

# Flavouring 'Goulash Communism'

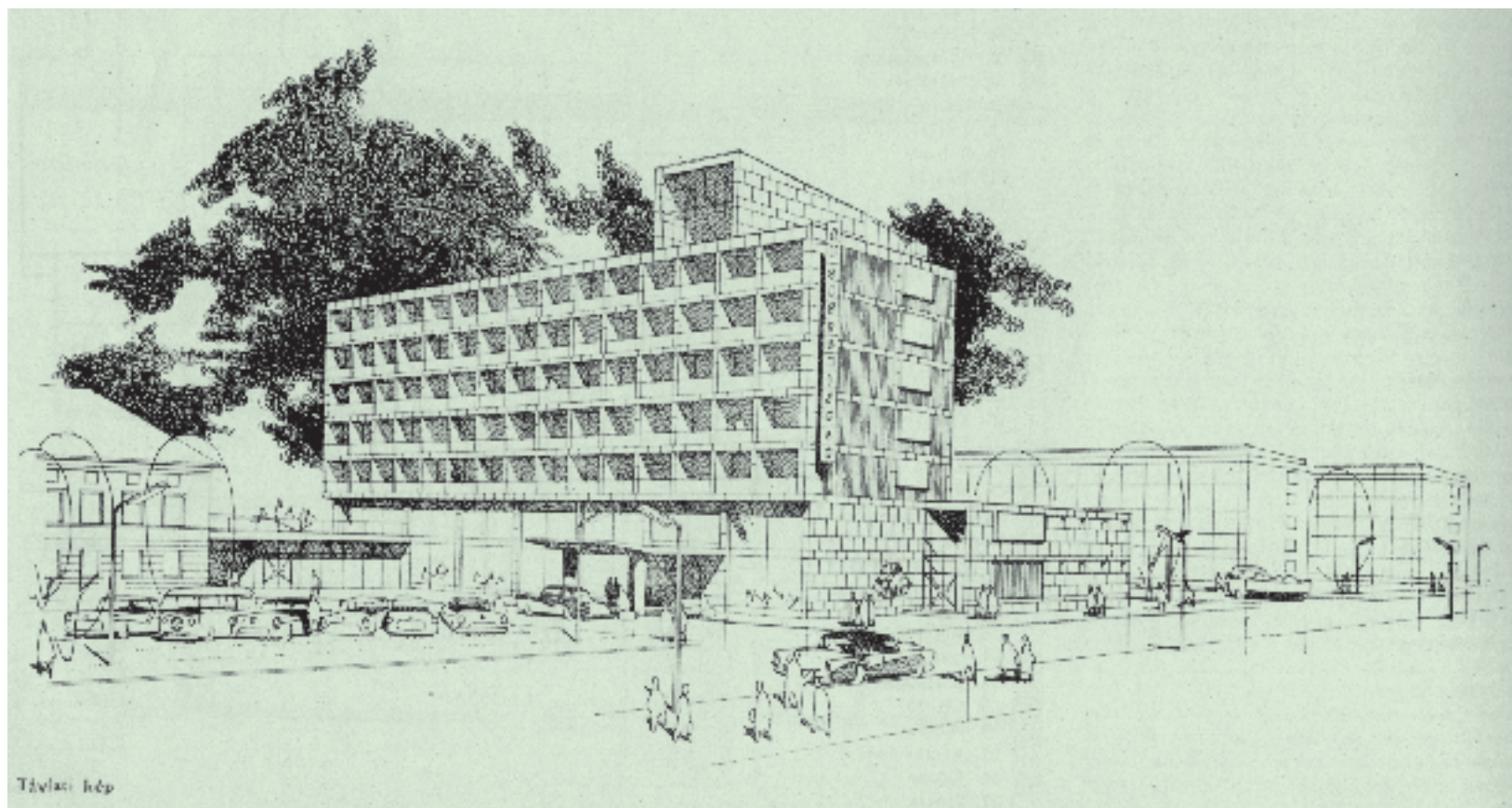
Approaches to Modern Architecture in the early Kádár Era in Hungary (1957-1963)

