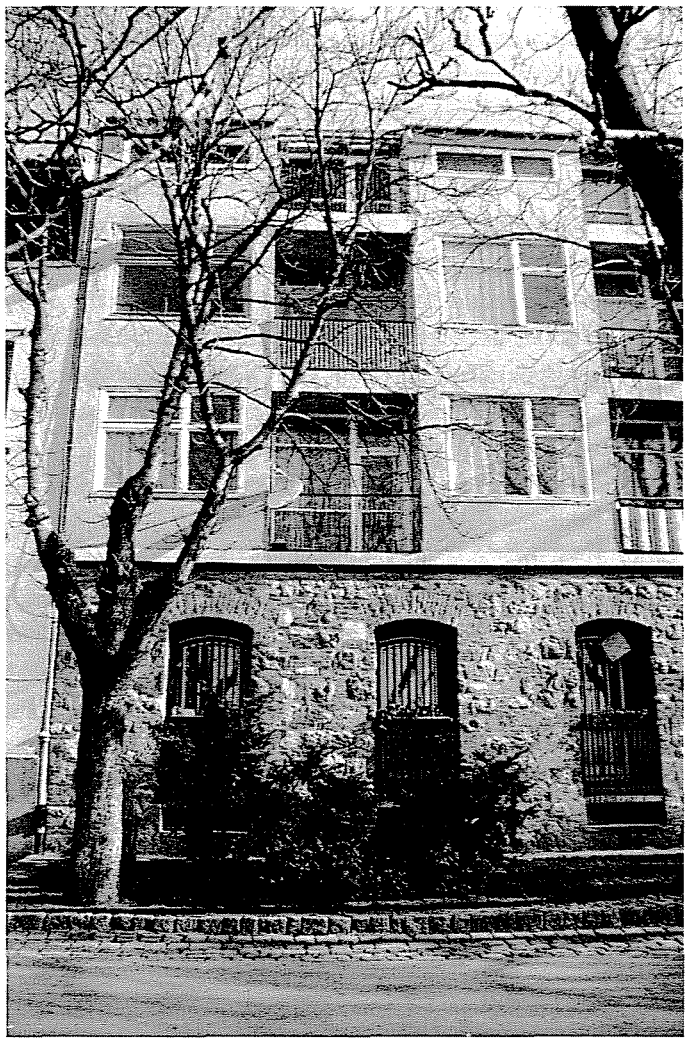

**Fig. 2.** Apartment house. Tóth Árpád sétány 24. The front facing the bastion.

Around the same time another apartment house was built in the same block. György Jánossy designed it in 1959 but it was

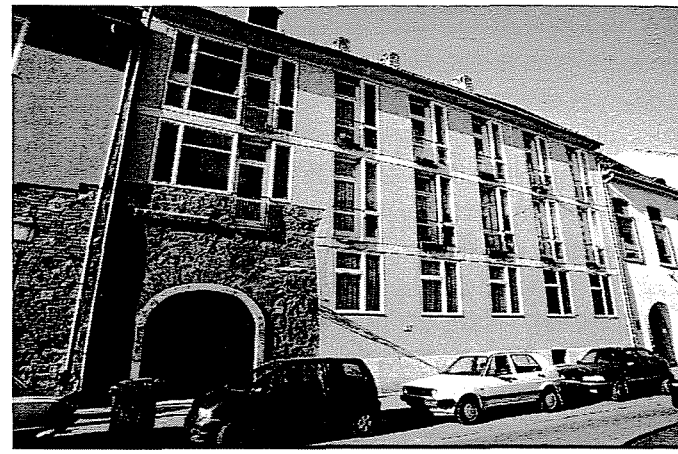

**Fig. 3.** Apartment house. Úri utca 32.

completed only in 1963. The building less appreciated by contemporaries but the more evaluated by posterity, represents a special way of adjustment. It contains duplex flats consequently there are various windows one above the other that dissolves the difference in floor height to the adjoining neoclassical building. The windows are put on the plane of the façade creating the impression of flatness, but the irregular surface of the white-coloured brick offsets this effect and connects the house to the other buildings – as it has already been pointed out by the first reviewer of the house [13] (Fig. 4.) The building stands on a corner and it turns to the opposite street with a façade without openings, a solution that neither the public nor the professional monument protectors could fully accept. Miklós Horler tried to explain this gesture with the modern architectural principles: "Architectural logic of the building form and the transversal construction can be in harmony but only with the solution." The allusion to the forms of the medieval castle district as a possible explanation was raised only by posterity, which the architect did not deny [14] (Fig. 5).

