

# Church as a home – sacral and profane functions in modern Hungarian Churches

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## Abstract

Contemporary church architecture in Hungary is one of the most monumental and representative architectural topics of the period after the political change; following forty years of communist dictatorship it became possible for congregations to freely raise new church buildings, asserting at the same time their social rights. It is remarkable that among the newly built churches the majority appear through the uniting of diverse functions such as congregation centres. The sacral church spaces of these architectural complexes are flexible and thus often extended with the community's educational or other functional units used for non-sacral social gatherings, as a result the church may really become the home of a community. The article tries to encompass this phenomenon by analysing in the context of historical antecedents a typical contemporary Catholic and Protestant Hungarian church.

## Keywords

Church architecture · house church · congregation centre

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Quote: "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple."

Psalms 27 (26):4

## Introduction

Man's ancient desire to bind his life - or his everyday dwelling - to sacral places can be best illustrated with the nearly 3000 year old biblical text chosen as an epigraph for this paper. We can see in the course of history, that - although in different measure - all ages and all denominations were open by the construction of their own churches to put profaner functions into the composition that may even have become the real home of the community using the sacral space.

For the study of this phenomenon, true both in historical as well as in present times Hungary is perhaps an ideal example. Hungary, due to historical reasons presents a very varied picture of religions as over the centuries many denominations represented themselves with a considerable number of believers, similar to only a few other regions in Europe. (The most important denominations in Hungary are: Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Calvinists, Jews, Unitarians and Muslims.) The different denominations generally do not belong merely to the Hungarian nationality but to the different minorities and ethnic groups living in the country. The cultural and religious development of this Central European country once significantly bigger than today was always in an organic connection with the cultural and religious development of other European regions, so it may authentically represent this completeness.

A number of new churches have been built in the country over the past two decades, as in the period between World War II and 1989, during the Soviet-type communist regime and before the political change, it was virtually impossible to build a new church or only with very strong limitations. The building activity of the period after 1990 aimed to remedy these deficiencies.

The common feature of these churches is that in most cases the sacral space devoted to liturgical functions is extended by

the rooms of community life. The church is not a lone-standing building but encompasses a congregation centre. Paying attention to this architectural phenomenon our paper tries to reveal its historical antecedents, and to exemplify it with two contemporary examples.

### Historic predecessors

The building of a church always belonged to the conservative architectural genres due mainly to the centuries old traditions of the liturgy. Although in every historic period there is an adequate and grandiose spatial conception of the sacral space ideal to worthy God and equal to the *Weltanschauung* of the age that resulted in the record outputs of architecture, nevertheless the functional and intellectual structure of churches changed little. It is also interesting from this point of view how the demand of modern architecture and of our age on the flexibility of spaces and its solutions appear in contemporary sacral architecture, and similarly, how the other claims of the age transform the relatively constant world of churches.

In antiquity, the sacral architecture of the Greek and Roman polytheism defining European culture was entirely of a nature other than the later Christianity. The temples did not function as a venue for large masses of people, merely the reception for the limited group of cultic believers, for individual devotion, or just for the God's sculpture be localised inside. The altar was also frequently in front of the temple. The main trends of these space formations were fundamentally extroverted, with simple functional claims. The temple of late antiquity presented a strong symbolism in its statue-like appearance and in its role of representing the culture of the society. While the building was a closed functional unit that could not be deliberately changed or treated flexibly, nevertheless we may find a long row of profane functions in the more-developed sanctuary sites of the Greeks such as a treasury, dwellings of the priesthood, dining places, the exhibition halls for the sacrificial gifts and the stoa [5, p 282]. The cult of Mithras - widespread in the late antique period of the Roman Empire - showed a much greater affinity with the later Christian liturgies. Although we know little about the details of the cult due to its character as a mysterious religion, it is known that the ceremonies consisted of the community gathering with its common meal and actions [11, p 204]. Their cave-like sanctuaries sunk into the ground were not dominant public buildings and they do not emerge from the city fabric but they may have been in an integral connection with residential buildings (like for example the site of San Clemente in Rome). To date, four Mithras sanctuaries have been uncovered by archaeologists in the area of today's capital of Hungary, Budapest which was the Roman colonia Aquincum, and these fitted organically into the city fabric.

