

CHAPTER 7

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CHAPTER 7

Nation Building

From 1895-1939 the architectural history of Central Europe was one of geopolitical, social and ideological experiment. As defined in Chapter 1, *Mitteleuropa*/Central Europe had a history of shared values and traditions through extended trade and political interests and it is these that drove modernism forward. Otto Wagner as Professor of Architecture at the Academy in Vienna in 1894 began this process by calling for a new approach to architecture independent of the past, forward looking and capable of taking towns and cities into a new century. What was needed, beyond Vienna, was a unifying principle that would appeal equally to all of the non-Germanic nations that did not rely on ideas of national identity but embraced the concept of nation building one with another as in the perception of *Gemeinschaft* [p.4].

This modernisation did not progress at the same speed or with the same intensity in all of the nations. There is a very clear difference in architectural advancement between Poland and the Czech lands and latterly Hungary as one grouping, with Croatia and Slovenia as a second group. These splits were mirrored in ethnic divisions, Poland and the Czech lands – Northern Slav; Croatia and Slovenia – Southern Slav and Hungary – Magyar. As the idea of national identity resurfaced in the early 1900s, Hungary, Poland and the Czech lands reinvested in the imagined safety of ethnic traditions.

A return to National Styles

In Hungary, where people had long searched for the origins of the Magyar race a national style was seen. This national style was driven by the idea that in being the first country to distance itself from Vienna, Hungary would be able to establish political and economic independence. How this was to be accomplished was unclear. One of the major problems to be overcome was that Magyar (a Finno-Ugric language) is difficult to understand and as the language of business, government and exchange was still German this separation from Vienna would be very difficult to achieve. The Godollo Studios were the visible evidence of this attempted separation where all those disparate strands of the Magyar style as expressed by Jozsef Huszka were present in a range of decorative and applied arts produced within the artists' colony. These decorative elements of Transylvanian, i.e. Szeke and Kalotaszeg origin, were amalgamated as an 'architectural appliqué' by Odon Lechner in the Post Office Savings Bank, 1899-1901. This pursuit of national style ran not only through the architecture of Odon Lechner

and Istvan Medgyaszay but also in the music of Franz Liszt, the Hungarian Rhapsodies from 1846 to 1895. This upsurge of national identity was also evident in the Zakopane district of Poland and in Bohemia and Moravia where it was seen as a very necessary cathartic solution to the previous dominance.

It was inevitable that with greater moves to allow the towns and cities of the (former) empire to modernise that any national style would be short-lived.

The next question to be answered was how this expansion would be controlled. Could the fabric of the old towns and cities be safeguarded in pursuit of these economic goals?

Safeguarding the old while engaging with modernism

This thesis demonstrates that the expansion was accommodated by very clear planning and building throughout the cities of Central Europe, although each town or city had different needs. The material below demonstrates some examples drawn from the core lines of enquiry of the thesis.

Development in Zagreb was very much dictated by a repositioning of part of the city below the railway line as *Novi Zagreb* (New Zagreb) where a new commercial district was arranged complete with commercial fair grounds and a new port on the river to aid exports.

Ljubljana was re-planned and buildings restored by Maks Fabiani following the earthquake of 1895 though very little new building or commercial development took place from that date onwards until the later phase of modernisation by Jože Plečnik from 1928.

Brno, as the commercial and industrial hub of the Czech lands, grew at an astonishing rate with an emphasis on heavy engineering, brewing, textiles and steel produced by a workforce of 31,000.

Zlin was planned from the ground up as an uncompromisingly modern city. What confounded the critics was that this was a Modern Functionalist solution to the problems of an urban environment employing all of the latest materials and techniques of construction, yet located within a garden city setting. This is explained by the fact that the only knowledge Tomas Bat'a had of the garden city was from English sources.

Zlin was able by the employment of standardised building methods to progress from a rural village to a self contained commercial metropolis without compromising the inhabitants' quality of life. Although Zlin, like Zagreb and Ljubljana, arose as a modernist expression of the garden city of the future unlike them it later became an expression of the aims of the Modern Movement.

