

# Slovakia, or what could be the Meaning of the Architectural Periphery?

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## Prologue

On the occasion of the official meeting of European architectural magazines in Montpelier in 1999 Dietmar Steiner, the director of the Architecture Centre in Vienna, offered a competition for a prize to be awarded to the architectural magazine which would be the first to publish the Glass House in Stupava. Most of the participants at the conference had no idea what he meant. Not only did they not know where Stupava is, but also most of them were still confusing Slovakia with Slovenia. However Dietmar Steiner was well aware of what he was speaking about. As one of just a few western Europeans, he visited the small-sized glass prefabricated house, which had in the meantime become a frequently visited architectural attraction. Architects Ján Studený and David Kopecký conceived the detached family house in the spirit of the architectural discourse of that time. The architecture was only intended to frame the events tied to the family life. They refused traditional categories such as walls, windows or the functional articulation of rooms. The house was a unique example of such thinking in the whole of Central Europe. As a matter of fact, no review of the Stupava house was ever published in any of the foreign magazines. The photography of the house under construction in the Slovenian magazine *Arhitektov bilten*<sup>1</sup> that illustrated Steiner's contribution from the conference was the only exception. As far as I know, the Slovenian editorial office, however, never received the promised Sacher cake from Steiner.

From the beginning the house, made of glass concrete shaped pieces was given a puzzled reception on the domestic architectural scene. Though some enthusiastic reactions appeared, especially from among the ranks of architecture critics and of the youngest generation of architects, most architects presented sceptical views on the habitability of the house. In spite of that, the house was awarded all prestigious local architectural prizes.

In 2004 the house was rebuilt by its owners; it was walled around, plastered white, filled out with windows and balconies. The house acquired a standard neo-modernist look. The local architectural scene unanimously claimed: it was more than expected! The experiment was over.

This story, as well as the questions it brings forth, is characteristic for the Slovak environment, for its local architectural discussion, for the relation of the builder and the architect and even for the relationship of Slovakia to the rest of the world.

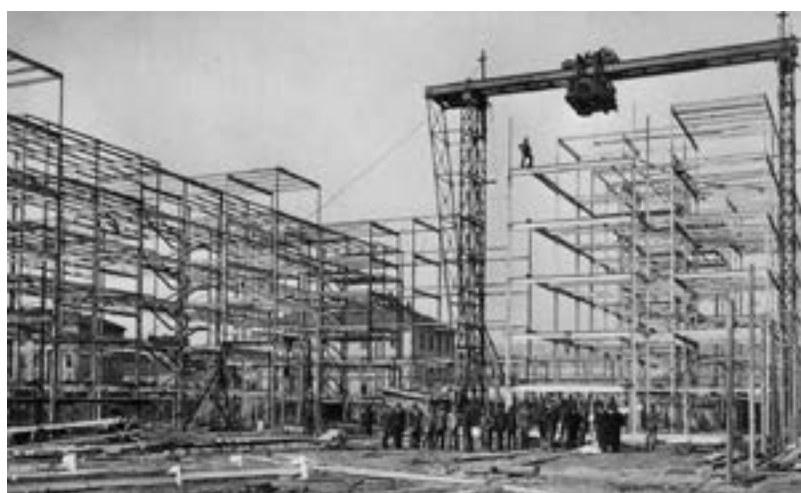
## Evanescent Impulses and Enduring Tradition