The architecture of the early Christian period shows in several aspects a closer similarity with the today's Christian buildings than of those historical ages in which they enjoyed the considerable support of the secular powers.



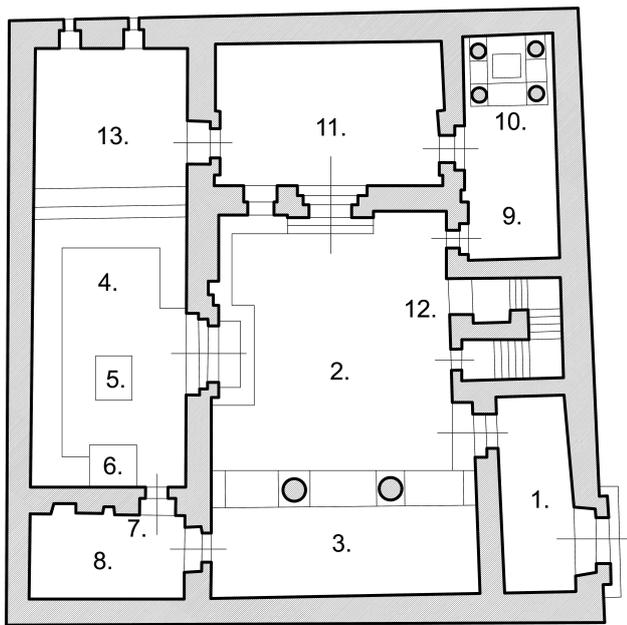
Fig. 1. Mithras sanctuary under San Clemente, Rome. (Photo by Zs. Kiss)

The house church of Dura-Europos near the Euphrates River, built in the 3rd century A.D. may be considered as the earliest example of a congregation centre. The church having been transformed from an apartment house is an exceptionally valuable monument of the 'architecture of needs' remaining from the early-Christian era. (Although latest research doubts its Christian church function stating that it may have been a synagogue [2, p 46]). The almost complete synthesis of daily community and private living space as well as the sacral functional units – the sequence of rooms of baptisterium – consignatorium – coenaculum – attached to it had been realised in the complex organised around a central courtyard. The 4th century Qirqbiza (Syria) house church is similarly complex in spite of its lesser known functional units.

The architectural requirements for the representation of authority have played in the complicated and in time and space exceptionally manifold historical progress of the development of Christian church architecture, an increasingly important role, by which the disposition of house churches with rather complex function, however with simple architectural structures have lost their significance.

It might be interesting to examine the relationship that in ages when secular power and the church were in closer alliance and there was a greater demand to form the stately sacral buildings, there were less profane functions connected to the church. This is obvious because in these ages as a consequence of the commonality of religion in the community, the organisational task of the church, independent of the people's secular divisions was less significant.

By reason of its internal nature, the imposing appearance of churches should arise from their role to bear witness to the endless glory of God and to draw people's attention to life's most fundamental questions by their conspicuous character; although we can clearly recognise, that churches became rich and grandiose due rather to the secular authority's need to propagate and enforce their own power. Thus the simple forms of churches



**Fig. 2.** House church at Dura-Europos. Plan with hypothetical functional layout (1. entrance-hall, 2. courtyard, 3. portico, 4. coenaculum, 5. place of altar, 6. cathedra, 7. door of the deacon, 8. prothesis, 9. baptistry, 10. Baptisinal font, 11. consignatorium, 12. way up to the dwellings, 13. emporium - place of women (?).

of certain ages – when the Church could become independent of the secular power and in this way its community-organisational role grew – was neither determined of their profaneness, nor of people’s desire for homeliness, but modesty and the complex functionality resulted from the same reasons, of the community’s social claims.

It was likewise the exigency which resulted in the profane functions connected to the churches in the territory of Hungary of the late-middle ages. From the 15th to the 17th century people were constantly threatened in the country due to various conquering and pillaging military actions. The churches of the Saxon population settled in Transylvania were enclosed by remarkable fortifications, where the inhabitants could take refuge and hide their belongings in case of emergency. Even the church itself was built with the consideration of military directives. One of the most spectacular examples of this complex building-type is the fortified church of Biertan/Berethalom (Transylvania – today Romania). The engagement of the church and the defensive function is not an isolated phenomenon; there are a number of similar complexes in Europe.