None of these cities had to rely on an urban plan as large and involved as Wagner's *GrossStadt* for their development. All was achieved within established practices of urban planning.

The other representative of the Modern Movement that was to have a considerable resonance throughout Czech and Polish architectural thinking was the birth of non-objective art. These ideas progressed from statements of subject-object relationships, as with the writings of Pavel Janak c.1910, to be expanded by Szymon Syrkus c.1924 to insist on links between architecture and industry and the challenge of a mechanised world that had to respond with great adaptability to rapid social changes.

The development of the Modern Movement and the influences from Non-Objective Art

As Central European architecture progressed from the 19th to the 20th century the impact of French Cubism was being seen firstly as cubo-expressionist, then as Rondo-Cubist works through the architecture of Josef Gocar, Josef Choccol, Pavel Janak and Vlastislav Hofman in Prague. Although these works are seen as an architecturally-resolved national style they are no part of the earlier period as discussed in a 'Return to National Styles'. All of the exponents, particularly Pavel Janak, had read widely on the nature of the Gothic from German text and it is argued that this source as distinct from others provided him with his 'cubist' vocabulary.

As recently discussed by Murray (The Burden of Cubism, Blau and Troy [ed.]), making definitive statements about the connection between French Cubism and Czech architecture was more problematic than first imagined when approached on the basis of stylistic or intellectual convergence. The truth of this relationship is best represented by the 'off-centre' theory where it is recognised that experimentation with Cubist ideas by Czech architects was a response to the shock of major changes i.e. the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the First World War. Theoretical papers were written where the effects of matter being acted upon by abstract, unseen energies were capable of revealing the internal content of a building from viewing the exterior form as if in a

transposed three-dimensional overlay. This understanding of structure would allow Czech architecture to progress through co-operation and syncretisation to the establishment of Functionalism.

The architectural position in Poland was very similar, developing from the national style as the Zakopane vernacular, through a number of transitional phases. A group formed as the Polish Constructivists, 1923-1936, gave voice to social demands – architects and planners should work as one to develop large urban conurbations that would meet the needs of the entire population. This vision of cities in the 1920s was taken from a variety of sources but particularly in this case from the writings of Le Corbusier. The major proponent of these ideas in Poland was Szymon Syrkus. He followed Le Corbusier's view that the relationship between residential areas and greenery was to be well considered even when the demands of constructing large numbers of small, inexpensive flats from prefabricated parts seemed to deny this possibility.

This social approach to the construction of apartments was first presented in 1926 with the collaboration of Szymon Syrkus and Teresa Zarnower for the First International Exhibition of Modern Architecture, Warsaw. The other major part of their architectural work was in building exhibition pavilions to promote the newly found commercial independence of Poland. The modern neo-classical style used by Bohdan Pniewski and Stanislaw Brukalski for the Polish Pavilion at the 1937, Paris Exhibition, is contrasted by the Functionalist, Polish National Pavilion, 'Art and Technology' of Bohdan Lachert and Jozef Szanajca at the same event. In writing in *l'Illustration*, in 1937, Louis Richard Monet wrote about the Polish exhibition halls of the Paris World Fair of 1937 in glowing terms. 'What a splendid assertion of its finally liberated personality is afforded the visitor by resurrected Poland'. He did not know the fate that was about to befall her.

Although much was promised from this group and their incarnations in Zwrotnica 1922, Blok 1924-1926, and Prasens 1926-1939, the advent of the Second World War ensured their high-minded ideals were subjected to over simplification and distortion, producing tightly packed housing where people were living in cramped conditions. Despite great difficulties the group continued their works and social ideas through Helena Syrkus, the architect wife of Szymon, who progressed through the Polish CIAM to become a Vice President of the CIAM Council alongside Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius in 1947.

Comparatively little was happening in Zagreb at this time, having recovered from the earthquake of 1880 and investing the city with the Green Horseshoe which had subsequently been expanded and developed. The city now had to adapt to an influx of

people coming to the new capital of the Croats. The growth in population Zagreb had seen 1900-10 was as nothing compared to the influx of people post-1918 at the end of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The inter-war years were marked also with a considerable number of foreign architects from France, Italy and Germany visiting the city. Peter Behrens, a pioneer of modernism, recognised within Zagreb a unique blend of architectural styles that echoed Adolf Loos' work – most notable in the Stock Exchange Building, 1923-1927.