In the words of the art historian Ján Bakoš, Slovakia is characterized as a "crossroad of cultures" whose particularity lays in "the sharp clashes of intense but evanescent impulses on the one hand and long-lasting, even conservative traditions" on the other hand<sup>2</sup>. The geographical position of Slovakia on the edge of the western world presupposes the strong influence of western centres on its culture but also the presence of eastern or southern impacts. Slovakia lived through its national emancipation as well as modernization only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was only in 1946 that the first school of architecture was opened here. The first architects educated in Slovakia started to practice at the beginning of the 1950s. Just to illustrate the speed of the modernization process; we can compare the situation of the 1940s with the present one. Today there are 3 schools of architecture and 2 thousand architects in Slovakia, which is inhabited by 5 million people. The character of the local architecture is a logical consequence of the given geographical facts, of the inner dynamic and human potential of the country. The Slovak environment is characterised by its capacity for immediate reaction to external impulses and their transformation within the domestic environment. This promptness and openness however bring along the danger of superficiality. Enhanced by the technical imperfections of the construction process, or simply by inexperience of architect and builder in relation to the attractive novelty, the impulses are often reduced to formal ones or due to incorrect practical processing they do not take root. The rapid action of acceptance of an impulse is often followed by a similarly fast reaction of refusal and a move towards more conservative positions.

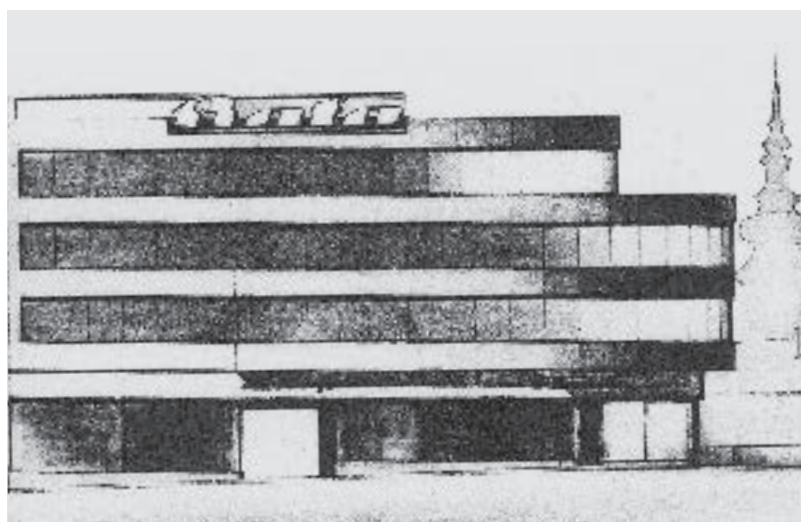
We can observe such a process in the example of the *Nová doba* (New Age) Housing estate, which was the first apartment block constructed with a steel skeleton. It became a local manifestation of fast building processes, unification and standardisation of construction elements and modernisation in general. However, only the first stage was built in such a manner. The second stage, which started immediately after the first one was finished, was based on a more traditional concrete skeleton construction and individual crafts. Or we can take a look at the first curtain wall ever used on the Slovak territory. The director of the city insurance company personally encouraged the architect



Family House, Stupava, David Kopecký – Ján Studený, 2000  
and the same house after rebuilding in 2004, Photo: Archive of Architecture, oA USTARCH SAV



Nová doba I. / New Age I. housing complex, Bratislava, Friedrich Weinwurm – Ignác Vécsei, 1932 – 1935  
and Nová doba II. / New Age II. Housing complex, Bratislava, 1935 – 1936, Photo: Archive of Architecture, oA USTARCH SAV



Baťa Shoe Company department store, Bratislava, Vladimír Karfík, original proposal, 1930  
and realised building, 1931, Photo: Archive of Architecture, oA USTARCH SAV





Agrarian bank of the Vaag region, Žilina, Friedrich Weinwurm – Ignác Vécsei, 1930, demolished 1996  
and new commercial building built on the same site 2000, Photo: Archive of Architecture, oA USTARCH SAV



Villa T, Bratislava, Friedrich Weinwurm, 1929  
and Family house, Bratislava, Christian Ludwig – Augustín Danielis, 1929, Photo: Archive of Architecture, oA USTARCH SAV



to use the most modern style of construction. The very first example of a glass facade in the whole country was enthusiastically welcomed by local critics and avant-garde architects. In the local press it was even written that due to this world novelty Bratislava would finally become a metropolis. Nevertheless, this was not only the first but the last curtain wall implemented in Slovakia until the 1960s. The market simply did not trust a spectacular novelty.