From the aspect of our topic one of the most important medieval building types is the cloister, which realises the unity of the sacral and profane communal functions. It is not particularly exemplary from the point of view of the observed architectural phenomenon, the community centre, handled as an organic flexible space, although it is a remarkable antecedent, because it effectuates a very diverse and complex functional system, for



**Fig. 3.** Hărman/Szászhermány/Honigberg (Transylvania – today Romania), fortified church. (Photo by J. Krähling)

example by the semi-separate choir joined to the sanctuary, or the dormitory, which can be reached from the transept in the case of the Cistercian monasteries. One of the most differentiated examples of Renaissance architecture is the Il Redentore church, Andrea Palladio’s magnificent work in Venice, where the choir behind the chancel is separated by a curved colonnade.



**Fig. 4.** Il Redentore , Venice. Chancel (Photo by J. Krähling)

The connection of the church and the spaces of community life, within the limit of one building met with theoretical difficulties in the architecture of the Middle Ages and the early Modern period: the consecration of the sacral space according

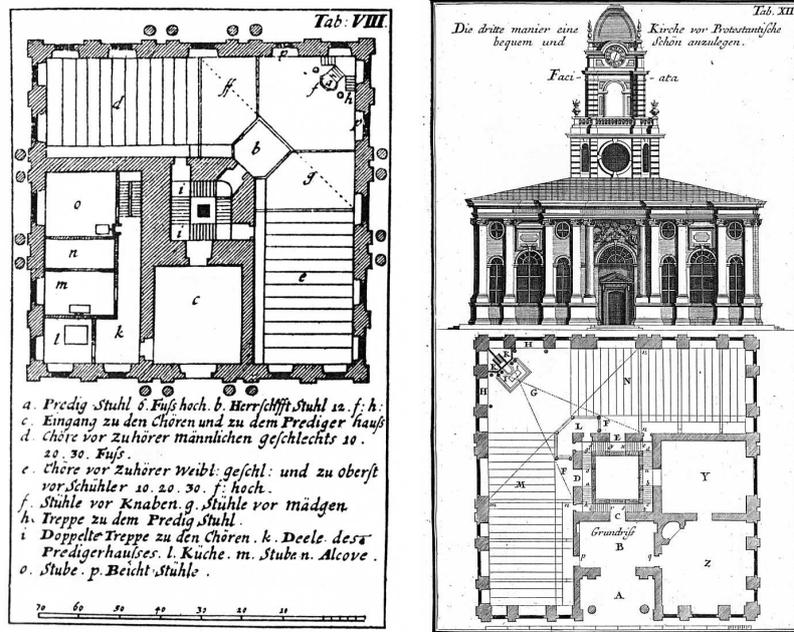


Fig. 5. L. Ch. Sturm's model plans for flexible congregation centres (After Sturm 1712. [14] and Sturm 1718 [15]).

rigidly to rites, the fixed nature of the liturgy, the permanent presence of the Holy Eucharist did not tolerate experimentation on the arrangement of the sacral space.

In common, there were no side wings joined to the catholic churches in the Middle Ages and the early Modern period, except in the previous examples, so the profane and sacral functions in the same space did not co-exist in a flexible way. Although we can observe, that the different parts of the church were used for different purposes, these spatial-sections were in organic connection to each other but typically in an undividable manner. Thus in the Middle Ages and the early Modern period the sanctuary, the choir, the nave, the pulpit, the side-altars in chantries, or the aisles with confessionals can be named. The preaching had been separated from the liturgy and from the altar-space; its place became the pulpit in the nave. The main place of the mass, the sanctuary was inaccessible to the laity; it was even visually blocked by the rood screen in the Middle Ages [2, pp 55-57]. Further places of other nature could join to the church, for example the baptistery, or the narthex in case of oriental rites. They are all for the liturgy of course, but in these areas public use and the laity are differently present. Usually these places, surrounding the sanctuary only served the liturgy to a certain measure (sacristy, oratorio), partly serving other functions (education, library, treasury); as we can see for example in Erzsébetváros in Transylvania (today Romanian: Dumbrăveni) in the Armenian-catholic parish church built at the end of the 18th century.

