

## **DEEPLY EMBEDDED IN TRADITION**

### **Interpretations of regional roots for modern Hungarian architecture in the 1960s**

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#### **Abstract**

*Sigfried Giedion's seminal paper of 1954 on new regionalism was first mentioned in Hungary by János Bonta in his opposition at the Congress of the Association of Hungarian Architects in 1961. He referred to it as an acceptable way of adaptation to the local conditions, to meet the given place, landscape, nation and circumstances. This was the first and the last case when this expression occurred in Hungary in the coming decades.*

*However, the question of how to relate modern architecture to the local conditions was kept on the agenda during the 1960s. In the discussions, the reference point was never the region or the place, but tradition. Even though two parallel approaches can be detected. The representatives of the first trend referred to folk architecture tradition and proposed the detailed analysis of the Hungarian peasant buildings as an authentic source. The other source or rather model was Finnish architecture, which could develop a special but at the same time European modern architecture. Modern Finnish architecture was also rooted in folk tradition and the connection between Hungarian and Finnish art and architecture could be detected back to the turn of the century, which as a 'special relationship' made this approach even more plausible.*

*The paper discovers the two parallel approaches – both looking for tradition – but based on different interpretations and leading to different conclusions. We present the protagonists, architects and ethnographers, and follow how these concepts appeared in theory, in architectural reviews and in realised buildings during the 1960s.*

**Keywords:** Hungary, Finnish modern architecture, folk tradition

#### **Modernity and tradition**

In the first part of the 1950s, modern architecture as a representative of capitalist culture was disestablished and replaced with the so-called Socialist Realism, a state-required traditionalism which ruled the entire field of culture in Hungary. Although – after Khrushchev, the first secretary of the Soviet Communist Party had announced the return to modern technology and a break with historicism – Hungarian architecture returned to modern architecture at

about 1956, no attempts were made to discuss the relationship between modernity and tradition. After the uprising of 1956 political power needed years to stabilize its position and the situation calmed down only around 1960 to launch a cautious talk about the still sensitive subject.

In 1960 a new editorial board was elected for the country's only architectural periodical, *Magyar Építőművészet* (Hungarian Architecture). The chair position was kept by Máté Major, a communist university professor and an advocate of modern architecture, but the board – including János Bonta as chief editor – consisted of young architects, speaking foreign languages and many of them also acting as university lecturer. The periodical published several new examples of recent modern architecture from the international scene and gave space to cautious theoretical writings, too. The author of a keynote essay – under the title *Modernity, Secession, Tradition* – was a university professor, who started with the statement that contemporary Hungarian architecture could not be compared with the quality of French, Italian, Scandinavian or American architecture. He saw the reason in that the referred foreign examples followed modern principles and preserved their connection to their roots both (Kathy, 1960). The professor discovered the vernacular roots also in Le Corbusier's recent works, going as deep as the effects of African sources and folk architecture.<sup>1</sup> To find the right way he suggested to recall and analyse the turn-of-the-century Hungarian architecture, namely Hungarian Secession.

We see that the basics of modern architectural principles were set out already in the turn-of-the-century works. These principles – truth to materials, sincerity, utility, functionality, national character – have not changed since then. ... Some foreign impacts (Finnish) played a role in the turn-of-the-century architectural efforts, but our traditions – especially folk architecture – formed their basis. (Kathy, 1960, p. 37)

Reacting essays mainly touched the evaluation and re-evaluation of Hungarian turn-of-the-century architecture, considering evidence of its connection to folk

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the Hungarian word „népi” refers to peasant architecture the content of which is narrower than the usually applied „vernacular”. To stress the difference we use “folk architecture” when the Hungarian text writes “népi építészet”.

architecture. The author of the only direct reflection on the relationship between modernity and tradition suggested an instinctive connection between modern architecture and national character.

In this way, the elaboration of a special Hungarian architecture relying on traditions is more of an intuitive than a rational work. The creator's architectural and aesthetic requirements as an immense necessity will force it to come to being. (Császár, 1960, p.52)

Császár's statement reflected the opinion of the majority of the profession. After the painful interlude of the forced traditionalism practising architects were reluctant to look for traditional sources, even in folk architecture. The concept of regionalism – or new regionalism as named by Sigfried Giedion in 1954 – the idea of an architecture embedded in its natural and cultural surroundings and connected to the place didn't find any reflection in the professional scene. Giedion's approach worth considering, was suggested only once, by János Bonta at the Congress of the Association of Hungarian Architects in 1961.