**Fig. 4.** Apartment house. Tóth Árpád sétány 27.

The architectural approach to the houses built in the Buda Castle was an exception compared to the general attitude. In an article about the current infill developments that was published in the Magyar Építőművészet (Hungarian Architecture) the author describes twenty-three designs. He evaluates the layout and

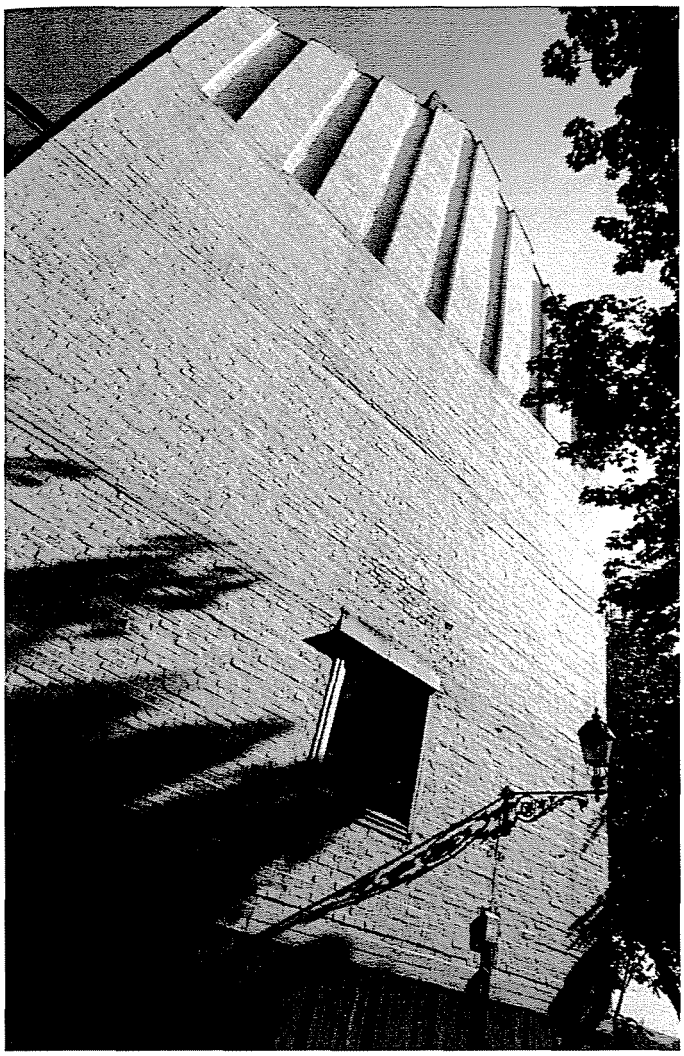

**Fig. 5.** Butt of Tóth Árpád sétány 27.

the façade in each case but he mentions only for five buildings, (that) "it fits well into its environment", and criticizes only one house that it "is very different to the next one" [1]. The article published on the same issue in the Magyar Építőipar (Hungarian Building Industry) questions even the adjustment as a point of consideration, after all the surrounding valueless buildings will be demolished sooner or later.[1] Parallel to the rather shallow grid façades – demonstrating structural order – of the first wave of the infill projects some façades also appeared playing with modern architectural forms. They used the measures of stressing horizontal or vertical elements, moving out surfaces from the plain, geometrical details, clear colours and materials. With the exception of the historic environment the architects didn't want to adjust – but neither politics, building industry, public nor architectural theory expected them really to do so.

[1] "Infill developments in general with a few unlucky stressed exceptions, mainly lack a cityscape message. They make complete an already existing city structure, usually without any chance to be better than the adjoining houses which slowly grow very old and which are close to historicism in style. Some buildings have been put in a neighbourhood where historicism is evident. The atmosphere and form of adjoining houses had hardly any effect on forming of these buildings, what is correct I think" [27].

One of the professionally highly evaluated infill developments of this period was the apartment house in Budapest, Fehérvári út 17. The architect Zoltán Gulyás who won the Ybl-prize for this building in 1962 built it between 1959 and 1960. Only one of the two contemporary reviews mentioned the problem of placement [29]. It describes that the corner house covers both adjoining fire walls, it keeps to the building limits on the ground floor and on the roof level, and the height of the main edge equals with that of the adjoining buildings. The other review of the building consists of only six sentences describing the technical data in Magyar Építőművészet, 6. 1961. – so much about adjustment (Fig. 6). Strictly speaking the articles did not mention either the inherent values of the building, it was the very time when the architectural analysis of buildings disappeared from the periodicals and the unquestionable data were left alone, the function, the applied construction and materials, the built-in volume. However the apartment house of Zoltán Gulyás despite the clear demarcation line at the connection was not designed without empathy to its environment. The façade with its ribbon windows was only a bit more further forward than the neighbouring houses built between the two wars in modern style, while taking on the relationship with the opposite clinic building (Jenő Szendrői – Andor Lévai, 1949) is evident. The ribbon windows, the horizontal parapets, the stressed division into three parts and the clinker brickwork façade make this manifest (Fig. 7). Another