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By the second part of the 1950s – after the short but impressive period of historicizing socialist-realism – Hungarian architecture had returned to modernism. In consequence architects had to reinterpret the old cultural demand of “socialist in content, national in form”, which was reaffirmed by politics, and they had to define their relationship to modernism within this buzzword. In this period of temporary political uncertainty and of gestures of détente, controlled discussions were tolerated.<sup>1</sup> This essay will be concerned with contemporary debates on the topic of returned modern architecture on a political, professional and public level. Questions to be answered include the following: How did Hungarian theorists and practicing architects react to the situation? Is it possible to define and separate different trends within their approaches? And if so, how can these approaches be connected to parallel international or to former national trends?

When Nicolai Sergeyevich Khrushchev, the first secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, declared the need for a change in architecture in December 1954, he referred to modern technology as a driving force for development. He accused architects of “disengaging from the modern economic-technical terms of development; under the pretext of fighting against constructivism they fell into other extreme of formalism: they became captivated by individual and artistic exaggerations, using architectural shapes, ‘unusual decorations’ (and unusual cubic meters) which made dwellings similar to churches or museums.” Architects had to draw the consequences that “the decisive factor of the further development, that the artistic aspects should have a closer contact with modern technology, with economic-technical aspects.”<sup>2</sup> He stressed the power of technology as a means of industrialization, pre-fabrication and standardization, all as means of quantitative development. The above factors were

parts of modernity, but modern architecture never restricted itself to rational considerations, so when Hungarian architects celebrated the political turnaround, they appreciated in first place the elimination of the required historicism. However in the following years the situation became controversial. Journals continued publishing revival-style buildings – it needed some time to build modern ones – while leading theoreticians (most of whom were party members) tried to explain, including to themselves, the sudden and radical change in political expectations. The time for a quiet explanation and also for official future guidance came about only after the failed uprising in 1956. Political power – which needed about a year and a half to stabilize its position – turned its attention to cultural questions only in 1958. The guiding principles for the cultural policy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party were published in July of that year. The thesis of the paper was that the main obstacle to cultural and ideological development was nationalism, which had to be opposed with a national culture based on socialism. “The newly born culture is socialist in its content and national in its form. It preserves and comprises all those progressive cultural treasures which were collected through the development of hundreds of years in national works and in values adopted from other nations. Using the best results and inspired with the socialist ideal, it developed the synthesis of popular, national and humanistic character to a higher level.”<sup>3</sup> The label was kept but the intention became different. Nationalism was contrasted with socialist patriotism, which entailed the priority of socialist internationalism over national integrity. The theses made it also clear that the “popular, national and humanistic character” of the culture should be based neither on the peasants’ folk culture nor on the petty bourgeois’ urban culture, but on the culture of the working class, which played



the leading role in the fight against capitalism. The paper didn't describe any features of the working class culture, but referred to technological development as a defining component of the future of socialist culture. "The great scientific and technical transformations of our age demand even faster development on the general cultural and technology level. This new requirement shall be enforced in the different fields of culture, and shall be counted on when defining the detailed tasks."<sup>4</sup> To conclude, the guidelines clearly defined the 'socialist content' of the new culture but they didn't have standards on how the 'national form' should look.