Our architecture is provincial but not in the good sense of reflecting on the relatively limited conditions of a given landscape, people and situation – that we shouldn't call provincialism – but with Sigfried Giedion's words, new regionalism. Our architecture is provincial in its immaturity that it wants to look more than what it is. (Bonta, 1961, p. 144.)

Imre Kathy returned to the theme of modernity and tradition in another essay a year later. This time he clearly expressed that Hungarian turn-of-the-century architecture should be appreciated for its structural innovations and new space concept, but not for decorative shape and details. He stated that – as vernacular and professional architecture is in mutual contact – looking for traditional sources we shouldn't turn either to a certain period or to folk tradition. He also proposed an explanation why Hungarian architects return again and again to this source, namely that in Hungarian turn-of-the-century architecture the pursuit for a modern and national architecture were linked together. '*The problem of the folk and national roots did not arise so sharply elsewhere, probably in Finland, as an exception, where the social conditions were similar.*' (Kathy, 1961, p. 49.)

The turn-of-the-century period was a flourishing relationship between Finnish and Hungarian architecture, confirmed by several personal contacts. The above-mentioned cultural background had a further element, namely the common roots, the Finno-Ugric language family. The cultural contacts were interrupted during the WW II, and officially re-started only in 1959. (Heikkilä, 1984, p. 297.) Finnish people were considered as our relatives, we had a strong architectural relationship in the first part of the 19. century, Finland had rich and well-preserved folk architecture, parallel with a modern architecture which became more and more known and appreciated internationally.

### **The Finnish connection**

Ironically, the main promoter of Hungarian folk architecture and modern Finnish architecture was one and the same person, the ethnographer László Vargha (1904-1984). He joined the Department for History of Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture and was commissioned to teach folk architecture from 1952 and history of Hungarian architecture from 1954.

Vargha introduced his ethnographic approach to the university. He became the first general director of the freshly established independent Ethnographical Museum in 1948 and had a broad and long practice in researching folk architectural heritage. During his early career, he visited Finland and the open-air museum of Skansen in Stockholm, Sweden in 1935 (Vargha, 1935) and became a devoted advocate of creating a central collection of folk architecture in Hungary (Vargha, 1937). He participated in surveys of folk architecture in the late interwar period and continued research after the war. As a university lecturer, he had lead several field trips for students to document the vanishing past of villages left in decay in the age of heavy industrialization and urbanisation lead by the socialist central government.

During his early study trip to the North, he also built connections with local Finnish professionals. Apparently, he has lost close contact with his friends during World War II; the list of archived letters sent to Finnish colleagues only

resumed in 1968 (Vargha, 1968). Memoirs and a 1960 scientific student circle study on the application of Finnish sauna in Hungary supervised by Vargha show that he had never forgotten Finland (Istvánfi, 1994, p. 64). The author of the study and later his successor as the lecturer of folk architecture, Gyula Istvánfi remembers that Vargha emphasized the thorough knowledge on Finno-Ugric relative peoples, especially the Finns.

The activity of Vargha is definitely a link between traditional, pre-war relationship between Finnish and Hungarian professionals – maintaining friendly personal contact – and the new era of broader and more institutionalized contacts of the 1960's. His conviction towards the relationship between the Finnish and Hungarian people had never been forgotten and has strongly influenced his thinking on Hungarian folk architecture and Hungarian architecture in general. Viewed in a historical scale of two hundred years, the apparent silence in the relationship between the two nations in the postwar years was exceptional. Resuming of contacts around 1960 only restored normal proximity.

Another key person, Elemér Nagy (1928-1985) came to the fore around this time. After graduating at the Technical University of Budapest he joined the Department for History of Architecture as a lecturer and held classes up to 1962. He eventually left the university and shifted to public life. When the Association of Hungarian Architects re-formed its foreign affairs committee Nagy was appointed the correspondent for Finland. (MÉSZ, 1959) He later joined the periodical, *Magyar Építőművészet*, he was fellow from 1960 and became chief editor from 1962. Nagy gradually became the second key person in Finnish and Hungarian relations besides Vargha in the 1960s. Nagy and Vargha were also colleagues at the Department for History of Architecture.