Somehow similar was the situation with the first high-rise building, called Manderla, in Bratislava. The initially warmly welcomed and ambitious 12-storey "skyscraper" was later strongly criticised not only by the general public but by the architects themselves. To underline this special features of the local situation we can compare the easy route to implementation of the first high-rise in Bratislava with the complications that accompanied the construction of the first high-rise – the famous "Hochhaus on Herrengasse" – in Vienna.

It was not necessarily the fate of novelty that led the Viennese to hesitation, but perhaps the need for deeper analysis and reflection. And in Bratislava it was not necessarily the braveness of the architect and investor but perhaps the superficial and less experienced regulation committee that influenced the construction process.

We could illustrate this so called openness towards novelties with another example – the process of approval for the construction of the Baťa shoe company department store. The department store was to be built in the historical centre directly adjacent to the old town walls. The Baťa architect Vladimír Karfík came out with a proposal for a modern very elegant city building. After a series of proposal redesigns by the local authorities, the regulation committee finally approved the very industrial styled and most radical of all of Karfík's proposals. Even the protests of the local antiquities board could not stop the construction. The department store was erected within a few months of obtaining its building permission.<sup>3</sup>

It might sound surprising, but today the place of enduring tradition is occupied by modern architecture, at least as conceived by architects. The strong development of modernism is connected with the interwar period, in Slovakia identified with the first Czechoslovak Republic, with the years of national emancipation and the intense development of an authentic local culture. Modernity is considered to be a timeless value and is reflected in the works of

architects widely separated by generations, localities and opinions. Even the best examples of postmodernism in Slovakia were narrations of the domestic functionalist experience. In the nineties it was a reaction again the strong position of the modern tradition that caused the rapid formation of neo-modernist architecture.

However, the strong modern tradition in Slovakia is connected with the fact that modernism never gained any extreme position. The melting of the „evanescent impulses“ to a form acceptable by the domestic environment, their moderation and even deformation, characterizes the Slovak architectural scene all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "Sharp extreme positions are being abandoned in the name of the values important in this environment." What are these values? Probably it is all about practicality and elementary functionality. Pragmatic solutions have been long since well received in the local milieu.

This is probably the reason why Emil Belluš is considered to be the foremost Slovak architect of the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century. Belluš was always able to respond very pragmatically to fashionable trends and to transform them into perfectly functioning and artistically attractive forms. His abilities can be judged by following his work from the early 1930s functionalism, through the late 1930s, when he was strongly inspired by the Italian *novo cento*, up to the 1950s and his approach to dealing with socialist realism, the official Soviet doctrine in arts.

### **Bad Builder and Good Architect**

As far back as 1938 the architect Oskar Singer from Nitra complained: "for an architect it is not easy to work in the provinces" where his opinions meet a "lack of understanding and acceptance from the provincial man."<sup>4</sup> Similar feelings accompany contemporary architects too and the builder is again and again regarded as an obstacle to the creation of the valuable architectural resolutions. Such a relationship is proved by the fact that builders or users reject many works of architecture rewarded with top architectural prizes. The story of the house in Stupava is a tale taking place quite often in different variations in the Slovak environment.

We can look back at the ambitious form of the family house of the former director of an important Slovak printing plant, Karol Jaroň built in 1929 according to the design of the Czech architect Alois Balán. After a few decades it was rebuilt to a traditional



Demolition in the historical core of Bratislava due to the construction of new bridge over the Danube river and New bridge, Bratislava, Jozef Lacko, Ladislav Kušnír, Ivan Slameň, Alexander Tesár, 1973, Photo: Archive of Architecture, oA USTARCH SAV; Lubo Špirko

shape and eventually demolished in 2012. An even more striking example: the Agrarian bank of the Vaag region in Žilina designed by the most extraordinary personality of the Slovak avant-garde, Friedrich Weinwurm. After a lengthy process of approval by the local authorities, the bank was finally built in 1930, but never really accepted by the general public. Despite its being the first example of modern building on the piers with a roof terrace it was destroyed in 1996 and replaced by a paraphrase of historical building style in 2000.