The weakening importance of national aspects can also be detected in the field of official (politically based) architectural decrees. The Association of Hungarian Architects prepared a thesis for the meeting of the architectural associations of socialist countries to be held in November 1958 in Prague. Before presenting the thesis the management of the association discussed the main points. The proposed paper touched on the following questions: 1. "What should architecture be in countries building socialism or in countries where socialism has already been built? 2. How should this architecture relate to the architecture of the capitalist West and how to its own, national (feudal, capitalist) past, that is to architectural history?"<sup>5</sup> Although the wording itself – which stressed the 'national' as something connected to former, rejected social and political systems, like feudalism and capitalism – expressed a distancing, some participants felt it important to have such a relationship. The opinion that the "Hungarian character should necessarily be present in architectural work" was left alone, but the view that our architecture should be based on home milieu, landscape, climate and nature was shared by others. Some contributors didn't question the importance of traditions. This new definition of socialist

architecture "doesn't mean that architecture should ignore its traditions. But beyond the finding that respect for tradition should never be at the expense of modernisation, according to the socialist architecture we shouldn't follow but feel traditions and with this impulse we have to begin the new tasks with new means" – one participant stated.<sup>6</sup> In light of the original questions, the national aspects of architecture seemed not to be a current issue of the discussion. The leadership was much more interested in the organizational changes in the building industry and in the place of creative designers within it.

Máté Major, the president of the architectural association, published a slightly revised version of the theses in an academic journal.<sup>7</sup> Even the title of the article – *Current Problems of Socialist Architecture* – referred to the primacy of socialism. Form follows first of all materials, construction, technology and function in modern architecture, the author states, which is why socialist architecture has not differed yet from capitalist architecture except in local conditions. "Developing socialist content that is the socialist way of life, thought and message will help us to reach the stage of the national form – the difference in people, society and ideology that separates our architectural forms from the capitalist West over its locality – and socialist architecture, the new, special, historically matured, higher step of universal architecture, will be formed."<sup>8</sup> The message of this quotation and of the whole paper is that the national form should grow organically out of socialist content. In other words the two concepts cannot be separated: the national character of our architecture means that it is embedded in the socialist society. The difference should be developed from a different superstructure – in line with Marxist ideology and terminology.

The intended result was a different form of modern architecture, though the authors usually omitted

Plan for developments in the centre of Kecskemét, with Hotel Aranyhomok in the foreground.

Architects: István Janáky, Dénes Perczel.

*Magyar Építőművészet* 1-3, 1958



Hotel Aranyhomok, Kecskemét, 1962.

Architect: István Janáky. *Magyar Építőművészet* 4, 1964  
István, Dénes Perczel. *Magyar Építőművészet* 1-3, 1958

the word 'modern' and simply mentioned 'socialist architecture' in their writings. When the leading figures had to choose from the palette of modern architecture they preferred the functionalist approach of Walter Gropius, which seemed to be in tune with the leading political password, industrialization. "Our architecture, that striving towards prefabrication, should rely on rationalism, logical consistency and realism as an imperative. In this respect we agree with the functionalism of Walter Gropius, who connected functionalism with the social tasks of architecture and with the standardization of mass housing."<sup>9</sup> The connotation of modern architecture was capitalism, so even if the methods, materials and technology were accepted, the difference needed to be stressed. "Architecture should be thoroughly reconsidered and revolutionized with the basic belief in the power of the socialist world. If capitalism has its modern architecture, then we have to create architecture in socialism with a super-modern method, in the purest sense of the word." – read an enthusiastic contribution at the conference of the Association of Hungarian Architects in 1961.<sup>10</sup> As opposed to the theoreticians and the official representatives of the profession, for the majority of practicing architects it was irrelevant if the new architecture was called 'socialist', 'modern' or 'super-modern'. They enjoyed the fact that they had escaped from the standards of using historical forms and traditional building materials, and they celebrated the regained pragmatic

modernism, the rationality and the promise of using new technical solutions. The windows facing international modern architecture were opened.