The Turkish rule lasting 150 years was a decaying period in the history of the Hungarians, and it was not in an organic relationship with the architectural tendencies of the country. However, the mosques, these typical sacral spaces subsisted from the Ottoman Empire are also constructed in accordance with the demands of the sacral function, with a directed, rectangu-

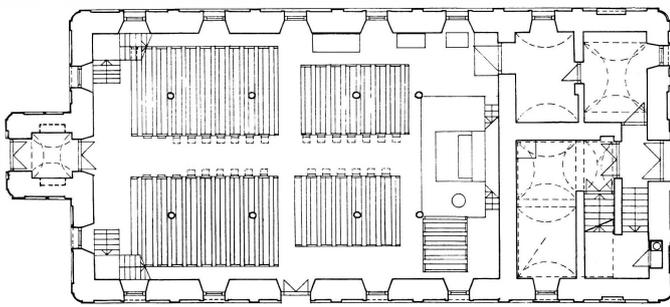
lar, undivided space. The cloisters of dervishes were integrated into the mosques as distinct buildings. It is an interesting phenomenon that after the changing of the regime in some cases sacral buildings of the inhabitants were in use continuously by the conquerors – so in parallel use by Christians and Muslims. This resulted in the mihrab-niche in the wall of the medieval parish church of Pest (today in the centre of Budapest), or the use of the mosque of pasha Qasim in Pécs as a Christian church even today.

### New approaches following the reformation

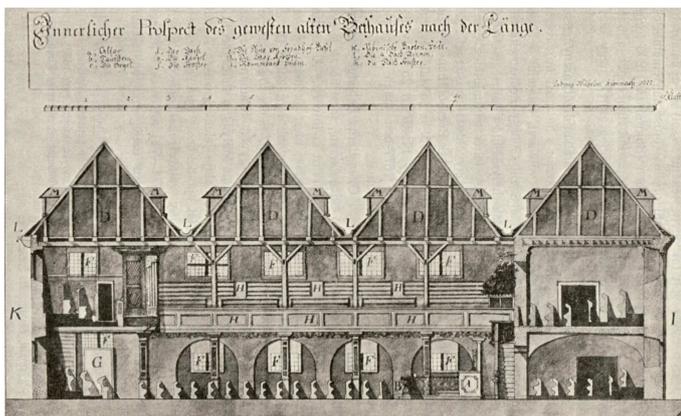
The Reformation changed fundamentally the interpretation of the sacral space by formulating the requirement that the liturgical space only exists if it embodies the congregation through its services. Meanwhile the building, the equipment and even the liturgy lost its sacral nature, this radical breaking away from the ancient Christian tradition impoverished protestant church architecture, at the same time it enabled regeneration and experimentation. In the background of the architectural effect of the community centre stands mainly this fundamental statement of the reformers, the need for the creation of the convenient building for the congregation as the community of saints. In the treatise of Leonhard Christoph Sturm entitled “Architectonisches Bedenken ...” [14] there is an L-shaped church plan completed with a vicarage to form a square, with a tower in the middle. In the second treatise on church architecture published by Sturm in Augsburg in 1718 there is also an L-shaped church completed to a quadrangular shape, but here the six rooms of undefined function which lay round the tower to the opposite of the church - as the architect defines its functions - can be used for any purpose depending on the local demands and can be divided with partitions, for example an outstanding common library can be settled in it [15].

The junction of the church and the library has a considerable tradition in monastic architecture, and at the same time Joseph Furttenbach Jr suggested it in 1649 in his Protestant church standard design.

From the domestic architecture of the 17th and 18th century, those examples need to be emphasised that show distant intellectual affinity with the house churches of the early-Christian era resulting from measures limiting Protestant congregations: this kind of "emergency architecture" had been realised by the almost complete infilling of the urban apartment house's yard into a church as in Pozsony/Bratislava (now Slovakia, 1682) and in Sopron (1722). The Uraiújfalu Lutheran church (Vas county; built 1784-91) with its uniform hip roofed mass not only incorporated a longitudinal church, but also a flat for a teacher and a library-classroom, a quasi follower of the mentioned Furttenbach's model plan of 1649.