In 1993 the architects Jozef Ondriáš and Juraj Závodný designed a villa and built it with their own resources. It was a manifesto of personal architecture conceptions and at the same time a very up to date design. Many enthusiastic admirers of architecture visited this ideal architectural project. For years the architects unsuccessfully tried to sell the villa till finally it became an administrative building.<sup>5</sup>

An immediate nomination for a local architectural prize followed the completion of another house, this time a weekend house in the form of a steel-wooden container built in 1999 by the fhp architects in Horná Potôň. Later it was published in a whole range of architectural magazines, including the Austrian *Architektur aktuell*<sup>6</sup>. However, the builder never used the house, which still today stands abandoned as a symbol of an unaccepted and thus unsuccessful concept.

However, there are builders in Slovakia who not only accept an extravagant concept with enthusiasm, but who also identify themselves with it over a long time span. In 2000 the architect Ivan Matušík designed a family house in the shape of a tube. He was 70 at that time and the family house Elipsion was in a sense the culmination of his lifelong credo "form follows form". The family house found enthusiastic investors, who have inhabited it for four years without refusing the excursions of visitors admiring its architecture. Critics and ranks of architects respect the house perhaps due to the important architectural prize it was awarded.

### Polarity

Another permanent and characteristic feature of the local architectural discourse all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century is polarity. Polarisation influences the architectural press, architectural prizes and the life of the architectural community. The polemic between the conservative and the modern characterized the architectural discourse as early as the thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let's just mention texts by architect Christian Ludwig adoring reserved traditionalism and the stirring avant-garde claims of Friedrich Weinwurm. While Ludwig defended architecture as a matter of art, Weinwurm advocated the "Sachlichkeit" / matter of factness. This polarity could also be illustrated by the works of both architects. The polarisation of the architecture scene of that time was as well supported by the only two existing local architecture journals, *Forum* and *Slovak Builder*. While *Forum* supported the avant-garde, *Slovak Builder* defended the positions of conservative pragmatism.

In late 1960s the construction of a new bridge over the river Danube in Bratislava polarised the local scene. Due to the construction of the bridge part of the historical structure of the town was slated for demolition. However at that time the majority of architects stood on the side of the innovation.<sup>7</sup>

A similar polarity again appeared in the 1990s in the discussions raised by the debates between Peter Pásztor, a traditional-oriented follower of the famous Hungarian architect Imre Makowec, and Ján Bahna, an enthusiastic supporter of innovation and new modernity<sup>8</sup>.

### "Sahara"

Another characteristic feature of the local architecture discourse is the irreconcilable critique of the actual standard of architectural displays. Here the rhetoric is the same all through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The loudest purveyors of such opinions are precisely those architects strongly oriented to the latest actual trends and western models. In sharp polemics they refer to the domestic



Roman Catholic Church, Lovinobaňa, Peter Pásztor, 1993

and General credit bank headquarters Bratislava, Ján Bahna and others, 1996, Photo: Archive of Architecture, oA USTARCH SAV

architectural scene with the term "Sahara" since architecture is in the state of "prehistory".<sup>9</sup> The scissors between them and the pragmatically-oriented majority are getting more and more opened. Though some critics find this polarity to be irreconcilable, it presents an important factor of the domestic architectural production, in which the orientation to the latest trends permanently clashes with the pragmatic position of the majority.