Vargha was also an organizer of professional life for his mentees outside the university as well. He kept contact with his students after graduation and also involved the most talented architects in professional events (Gilyén, 1964). Besides his close contact with Elemér Nagy, he also initiated the career of László Szabados, who worked for the office of Aarne Ervi (Szabados, 2005), and Károly

Kaszás. Kaszás first visited Finland in 1962 as a guest of the World Festival of Youth and Students (Kaszás, 2015), returned two years later for a study and later he organized several study trips for students as a lecturer and contact person. Today he is considered one of the greatest living experts in Finnish architecture in Hungary.

Vargha also presented his knowledge outside the Technical University. Lectures were given by him at various scientific and university platforms and popularized Finnish architecture (Vargha, 1968). When talking about *Finnish folk architecture* he rather interprets it as the *architecture of the entire Finnish folk*, presuming the immediate relationship between society and its building activity. Modern Finnish and Finnish folk architecture are deeply intertwined; he admires the sustenance of folk values (Vargha, s.a.) and praises Finnish architects for their social consciousness and deep understanding of social conditions. From his preparatory sketches, we learn that he also refers to ethnographical works establishing the ethnographic context of the architecture of Finland. In his lectures, Finland is always set as a role model for modern Hungarian architecture.

### **Lessons of a model – results of an ideal**

Modern Finnish architecture became world-wide known during the 1960s. Of course, this is mostly explained with Alvar Aalto, who was known around the world as a Finnish architect and whose buildings were included already in the 1949 edition of Giedion's seminal book *Space, Time and Architecture*. (Giedion, 1949) However, as Petra Čeferin explains, the consciously selected and presented material of the series of international exhibitions on Finnish architecture starting in 1957 helped a lot in creating a special image: within one decade the nine exhibition projects were presented in 25 countries. (Čeferin, 2003)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is still waiting for explanation, that against the personal contacts and the attempts of the Association of Hungarian Architects neither of these exhibitions reached Hungary. In particular, that the material was presented in three towns of the neighbouring Czechoslovakia in 1964.

From the numerous reviews on the exhibitions, the international image of Finnish architecture of the era can be filtered and compared to contemporary Hungarian description. Among the main features common in the reviews Čeferin mentions the '*human character*' first. The masterly use of wood was evaluated as another key factor, which was easy to connect to a humanised architecture, to sensitivity. The close connection of Finnish architecture to Nature, to the natural environment, was just a further step on the same track. The impression (or according to Čeferin, the intention) of '*within Nature*' embrace' added a kind of harsh, Nordic image of the buildings. (Čeferin, 2003, p. 85.) This familiar but at the same time strange character of Finnish architecture recurred in several reviews. Finland was situated somewhere on the crossroads of East and West and the result was functional and organic at the same time. The '*national specificity*' of this architecture also occurred in a few reviews, but not as the main feature of Finnish architecture, while the Finns rather intended to sell their architecture as a '*constituent part of the international production*'. (Čeferin, 2003, p. 124.) To sum it up, Finnish architecture was appreciated for the sensitive use of materials, especially wood, for the close connection to the natural environment, and for the human character, represented in the synthesis of regional and universal.

The first article in Hungarian dedicated solely to Finnish architecture was published by Elemér Nagy in 1962. The author highlights the close relationship of modern Finnish architecture to its tradition and its immediate natural environment as opposed to mainstream, avant-garde modernism determined by abstract fine art. Compositions emerge from their surroundings due to their natural forming and local materials. Organic growth and continuity of ideas characterize this kind of modernism, as opposed to the explicit negation of the avant-garde. '*The easiest way to approach the speciality of Finnish architecture probably if we oppose it to the constructivist-functionalist trend.*' (Nagy, 1962, p. 21.) Tradition and nature as inspiration and source both appear in Nagy's description, as well as he stresses the sensuous materiality and perfect realization of the works. However, in his interpretation, the value of Finnish architecture lies rather in an opposition to the functionalist-abstract trend than

in a coordination of two approaches. In a later article, Nagy appreciates that in Finland urban designers respect the natural environment and they estimate tradition and continuity. (Nagy, 1969)

László Vargha also joined the theme with an article (based on his lecture delivered in the Association of Hungarian Architects in 1964) titled *The Folk Traditions of Finnish Architecture*. Vargha mentions the close relationship to landscape and the extensive use of natural materials. Traditions are widely known, and ethnographical heritage is respected by architects, both constantly re-evaluated and applied in practice. He praises the Finnish for their successful quest for intellectual independence from the historical styles, achieved by a deep understanding of folk architecture and rural building practice. Monumental modern architecture grows out of intuitive folk architecture but adds to it the spirit of modernity. *'This architectural attitude explains that while Finnish architecture has a special domestic flavour, at the same time – and on the highest level – it is also European.'* (Vargha, 1965, p. 56.) Vargha appreciated vernacular Finnish architecture, but only as a method, as a model for modern architecture. As one of his students expressed, *'nothing was more alien to him as to present folk architectural heritage as a subject of copying and direct application.'* (Filep, 1994, p. 82).