**Fig. 6.** Uraiújfalu, Hungary, ground plan of the Lutheran Church (Survey made by the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Dept. of History of Architecture and of Monument Preservation)



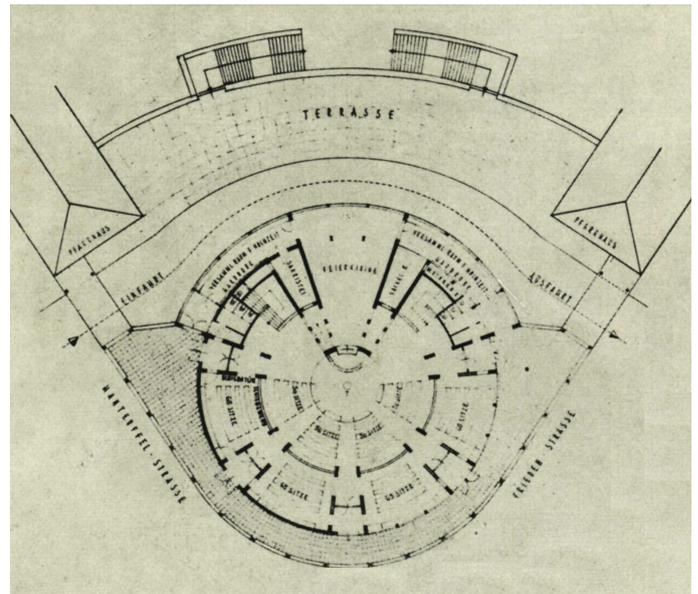
**Fig. 7.** Pozsony/Bratislava (Slovakia) house church built in 1682 [10, p 417].

The two most notable Protestant church architecture manifestos of the 19th century, the Eisenacher Regulativ (Eisenach Regulations, 1861) arguing for the medieval church architecture styles and its reaction, the 'Wiesbaden Programme' (1891) forcing the centralising congregation spaces did not result in a substantive breakthrough in this question, at the same time through the church spaces designed according to the Wiesbaden princi-

ples and imitating an assembly hall with its gallery solutions, a kind of mobility can be discovered.

### Flexibility in 20th century sacral spaces

The architectural ideas of Professor Otto Bartning had a big effect on 20th century modern Protestant church architecture [1]. In his fundamental work on modern church architecture he publishes basic arrangements of protestant liturgical spaces in which the situation of the altar and the pulpit is the first determining factor. Bartning's 'star church' (Sternkirche) plan created in 1922 may never have come to fruition, however his effect was considerable; in the totally central arrangement organised round the pulpit, one of the sectors was the lifted 'festive church' (Feierkirche), that was used in a differentiated manner by extraordinary congregation liturgical events. The idea of this centralised plan with flexible spaces had been realized with some reductions in the Resurrection church (Auferstehungskirche) built in Essen (Germany) in 1929-30 and in the Berlin-Siemensstadt church of Bartning (built 1932-34). Congregation centres with variable interior spaces were also built in the Protestant Scandinavian countries; all these architectural solutions have more or less influenced 20th century Hungarian Protestant church architecture.

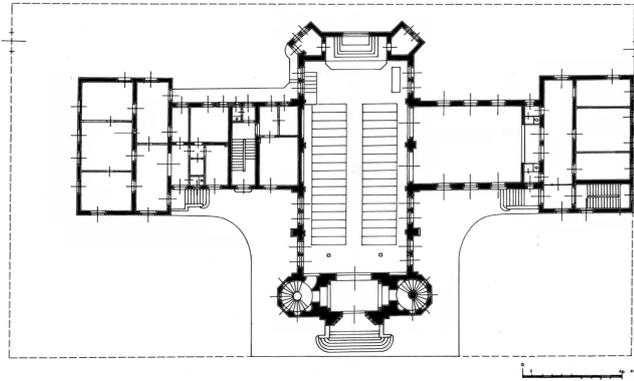


**Fig. 8.** Essen, Auferstehungskirche [Resurrection Church] Plan 1929-30, O. Bartning (Der Baumeister- Monatshefte für Architektur und Baupraxis XXIX (1931) Januar, p. 8.)

Among 20th century Hungarian Protestant - Calvinist or Lutheran - congregation centres built after 1920 we find an increasing number of building complexes where the church as a sacral space and the profane community functions serving the congregation's aims can be united by a mobile wall. The Budapest - Kelenföld Lutheran church designed by János Schulek in 1926 may be the first developed solution for the problem. Schulek's design follows in its mass-shaping and his façades of late Historicism, but on the other hand, the church and sacral

space and the congregation's space may be variably connected to each other.