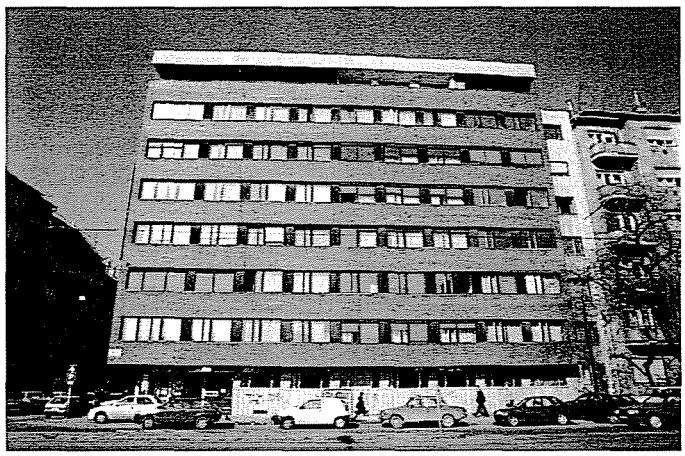

**Fig. 6.** Apartment house. Fehérvári út 17.

example for infill development emphasizing modernity and difference from the surroundings is the apartment house in the Hajnóczy utca 4. (György Tokár – Attila Emődy, 1959-1964). The building was situated in an environment with the atmosphere of $19^{th}$ century historicism. The architects had two main design goals both in the spirit of functionalism. First was to offset the unpleasant (northward facing) aspect of the front and second to open the view to the Castle [24]. The building twisted from the plain façade with four vertical masses, hanging in the street space and from one direction appeared as compact clinker prisms. The experts appraised the building just on this, for its clear forms and the brave gesture of difference [2] (Fig. 8.)