While for most Hungarian architects this situation meant a longing for similar materials, details, forms etc. as were applied in the West, it also awakened a special approach to modern architecture. Raising the old/new issue of the Hungarian character in architecture was part of a wider cultural discussion in the country. Parallel to the historians' and the art historians' debate on nationalism, at the turn of 1961 some articles were published in *Magyar Építőművészet* (Hungarian Architecture) the leading architectural journal, dealing with the traditions of Hungarian architecture. The author of the keynote paper began with the statement that contemporary Hungarian architecture couldn't be compared with the quality of French, Italian, Scandinavian or American architecture. He found the reason for this in the fact that the foreign examples referred to both followed modern principles and preserved their connection to their roots. On the contrary Hungarian architecture had lost contact with its traditions. The author called attention to the importance of tradition in general, but with a special emphasis on turn of the century Art Nouveau and peasant architecture as styles worthy of being followed in their approach and formal richness. "We see that the basics of modern architectural principles were already set out in works from the turn of the century. These





Mortuary, Szeged, 1960.

Architect: Béla Borvendég. *Magyar Építőművészet* 6, 1961

principles – fidelity to materials, sincerity, utility, functionality, national character – haven't changed since then... Some foreign impacts (Finnish) played a role in turn of the century architectural efforts, but our traditions, especially folk architecture, formed their basis."<sup>11</sup> Responding articles all shared the opinion that we shouldn't ignore our traditions, but they differed in relation to the question of whether we should look for them or rather choose a certain period or style to follow. In the hope of regaining the artistic freedom enjoyed by the practicing architects, one architectural historian expressed the approach of the majority: let architects create and they will instinctively reflect on tradition. "Elaborating a special Hungarian architecture based on traditions is more an instinctive than a conscious phenomenon. The architectural and aesthetic needs of the creator force giving birth to it, as an internal necessity."<sup>12</sup>

However when the contributors to the debate tried to identify the atmosphere of Hungarian architecture they all included features of peasant architecture. Identifying Hungarian architecture with peasant or folk architecture was not a new development: it had the roots in the creating of the nation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. But there was another reason which made peasant tradition relevant: because of the rationality represented in its structures and use of materials, folk architecture was the only tradition which was acceptable for modern architecture.



After the painful interlude of historicism in the 1950s, Hungarian architects were reluctant to look for traditional sources, even in folk architecture; consequently the theoretical proposal – at least within our period – found no followers in practice. In spite of all this the myth of folk architecture was present. It was not an exception that when reviewers felt any reference to traditional architecture in an executed modern building they celebrated it – even if the architect had no intention of recalling the shape of a rural building. Just one example – in 1961 a reviewer evaluated a recently completed mortuary as follows: “It is a synthesis of what latest modern architecture offers, using conscious and unconscious symbols and the values of the most ancient folk architecture. ... It refers to both the smoking houses of the Great Hungarian Plain and to Le Corbusier’s chapel in Ronchamp.”<sup>13</sup> The architect didn’t protest against this interpretation, but when he was asked many, many years later about the building in an interview, he referred to pure practical considerations, and elsewhere made clear his admiration for Le Corbusier.<sup>14</sup>

Alongside the two aforementioned approaches to modern architecture – oriented towards technology or national traditions – we have to list a third one. This trend differs from the others in that it doesn’t have a direct theoretical background. The relationship between modern architecture and the built and natural environment, otherwise modern architecture’s human character, was on the agenda of international architectural discussions, especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s. There is hardly any writing with similar content or reference to these discussions in the Hungarian press. The only exception is a contribution at the 1961 Congress of Association of Hungarian Architects, in which one architect referred to Sigfried Giedion’s concept of “new regionalism” as an approach to follow if we intend to adapt to the conditions, to meet the given place, landscape, nation and circumstances.<sup>15</sup> At that time he was the editor of *Magyar Építőművészet*, the architectural journal which published many modern buildings in this period. Consequently the presence of a ‘modest’ or ‘situated modernism’ – the labels were created later – should be attributed to an international impact, not through theory but by familiarity with the examples, even if only from pictures. However the reception of Louis Kahn, Alvar Aalto or the next generation of Finnish architecture doesn’t alone explain the emergence of a trend. An explanation of the modesty of this third group of buildings is that they were mostly infill developments. This condition restricted if not excluded the use of prefabricated elements, while the architects took took harmony with the neighbouring buildings seriously.