This progressive functional ground-plan solution with a conservative exterior became a model layout for the Hungarian Protestant congregation centres for later architectural practice.



**Fig. 9.** Budapest-Kelenföld, Lutheran church and congregation centre, ground plan, 1926, Architect: J. Schulek.

A number of congregation centres of similar character were built up to the period preceding World War II, however in the following era, in the time of the socialist system new churches may have been built rather occasionally, and they usually recall the architecture of the 19th century in their older solutions [8]. After the change of regime in the 1990's in Hungary, there was again an upswing in church architecture and in the case of the evangelical ones built at this time the decision-makers of the church - apparently because of the tested functional arrangement that became even more current by the end of the 20th century - suggested following the conceptual arrangement of the congregation centre in Budapest-Kelenföld shown above [7].

The architectural achievement of the Catholic Church following the reforms after the Council of Trent (1545-63) – beyond following the fashionable trends of architecture – did not really change until the beginning of the 20th century. From the papacy of Pius X the liturgical renewal movement has been increasingly initiated, which was then ended by the encyclical letter 'Mediator Dei' published in 1947. The liturgical renewal movement may be regarded as the preparation for the II Vatican synod's liturgical reform. In its architectural concerns it may be characterized as experimentation on a theoretical basis following also the tendencies of Modernism.

The emblematic monuments of this 20th century renewal of modern Catholic church architecture were built in the 1920's: the church designed by Auguste and Gustave Perret in Paris-Rancy and St. Peter's church in Dettingen of Dominikus Böhm. In some of Böhm's church designs - by keeping the character of the uniform sacral space - the Eucharist appears on a separate altar in a separate chapel similarly to the baptismal font in another chapel in that they join the church space in a differen-

tiated manner, creating inside the stability of the Catholic liturgical space the possibility of functional variation. (Holy Joseph parish church in Offenbach am Main in 1925., 'Circumstantes' ideal plans of Böhm in 1923) [12, pp. 43-44].

Rudolf Schwarz was Böhm's colleague, pupil and the outstanding architect of modern German church architecture, whose book published in 1938 provided profound human answers in the questions of modern church architecture determined of actual architectural problems in an oppressive era but also affecting the area of theology [13]. In the works of Schwarz realised after WWII - like the case of St Michael's church in Frankfurt built in 1953 - the spatial units with a changing function inside the church building organised as a flowing space composition are of outstanding significance, following the differentiation inside the "Tridentine" liturgical space. Practically, similar tendencies can be observed in Benedictine monastery architecture being renewed in the 2nd part of the 20th century, from time to time melding the monastic choir with the worshiper's space, together with a mobile altar and the chapels which gradually expand the sacral space. The discussion on modern church complexes in British architecture had been warmed up in the beginning of the 1960's [9].

Catholic church architecture also underwent a renewal in Hungary in the beginning of the 20th century. We may characterise these designs as early Modernism, but essentially their spatial constructions do not show major changes. Although buildings with a community function appeared beside the churches, these have never been merged into the sacral space. An excellent example of this phenomenon is the Balatonboglár parish centre, designed by Iván Kotsis in 1932 by which all the different functions like parsonage, community house and church were placed in a separate building. In a preliminary project of Kotsis for a chapel in Balatonboglár the sacral space and the chaplain's dwelling appears under the same simple roof [4, p II/64].



**Fig. 10.** Budapest-Kelenföld, Lutheran church and congregation centre, 1926, Architect: J. Schulek. (Original photo in the archive of the parish)

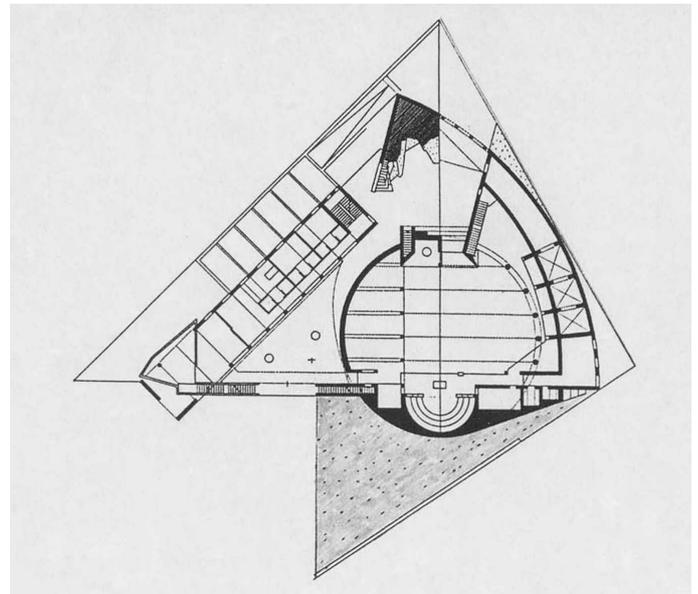
## Contemporary Hungarian approaches – congregation centres