[2] "There are more works of high standard within the individually designed

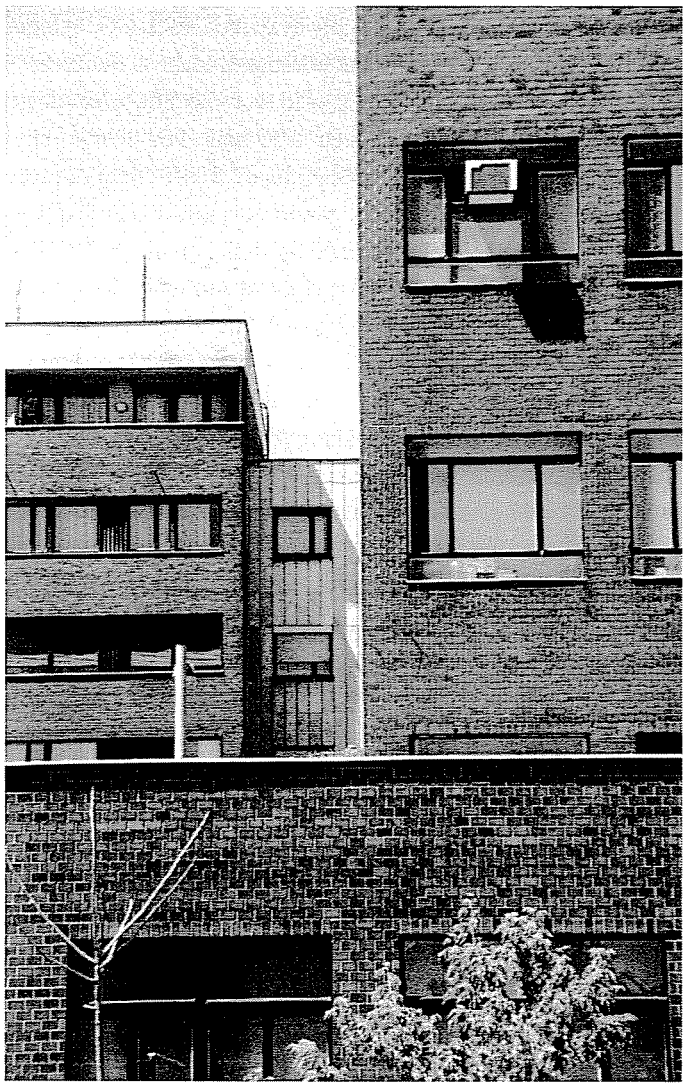

**Fig. 7.** Apartment house Fehérvári út 17. in context with the clinic building

**Fig. 8.** Apartment house. Hajnóczy utca 4.

At the beginning of the sixties the issue of national architecture was struck from the agenda and with no general demand to adjust to the closest architectural environment as the above mentioned infill developments show. The context to the wider architectural and social environment, the fit into the place appeared also in a particular way, if at all. The planning process of the Main Square in Kecskemét was connected with the demolition of the old city hotel and the building of a new one. The relation of the new building to its environment was clearly defined. The hotel was set back from the old square and gained its own foreground, a *piazetta*, while "regarding the closures, the city plan determined that as its elements were built in different ages that can be seen also in the forms, the new hotel must play the same role"– was written in the article illustrated with the designs of the hotel. [18] The Hotel Aranyhomok (István Janáky, 1957-1962) was published again when it was inaugurated. For this occasion the reviewer - over the usual poor description - also gave an appraisal of it, perhaps the architect's professional reputation explains it [9]. The author, Pál Granasztói uses the well-known principles of sincerity, modernity and contrast for describing the house in his writing, but as a new motive he formulates the demand for the expression of place (Fig. 9). The hotel in Kecskemét is first of all modern – he states. The façade "beside the baroque forms of the rectory, near to the Art Nouveau town hall designed by Lechner has an effect that balances and makes clear the whole mixed architecture of the square, it professes the hardness and firmness of our age." The whole façade facing the square consists of a loggia that is explained with the south aspect, the view to the town and the neutral effect of the grid. In addition to this the building is connected to the place that is to the Great Hungarian Plain. One of the main values of the hotel is "the elaborated, nice and quiet proportion of masses - also in details - through that we can feel the already mentioned architectural taste characteristic to the Great Hungarian Plain. The compact, massive and pure appearance ensures that the building in spite of its modernity fits into the location, seeming as if it was grown out of it." Posterity appreciated the hotel, now it is one of the 20th century buildings that were proposed to be included in the official list of monuments. The reasoning refers to the inherent values of the building: the good

condominium houses, especially in the buildings of the designers who got used to generosity and up-to-date pure design through industrial architecture" [26]. „The toothing that gives a strong plasticity to the façade is a characteristic and ingenious solution" [30].

**Fig. 9.** Hotel Aranyhomok in Kecskemét.

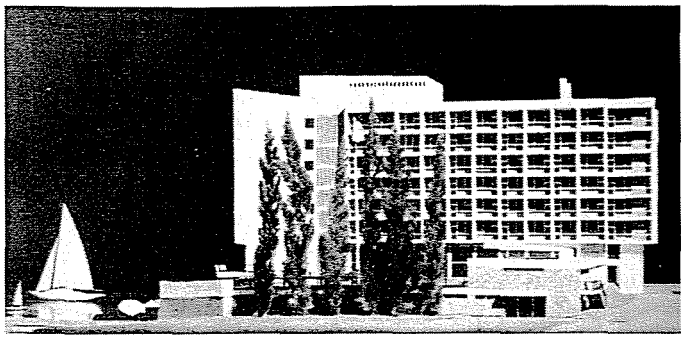

**Fig. 10.** Hotel project in Istanbul.

proportions, the geometry drawn by shadows, the decent order of the façade divisions, the original neon notice and the still remaining art works [20]. Hotel Aranyhomok really is a good representative of its age. Its emphasized grid façade makes it one of the first examples of the modern architecture to be set free from social-realism, so it might have a deeper meaning for the contemporaries than the carefully elaborated harmony of proportions. Without knowing the whole story, the general values of the building but especially the adjustment to its environment need revaluation. "In spite of all its pursuit the building remains to the average viewer only another middling apartment house with one-room flats and a corridor in the middle. It doesn't occur to them that the hotel creates a perfect background to the square and the church but that from its alien nature gives off a strange feeling of difference. ... The house does not communicate with the whole square but with a part of it, the *piazetta*. If this communication were not so restricted, perhaps the hotel would not react with total openness to the closed façades of the other buildings which surround the square" – a young architect wrote about the building in 2000 [32]. Is it possible that the architectural means lost their influence during the past forty years, or rather the architect never had in his mind to create a building characteristic to the Great Hungarian Plain, although he was born there? Just before the hotel in Kecskemét, Janáky had another commission for a hotel in Istanbul [10]. The layout of that never realized project formed an L but the façade and the whole outlook of the Turkish beach holiday hotel was surprisingly similar to the Hungarian one in the middle of the town (Fig. 10).

"The confidence or rather the belief that we can regain ourselves created a consensus between architecture, society and the policy" – a contemporary wrote in retrospect after more than twenty years [15]. At the turn of the fifties and sixties architectural practice turned back to the modern architectural principles and forms becoming independent from theory, and the theory that practice would need instruction. It seemed to both parts that modern principles are reliable and valid for eternity. The poor forms of modern architecture were appropriate also for the building industry, which had increasing influence on the policy. (Further effects of this "appropriateness" became visible only later: the first prefab factory started to work in 1966.) Designers were lost in modern architecture, they did not want to create a national architecture – had they wanted to, could not have done so – but they did not want to adjust either to place, to environment or to landscape. They hoped at last they could join to the international stream, and they did not realize, that the sweeping flow of modernism fell apart and slowed down in the meantime.

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