It can be seen, that the interpretation of Finnish architecture in the Hungarian architectural press differed somewhat from its international evaluation. The close relationship to the natural environment and the use of natural materials as characteristics were also mentioned. However, the simplicity, the elaborated details on the buildings and the importance of tradition, particularly folk tradition, were more stressed. Not by chance, when a reviewer of a recently completed office building in Budapest recalls Alvar Aalto as a supposed model, he finds the similarities in the way of thinking. He compares the building to Aalto's Rautatalo office building in Helsinki, while he praises it for the clear, simple and generous organization of inner spaces and the calm unity of the facades based on elaborated details. (Vámosy, 1964) Indeed, perfectionism, materiality and fine details characterized contemporary Finnish architecture, all

that the Hungarian building industry could offer only in a few special and exceptional case in the 1960s.



**Figure 1.** OTP-CHEMOLIMPEX office building, Budapest 1963. Architect Zoltán Gulyás. (Author's private archive)

In the middle of the decade, some interesting buildings were published in the periodical *Magyar Építőművészet*. all designed by Imre Makovecz. They were mainly restaurants, wineries, or related to relaxation, but all were situated in the natural or rural environment. In most cases, only the images were published, and the basic technical information and data were given. The first review came out about a road-side restaurant, the Sió Inn in 1966. The author, an architectural historian, found two main inspirational sources of the building, namely Secession and the '*special interpretation of folk architectural traditions*'. (Mendele, 1966) As mentioned above, the two elements were connected in

Hungarian architectural history. The reviewer found the elements of the turn-of-the-century architecture in the curved parapet of the terraces, the cut of the corners and in the framing of windows and doors – all formal details. The effects of the folk tradition he recognised in the main shape, in the surface treatment and materials of the building. The double-pitched roof of the consumer space referred to wine cellars, while the reed roofing and the white plaster of walls recalled traditional wine cellars. However, the reviewer remarked that this shape and material were never used in that countryside but was copied from another part of Hungary.



**Figure 2.** The road-side Sió Inn, near to Szekszárd 1964.  
Architect Imre Makovecz. (Author's private archive)

In the coming years a small group formed around Makovecz, whose works were reviewed in an article. (Kubinszky, 1970) The reviewer, again an architectural historian, also mentions the connection of their buildings to the turn-of-the-century architecture, and especially in case of Makovecz the integration of his buildings into the natural environment and reflections on the '*Hungarian rural architecture*'. However, he makes a critique, too. The main characteristic of these buildings is symmetry, which represents a forced naturalism, though the works can be interpreted within the rules of a kind of organic architecture.

For the wider public, including also the architectural profession, Makovecz's buildings recalled folk architecture, or rather an ideal of folk architecture. The idea of connectedness and peculiarity, something interesting within the low level of surrounding mass produced socialist modern architecture. Against the ambivalent evaluation of his buildings, Makovecz received the highest architecture prize in 1969. Ironically in the newspaper reporting about the award, the journalist wrote that he received it '*for his activity in the field of folk architecture.*' (Magyar Nemzet, 1969)

## **Conclusion**

Following the forced historicism of the socialist-realist architecture and the shock of the suppressed uprising in 1956, Hungarian architecture had to redefine its relationship to its regional roots. Although neither political nor the economic situation was not particularly favourable, some cautious attempts were made to find a special way to relate modern architecture to tradition. Deeply embedded in the Hungarian history, the regional, the local as a source, could have been interpreted only as a tradition, especially the tradition of folk architecture. However, parallel to Hungarian folk architecture emerged another reference point: the Finnish model. Except for the common roots of the two languages, there were no similarities in the state of the two countries in the 1960s, concerning not only the natural surroundings but political and technical facilities. In consequence, the example of Finnish modern architecture was left for longing for a higher quality of building perfectionism, sensitive materiality and fine details.

On the other hand, for the Hungarian public, the national source of architecture was still folk architecture. Within the poor and simple modern architectural environment building shapes that recalled forms and materials of folk architecture appeared interesting and attractive. For laymen, they also had a national flavour, while the architects who followed this trend slowly moved towards the universalism of organic architecture.

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