

CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN CHURCH-ARCHITECTURE

Re-interpretation of a broken tradition on the turn of the millennium¹

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On 2nd December 1978 John Paul II wrote in his letter to the Hungarian bishops the following: "... the catholic church, which has always played a very significant role in the history of Hungary, shall continue to form the spiritual image of your country by bringing to your sons and daughters the light of the Gospel of Christ, which has illuminated the way and slant of life of Hungarian people for many centuries".

The thousand year old Hungarian Christianity has played a dominant role in the liturgical reformation movement: the 34th International Eucharistic Congress took place in 1938 in Budapest. In the first third of the XX Century rather significant construction works have been done by the Catholic Church in Hungary. The modernist works, formed in the progressive style of the era, evangelized the magnitude of the church and its role played in the social life of Hungary between the two world wars by following the most updated principles both in architecture and in liturgy³. Several churches have been built with the interpretation of the early-Christian traditions, showing progressive liturgical principles and new arrangements of the architectural function - all this well before the II. Vatican Council (Fig. 01).

After 1945 Hungarian church construction has been set back for a long time due to political realignment. During socialism new church may have been built only in place of a demolished one, or in some lucky cases new temple was constructed to represent the compliance of the state power⁴. 40 years of ideological oppression have followed, however the rare architectural memories of the era have marked out with their expressivity⁵ (Fig. 02).

From the nineties, a boom of construction course has started, carrying the marks of value-crisis due to the uncertainty caused by the obligate break. Only after one decade can one notice the reconsidered production of architectural value, which is kind of re-interpretation of the broken development⁶. In case of contemporary Hun-

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³ PAMER, Nóra: *Magyar építészet a két világháború között*. Budapest, 1986.

⁴ SZROGH, György: "A hollóházi templom", in: *Magyar Építőművészet*. 1968/6.

⁵ One of two churches mentioned in the well-know summary of contemporary church architecture: STOCK, Wolfgang Jean: *Architectural Guide : Christian Sacred Building in Europe since 1950*. Prestel, München, Berlin, London, New York, 2004.

⁶ RÉV Ilona: *Templomépítészetünk ma*. Corvina, Budapest, 1987.

garian churches, the pledge for architectural value has undertaken the continuation of tradition beside the aesthetic demands of the turn of the millennium; this tradition is tightly connected in its identity to the clear conception of liturgical spaces and to the re-definition of Christian space approach on the turn of the millennium. After the ideologically dark era, dedicating the oppression as the time for preparation, the phrase of continuity becomes re-interpreted.

With the birth of a democratic state, the role of the Church within the society has been re-defined. With the return and buying back of ecclesiastical estates, the Church has amassed an enormous stock of buildings, which it must maintain. Schools were re-started with friar-teachers, communal buildings were re-animated, and scout teams visited the sacral pilgrim places in Hungary and abroad too. The first years after 1990 meant the determination of the tendencies provided by the new chances⁷. Parallel to the renovation of monument buildings of the historic religious centres, the design of new churches has started in order to satisfy the increasing spiritual need.

The constructions related to political changes were established in areas where the ease from strong political oppression had resulted in a very fast counter-reaction. In several industrial towns that had been settled under socialism, the churches appeared nearly simultaneously to the changes. The catholic church of the internationally known architect Imre Makovecz has been built on the skirts of the concrete plattenbau of Paks, the town in Middle-Hungary famous of its nuclear power plant. Hungarian organic architecture is inspired by ancient vernacular architecture - the composition seems like something before Christianity, carrying the vernacular religion of the thousand year old Christian state and determining a place within the world of the turn of the millennium at the same time. A building-organism was born from the anthropomorphic signs; the composition forms a heart shape (Fig. 03). The cross rises on top of the entrance tower, but underneath, the symbols of sun and moon appear as well. The main gate is guarded by two angels: the angel of Darkness on the north side and angel of Light on the south⁸. The timber structures are raised high from the layout to the heart-shaped skylight of the ridge, just like the two angles who accompany Christ turn to the light with their outstretched wings. Makovecz has balanced the uncertain period of political changes and social transition with the conscious use of this specific language of forms - the treasury of Hungarian vernacular forms becomes the embodiment of religious traditions.