Among Catholic churches erected in the last two decades an outstanding example is the Church of Hungarian Saints in Budapest, built close to the Danube between 1995-96 after the plans of Ferenc Török and Mihály Balázs. It was planned originally as the Vatican pavilion of the Budapest Expo, however the proprietor, the Catholic bishopric did not desist from the realisation of the building after the cancellation of the expo and it became an important parish church of the Southern Buda district and simultaneously the parish church of the universities to be found in the neighbourhood. The Tempeliaház church of the Suomalainen brothers, Timo and Tuomo built into a rock in Helsinki had a considerable effect upon the shaping of the Church of Hungarian Saints, although regional characteristics prevail rather in his details. A urn cemetery and community rooms were created under the liturgical space, while the parsonage and additional community spaces with classrooms for religious education are in a separate wing of the complex that encloses with the mass of the church an intimate place, thus leading believers through it in order to reach the main entrance defined by the eastward position of the liturgical axis; this leading-through is an efficient device of the preparation process for the mass. Consequently, necessary profane functions were developed on a large area beside the church, but these are not attached directly to the church and so neither are they accessible from it.

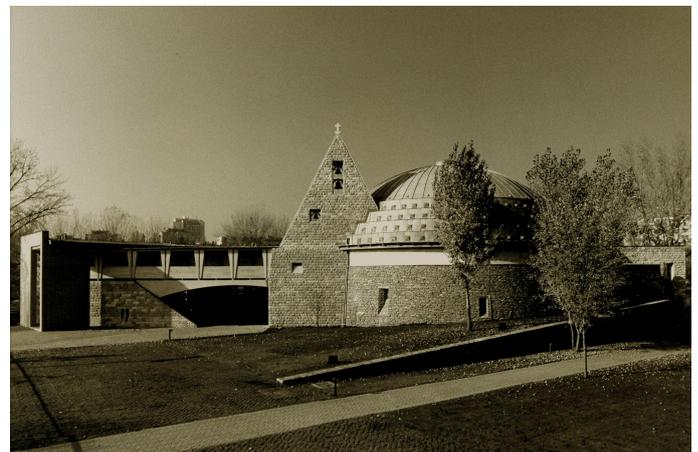


**Fig. 11.** Balatonboglár, Hungary, Catholic parish church and congregation centre, 1932 (Architect: I. Kotsis) - [4, p 1/76]

The building type of congregation centres involving church, community functions and possibly a parsonage became the most important building type of the already mentioned upswing of evangelical church architecture after 1990, and its model was - as underlined previously - the congregation centre at Budapest-Kelenföld. The most important project of this kind after the changing of the regime was the Lutheran church and congregation centre in Dunaújváros built between 1992-96 designed by



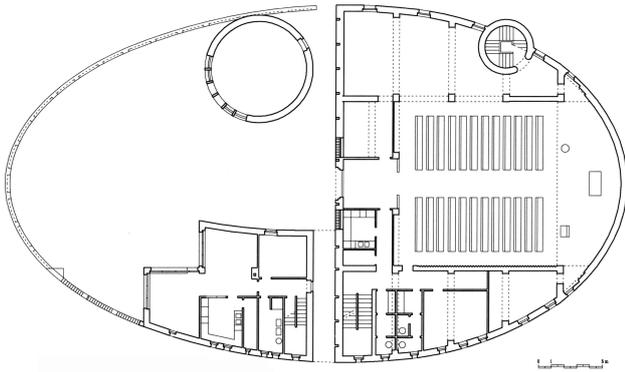
**Fig. 12.** Parish Church of Hungarian Saints in Budapest, 1995-96, Sketch design, ground plan. Architects: F. Török and M. Balázs