Facades were plastered, coloured, used lane mouldings or had brick cladding, composed proportions and openings etc. To sum it up the best examples had the common features of using traditional materials on the facade, monolithic reinforced concrete structural frames, and a human scale concerning mass and proportion. Their additional characteristics were the sophisticated details, due to the invested design hours – in this time the old building professionals were still available, and because of the temporary decrease in investments state design offices were not overloaded with commissions. This sensitive approach to modernism was weakened over time. It supposed thorough and slow work, both in design and in construction; consequently it was not effective enough concerning quantity, which soon became the primary criterion for the building industry. Furthermore the architects themselves became fascinated by the new shapes and solutions offered by technologies expressing development and optimism.

Hungarian social scientists retrospectively named the early Kádár era ‘goulash communism’, following a contemporary expression used by journalists.<sup>16</sup> This combination of words refers to a politics which, while following the rules of the socialist camp as defined by the Soviet Union, strived to enhance the living standard in the country and de-politicize the society. This sophisticated dictatorship resulted in a special Hungarian style of socialism. Architecture of this period was embedded in a social and political background and kept pace with its main striving, modernisation. Modern architecture was announced as an appropriate means for modernization, though the political and the professional interpretation of its content differed in many respects. Politics stressed mass production, prefabrication and standardization, while architects were fascinated by the possibilities of recent technological approaches and innovations. Despite the inherent conflicts of the interpretations of modernism, the profession came to a compromise with the political powers. “The confidence and the belief that we can make up for lost time resulted in a strong consensus between the profession, society and the political trend. In the spirit of modernism, architecture compromised with power,” a contemporary recalled in the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Architecture theoreticians made repeated attempts to define an alternative architectural modernism, naming it ‘socialist architecture’ or ‘super-modern’ but the majority of practicing architects followed – in their intentions – international modernism in architecture. There was only a smaller group of architects who, with the knowledge of foreign examples of modest or regional modern architecture, preserved the sensitivity of the former socialist-realist

period and in their projects created a kind of situated or even place-bound modernism. The trend of a particular Hungarian modernism was missing from the palette of early Kádár era architectural practice. The idea was raised, based on the history of this approach, but the old-new seed found soil only a few years later.

All in all, we identify three different approaches to modernism in our period 1958-1963, but none of them intended to represent a ‘particular Hungarian way’. Fortunately the label ‘goulash communism’ has another interpretation: as a result of increasing living standards, people could buy meat in the shops for their favourite goulash soup. And really Hungarian architects were pleased that they had regained modern architecture (the meat) and could experience with its different flavourings – at least for a while.

<sup>1</sup> The so-called ‘Hungarian issue’ of 1956 was removed from the United Nations Organization’s agenda only in December 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Khrushchev’s speech is quoted in MAJOR, 1955, p.137.

<sup>3</sup> A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt művelődési politikájának irányelvei, p.133.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.134.

<sup>5</sup> Board Meeting Minutes, 1958, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.16.

<sup>7</sup> Máté Major (1904-1986) was a leading figure throughout the socialist period. As an academician, a university professor and the president of the Association of Hungarian Architects (besides a number of other positions) he represented the official architectural theory in Hungary.

<sup>8</sup> MAJOR, 1959, p. 294.

<sup>9</sup> Theses of the secretary general’s report, 1961, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> FERENCZY, 1961, p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> KATHY, 1961, p.37.

<sup>12</sup> CSÁSZÁR, 1962, p.52.

<sup>13</sup> SÜDI, 1961, p.27.

<sup>14</sup> SIMON, 2005

<sup>15</sup> BONTA, 1961, p. 144.

<sup>16</sup> VALUCH, 2001–2002

<sup>17</sup> JANÁKY, 1988, p.3.

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Apartment house, Árpád fejedelem útja, Budapest., 1958. Architect: Miklós Hofer