The Church has given a quick response to the dynamically starting urbanization. The religious complexes have become nearly the centre of the areas under change. As a special example, we can mention the only building planned for the Expo in 1996 (that has never been realized) - the pavilion of Vatican - which was constructed as an Expo building with the original intention to be altered later as the church of the nearby university⁹. Not far from River Danube, which cuts Budapest into two, the

⁷ WESSELÉNYI-GARAY, Andor: "Kortárs magyar templomépítészet II. A helyek kihívása - posztorganikus építészet", in: *Debreceni Disputa*. 09/05. (VII.) pp.34-42.

⁸ MAKOVECZ, Imre: "A [paksi templom] tervezés történetéről", in: GERLE, János (ed): *Makovecz Imre műhelye. Tervek, épületek, írások, interjúk*. Magyar építőművészet-1. Mundus Egyetemi Kiadó, Budapest, 1996. pp. 306-307.

⁹ TÖRÖK, Ferenc: *Török Ferenc*. (Architectura - Vallomások), Kijárat Kiadó, Budapest, 1996.

building complex lays in a park, in the near vicinity of university and office buildings (Fig. 04). The main sacral space is determined by the cupola with flat arch and circle-shaped layout, emerging in the ring of tiny glass skylights - quoting the central churches of the medieval Hungary. The unusual asymmetry of the space with triforium is balanced by the axis of the space-row starting from the baptistery at the entrance to the syntherion of the altar apsis. Outside the homogenous mass of the monumental copper cupola, which is supported by stone plinth, is embraced by the Stations of the Cross climbing the ramp. At the gate of the entrance-bridge a gothic gable greets the visitor with the aim of leading him to the entrance between the buildings - in this way creating an urban space within the separate buildings of the campus. Historic spirit and direct architectural quotations try to find their way.

The main mission-area of the construction of new churches is the empty zone of the plattenbaues built in socialism. These residential areas hosting ten thousands of people circle Budapest as rings. During socialism, only the most important public institutes were constructed in the embrace of tower- and stripe-buildings, and these emerged in the seventies. Only four decades later was a church constructed with real community-creating power¹⁰. On the border line of the family house zone and plattenbau houses Kruppa's building complex appears in a human scale and with a monumental architecture of openings at the same time (Fig. 05). The reductive mass form gives pathetic scales, the stringent openings are precisely composed and the spatial effects are filled with rich emotions. The recycled brick wall built brick by brick speaks about the common will of construction; the purity of the white interior and the timber beams of the ceiling create the space of 'activity intending common good' which calls for devotion. The 'basement' rooms, which are connected to the street by level-lowering, magnetize the communal activities. This church complex is a majestic work that quotes the puritan but spiritually open spaces of the thirties.

The building complex designed by Tamás Nagy to Gödöllő is located in a similarly dense urban environment (Fig. 06). The hierarchic-order of the three main functions (church, vicarage, community house) results in a liberal composition. The central yard is bordered by building blocks from three sides. The fourth side is open to the surrounding: the heterogeneous forms of family houses and panel blocks are appeased by the calm composition being open in the bay-like formation¹¹. Arriving from the small park, the side-wings' facade rhythmically articulated with pillars escorts us - or rather leads us to the church that frontally welcomes us with its monumental elevation. A harmony is born from the delicate sonority of rhythm and scales of openings; while formal leanness and consistency hardly gives a chance for emotional attachments. The spaces of nearly evangelical purity are drawn into a genial and intimate one with the use of wonderful wooden furniture and white structural elements. In the semi-arch apsis of the altar, the glass windows glow with the lights of saturated colours, presenting a colour-sound transcription of the Gregorian melody of Kyrie Eleison.

¹⁰ WESSELÉNYI-GARAY, Andor: "Három kontextus : Római katolikus templom, Újpalota, in: *Alaprajz*. 2009/3. (16.) pp. 18-23.

¹¹ MASZNYIK, Csaba: "Fény és forrás : szentháromság katolikus templom, Gödöllő", in: *Régi-új magyar építőművészet*. 2007/5. pp. 36-37.