The further observation of architectural production in Zagreb during this period reveals a large amount of new construction carried out in a modern style that broke away from the historicism of the past. The architecture was recognised as international, but not necessarily of the International Style. This position was to change with the return of many architects who had trained with Le Corbusier such as Ernest Weismann and with Hans Poelzig: Drago Ibler and Zdenko Strizic. The new regulatory plan for Zagreb 1931 showed the influences of Le Corbusier's 'City of Tomorrow'. But like much in Central Europe that was progressive the Second World War halted development; however the plan was in part realised through Soviet Socialist Realism and more than any other Central European country the architecture of 1920s and 1930s Zagreb acted as a reference point for future architects working in Croatia.

Hungary by 1930 had adopted many of the concepts of the Modern Movement as expressed in Poland. These ideas were not used initially in building for the majority of the population but in the building of private houses for a middle class receptive to progressive ideas. These houses from the drawing board of Farkas Molnar and Josef Fisher were constructed 1930-1936. However, as in the Polish experience, there became a necessity to build large apartment blocks. Great thought was given to these blocks so as to avoid the routine or dull. Bela Hofstatter and Ferenc Domany produced a number of well-appointed apartments that enjoyed a panoramic view across parklands and over the Danube. Much of this work was influenced by CIAM. This consideration of location and space was also present in numerous industrial and governmental buildings where a linear balance of horizontal windows with little clear indication of interruption from vertical features became a staple of the architects working in Budapest.

One of the finest examples of this type of building is Gedeon Gerloczy and Nandor Kormendy, Magdolna Hospital, Fiumel Avenue, Budapest, 1939. The Stuhmer Chocolate Factory, Budapest, 1941, reveals how far this application of Functionalism might have progressed. Of note is the improvement in the disposition of the elements of the frontage in the understanding of Functionalism developed in the three years

between the buildings without the advent of the Second World War. Unfortunately all of the advances made by Central European planners and architects were lost from memory for a considerable number of years.

Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis, in common with a number of the major works cited in the Literature Review, can be seen as a platform for further discussion exploring historical issues around the development of modernism and the Modern Movement in relation to architectural developments and town planning in Central Europe.

By reviewing the extant literature in discussion with Central European authorities and by drawing upon a little known range of sources, this thesis brings into focus the role of key individuals such as Plečnik, Fabiani and Kotěra and it explores the significance of developments in town planning in places like Zagreb and Ljubljana.

In restoring missing detail and revisiting some of the key sites, the thesis reveals how Central European individuals made early and significant contributions to the development of architectural modernism and the Modern Movement that have hitherto received little critical acknowledgement. For example, Maks Fabiani is revealed by the thesis as a significant contributor to Otto Wagner's seminal volume, *Moderne Architektur*. Similarly, the thesis points up the significance of a number of architectural and domestic partnerships in which both the male and female view of the function of architecture (as developed in social housing) was to be found expressed within both Hungarian Functionalism and Polish Constructivism.

Finally, what this thesis reveals is how these figures developed what can be seen as local solutions, rooted in the context and culture of individual towns and cities and their unique histories. More significantly, this thesis demonstrates that these independent initiatives were formed with an understanding of - and in response to - wider national and international developments in the field of architectural modernism. In this connection, the thesis can be regarded as part of an emerging academic effort to redress the history of the Modern Movement (following the lead of Norman Davies) and an attempt to set in motion a raft of suggestion for further research into this rich field of cultural endeavour.

Further Research

Research in the future might usefully concentrate on some themes highlighted in the thesis. For example, more detailed prosopographic analysis of the interconnections between major actors in particular countries, especially those husband and wife teams that have been identified in Poland and Hungary.

The relationship between Maks Fabiani and Otto Wagner would benefit from an examination of its nature, duration and extent, drawing wherever possible on primary materials.

Another area that might benefit from more extended analysis is the early influences on Le Corbusier from Turkey and Central Europe.