Looking at the serious and successful Slovak builder Jozef Hlavaj criticising the ultra-left positions of Karel Teige when discussing the necessity of establishing a united Chamber of Architects in the Czechoslovakia of 1930, we have to state that the pragmatists often succeeded in evaluating the situation better than the idealistic innovators.

### Are We Different or Backward?

The last of the characteristic features of Slovak architecture is the constant effort to overcome a feeling of backwardness and inferiority in relation to the more developed western neighbours. Domestic architects are affected by questions such as "Were we different or backward? Were we different because of being backward?" posed by the philosopher František Novosád and truthfully describing the feeling of the Slovak artistic scene. The lukewarm reflection of Slovak events in the European centres, connected with the peripheral position of Slovakia, is perceived as a suffering of wrong and often leads to enclosure and isolationism. Let us mention only the fact that the Slovak avant-garde never succeed in penetrating the main magazines of Prague avant-garde of that time, not to speak about the architecture press in Germany or France! The situation got even worse after the Second World War, when behind the Iron Curtain Slovakia became part of the Communist world.

Slovakia and its architecture were discovered by the western world only in the 1990s. The total lack of any relevant information on Slovak architecture led for example to the enthusiastic welcome of the

modern utopias of the Slovak group VAL exhibited in the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2008 or to the uncritical admiration for the monumental works of Slovak late modernism presented through the images of the Austrian photographer Hertha Hurnaus in the book *East Modern* published in 2007.

The features of the Slovak architectural scene mentioned above are not unique; in variations they happen anywhere, yet their combination creates the uniqueness of the local scene. It is not about formal specificity. Foreign observers in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot "read any regionally specific signs" in the language of Slovak architecture anyway, and they evaluate Slovak architecture as a typical display of the Central European architectural culture<sup>10</sup>. It is rather the inner mechanism of functioning of the local architecture that is revealed by these features. In the light of 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture we can thus perceive Slovakia as a region which produces architecture that might be considered random or marginal but which at the same time represents a complementary answer to the extreme architecture solutions and in this way is a legitimate part of international architecture discussion and an important tool of diversification of the European architecture culture.

<sup>1</sup> Steiner, Dietmar M.: Forget the Publishers, the Readers, the Architects – let's do a Magazine. About what? *Arhitektov bilten*. 1999, Nr. 145 – 146, p. 92 – 94.

<sup>2</sup> Bakoš, J.: In: *Problémy dejín výtvarného umenia na Slovensku*. Veda 2002, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Moravčíková, Henrieta: Die Architektur des Baťa-Konzerns als Faktor der Modernisierung: Beispiel Slowakei. In: *Zlín – Modellstadt der Moderne*, Winfried Nerdinger (Hg.), Berlin, Jovis Verlag 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Singer, Oskar: *Bauen in der Provinz*. Forum 8, 1938, p. 176 – 185, here p. 180 – 181.

<sup>5</sup> Dulla, Matúš – Moravčíková, Henrieta: Jozef Ondriáš and Juraj Závodný, Villa in Bratislava and Mýtnik Office Building. *Architecture Design* 66, 1996, Nr. 1 – 2, p. 55 – 59.

<sup>6</sup> Moravčíková, H.: Ein Haus wie Morgensterns Lattenzaun. *Architektur Aktuell*, 2000, Nr. 243/244, p. 156 – 157.

<sup>7</sup> Bútora, Ivan: Who Destroyed Podhradie? In: *Lost City*. Eduard Nižňanský (Ed), Bratislava, Marenčin PT 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For the detailed argumentation of both sides in the 30s and 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see DULLA, Matúš – Moravčíková, Henrieta: *Architektúra Slovenska v 20. storočí*. Bratislava, Slovart, 512 p.

<sup>9</sup> Zervan, Marian: Slovenská architektura: na rozcestí. *Architekt* 5, 2003, Nr. 2, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Halík, Pavel: Pavel Halík on ARCH Magazine Prize 2002. *Architekt* 5, 2003, p. 35.