Perhaps this song in colours gives the most direct image of contemporary Hungarian architecture. At the turn of the millennium, the most important need of the human race is silence itself. The dynamism of the visual world around us has to be changed by the calm environment of the church, where - based on the traditions of the Hungarian Order of St. Paul (similarly to the constructions of the Order of Cistercians) - the aesthetics of structure and moderate decoration can provide peaceful surroundings for the meeting with God. In these rooms the role of community is also emphasized alongside the role of the individual, in order to hear clearer the Verb calling for acting for and together with others.

Thus, it is worthwhile to examine some examples of the contemporary architecture related to historic churches connected with Catholicism as well, because in the crisis of values where changes are impossible to be followed, a united Christian attitude can give an answer for social questions¹².

Hungarian Greek Catholic Church brings a specific Byzantine colour to the life of the Catholic Church. The church of Kazincbarcika (Fig. 07), a North Hungarian industrial town, faces the human scaled houses of miners, standing off from the socialist panel stripe-houses. The space of the believers is formed by a cylinder of standard circle layout, working as a symbol for the togetherness of the congregation, and above that an octagonal cupola closes the space¹³. In the middle, there is the icon of the Pantocrator. The symbol system of Byzantine traditions can be observed in the different layers of the composition built on each other. They are not quotations, but the transcriptions of contemporary idea: the exterior mass formation is built from the combination of tower bodies and central bulks.

The buildings of the protestant churches (which account for about one fifth of Hungarian religious population) answer the visual cascade of the millennium sometimes with decorated, sometimes with puritan spaces. The Calvinist church of Budakeszi (Fig. 08) was built to a longitudinal plot of the main street of this small settlement¹⁴. However, in the narrow layout the altar could be surrounded by the benches from three sides, composed with a beautiful symbol of community formation. The vertical element quotes the Transylvanian belfries, while an honour for tradition is present in the natural beauty of the wooden benches and gallery, which are showered by light from the roof structure designed by contemporary constructional principles¹⁵.

The dramatics of the same light are used with different tools in case of the evangelical church of Béla Pazár, located in the north part of Budapest¹⁶ (Fig. 09). The formula-like order of the building complex is consistent from location to detailing. According to the designers' intention, the composition 'clarified from

¹² KRÄHLING, János: "Gyülekezeti központok a XX. század szakrális építészetében". in: *Építés - Építészettudomány*, 2008/1-2, pp. 119-127.

¹³ "Kazincbarcika, görög katolikus templom és parókia, 1991- építész: Balázs Mihály", in: *Magyar Építőművészet*. 1994/3-4. p. 67.

¹⁴ "Református Templom Budakeszi, 1999 - építész: Basa Péter", in: *Régi-új Magyar Építőművészet*. 2002/3. p. 21.

¹⁵ LŐRINCZ, Zoltán: "Ne hagyjátok a templomot..." - *Új református templomok 1990-1999*. Kálvin kiadó, Budapest, 2000.

¹⁶ SZALAI András: "Kiáltás a vadonban", in: *ÉS*. 2003. (45.) 01.

meaning' gives a chance for a more genial relation. The simplistic aesthetical appearance is built on deeply rooted protestant traditions. With the homogeneous materials of the church hall the architects have created the communal space of salutation and hearing.

FIGURES

- Fig. 01. Budapest-Városmajor, roman catholic church, 1932-1933. Architects: Aladár and Bertalan Árkay
- Fig. 02. Hollóháza, roman catholic church, 1966-1967. Architect: László Csaba
- Fig. 03. Paks, roman catholic church, 1988-1992. Architect: Imre Makovecz
- Fig. 04. Budapest-Lágymányos, roman catholic church, 1994-1996. Architect: Ferenc Török
- Fig. 05. Budapest-Újpalota, roman catholic church, 2008. Architect: Gábor Kruppa
- Fig. 06. Gödöllő, roman catholic church, 2001-2007. Architect: Tamás Nagy
- Fig. 07. Kazincbarcika, greek catholic church, 1991-1995. Architect: Mihály Balázs
- Fig. 08. Budakeszi, calvinist church, 1994-1999. Architect: Péter Basa
- Fig. 09. Budapest-Békásmegyér, evangelic church, 1997-2000. Architect: Béla Pazár



Fig. 01



Fig. 02



Fig. 03



Fig. 04



Fig. 05



Fig. 06



Fig. 07



Fig. 08



Fig. 09