**Fig. 13.** Parish Church of Hungarian Saints in Budapest, 1995-96, Architects: F. Török and M. Balázs (Photo by M. Balázs)

the architect Tamás Nagy. It was built in a 'socialist city' created by the industrialisation policies of the socialist regime - the former name of the city in the fifties was 'Stalin City' - and where good care had to be taken to maintain the "clean Marxist ideology" of the working class; naturally enough a church could not have been built there in the period between 1945 and 1990. The exceptional architectural qualities of the complex with its timeless forms free of classifying categories embodies traditions of brick architecture typical of the protestant churches of Europe and the universal Christian symbolism - the mandorla-like egg form - and besides, in its deep spiritual approach traditions of the Hungarian organic architecture of 1990's. This architecture of Tamás Nagy had been diversely valued by a number of architectural theorists. We may complement all these with the observation on its character of a congregation centre that continues a centuries old Protestant building tradition very typical from the beginning of the 20th Century, which provides a funda-

mental living space with an appropriate architectural formation for church missionary activity and devices to the commitment for the narrower or a wider community responsibility in the era of the turn of the millennium.



**Fig. 14.** Lutheran church in Dunaújváros, Hungary, 1992-96, Ground plan. Architect: Tamás Nagy.



**Fig. 15.** Lutheran church in Dunaújváros, Hungary, 1992-96, Architect: Tamás Nagy.

The common claim of modern Catholic and Protestant churches is the unified composition of the church with spaces for the community beyond the liturgical activities. We may see however that in Catholic churches the community profane spaces are generally not attached directly to the churches' liturgical areas; they cannot be opened into one another. In as much as they are connected, it can be traced back in the case of the Hungarian examples to the effects of Lutheran church architecture, as in the new Catholic parish church in Gödöllő where the designer, Tamás Nagy is also an expert in Lutheran church planning, or by the parish church the Blessed Teresa of Calcutta in Szeged where Finnish evangelic architectural prototypes perhaps play a role in its design principles.



**Fig. 16.** Lutheran church in Dunaújváros, Hungary, 1992-96. Church interior with attached community rooms. Architect: Tamás Nagy.

Such linking of the different functional spaces is in the case of Protestant churches much more acceptable because they do not consider the liturgical space in such a measure sanctified like the Catholic Church.

We can see that the flexible use of church interiors seems to be uncharacteristic apart from the Protestant denominations. Circumambulation is another specific design requirement by the orthodox and Greek Catholic Christian churches formed according to severe and strictly bound rules which act against the flexible space formation. In today's large Islamic building projects where a congregation centre will be built together with the jami - for example the Islamic Cultural Centre of New Jersey, designed by Murad Abu Salim - profane and sacral functions are also not directly linked together [6, pp. 35-36].

### Conclusion

Summarising our investigations we can see that the church connected with spaces of a profane function vary in measure in different ages and among denominations. Observing theological principles the Protestant denominations have the most opportunities in this sense since here the form of the space and His physical existence appears as 'adiaforon', i.e. indifferent from the viewpoint of salvation, thus the space can be easily modified. Accordingly, although there is a significant claim to the linking of the church with the home aspect as the two totally different examples picked out present, its intentions are not merely typical of the Hungarian denominations. The tendencies of this - considered generally within the borders of the role of the universal church as its social commitment and responsibility to the community - can be traced back to the following principal causes. First, we can mention the sociological relationships of the religious communities as the most important factor. In as much the belonging to a given religion or denomination is not general within the population, the sacral building complex will play an important role in organising the community. This situation causes at the same time claims of a decrease in rep-

resentation, or causes emergency measures that facilitate the involvement of profane functions. The linking of the spaces with a different function may have come about more easily through the congregation centres of Protestant denominations and in a more intensive manner, because they do not consider their churches – in their own physical reality – as exclusively holy spaces as does the Catholic Church. The growing requirements of civilisation (the use of heating, electrical installations, etc.) and similarly, contemporary architectural fashion trends may result in functional consequences and demands in the 20th century congregation centres that a traditional church cannot fully meet, additionally, high standard technological solutions facilitated the forming of the spaces which can be flexibly used for the serving and home-providing purposes of religious communities. The demands of complex and varying functional solutions of flexible space formation play a determining and inevitable role in the design of contemporary sacral spaces resulting in the diverse architectural solutions for congregation centres.

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