

# Innovations in sacral architecture: The resettlement churches of Emil Belluš

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**Abstract:** The 20th century saw a great breakthrough in architectural innovation; however, this was less evident in sacred buildings. The Evangelical Church of A. C. was inherently innovative, which was also reflected in the architecture of its churches. The innovativeness of the evangelical denomination can be seen in completely new spatial concepts, morphology, the use of new constructions, materials and building technologies, including modern technical equipment of sacral spaces. This article focuses on two buildings by one architect—Emil Belluš (1899-1979), a doyen of Slovak architecture, whose work significantly influenced the field of sacral architecture of the Evangelical Church of A. C. Innovative contributions can first be seen in the design and later in the construction of two evangelical churches in Nesvady and Senec, in Slovakia, built in the 1950s. The churches were part of a project originally intending to build ten new churches for people who had been resettled as part of the government's post-war migration policy. For several decades, these two churches have remained the last addition to sacral buildings constructed in Slovakia. The article deals with the reasons for the creation of church plans, the socio-political situation of that time, circumstances of their construction, and spiritual ideas and creative contribution of the architect Emil Belluš. The research is based on a detailed study of these temples, their layout, and the use of new technologies, construction principles, morphological elements, and other architectural means in which we seek and define an innovative approach to creation.

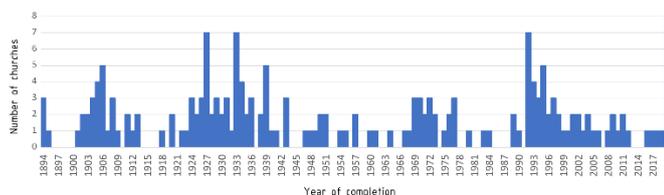
**Keywords:** innovations, sacral architecture, evangelical church, Emil Belluš

## INTRODUCTION

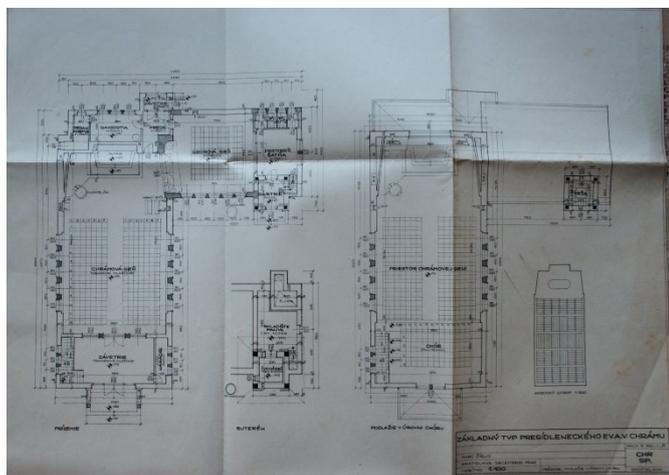
The only sacred buildings constructed by a great architect. This is true for two evangelical churches in small towns in the south of Slovakia. Emil Belluš is primarily known as a prominent architect of a wide range of buildings in both the public and private spheres (Dulla, 2010), but looking at the scope of his work in the field of sacred architecture clearly shows his interest in and relationship with this area, which is reflected in several designs for parishes of different denominations. Considering the appreciated qualities of his work in the field of profane architecture, we can assume that these were similarly transferred to the sacred area of work of Belluš (Krivošová, 1999). In this context, however, we cannot neglect the social situation, which largely influenced and limited the construction of churches in the period under study. The period of the 40th and 50th years of the 20th century was not entirely favourable for the field of sacred architecture. The rapid increase in the construction of evangelical a. c. churches in the 1930s (Fig. 1), caused by the increase in the number of worshippers belonging to the Evangelical Church of A. C. in Slovakia, was gradually slowed down, primarily due to the ongoing Second World War and later due to changes in the political regime.

However, despite its strict principles, the changing political situation led to the origin of two evangelical churches of two evangelical churches in Nesvady and Senec. Both churches were built according to the same plans, with only minor modifications due to the regional characteristics of the selected towns (Fig. 2). It was not uncommon to use the plans of another church and partially adapt or improve them in a new location; this can be seen, for example, with the architect Michal Milan Harminc (1869–1964) in his designs for evangelical churches in Veľký Grob or Žilina, based on the model of the church on Legionárska Street in Bratislava (Pohaničová, Vodrážka, 2018), all in Slovakia.

The aim of this article is to examine and define the manifestations of innovation in the architecture of the two evangelical churches, the creative contribution of the architect Emil Belluš to sacral architecture, but also the influence of the client—the Evangelical Church of A. C. Through a detailed examination of the tectonics of the churches, their layout, the materials used, morphological elements, design principles and technical equipment, we are looking for innovative ideas and principles that bring a change or progress in sacral architecture.



**Fig. 1.** The frequency of evangelical churches built in the 20th century in Slovakia. (Source: Búliková, 2023)



**Fig. 2.** Original floor plan of resettlement churches. (Source: Archives of Church in Nesvady, Slovakia, 1949)

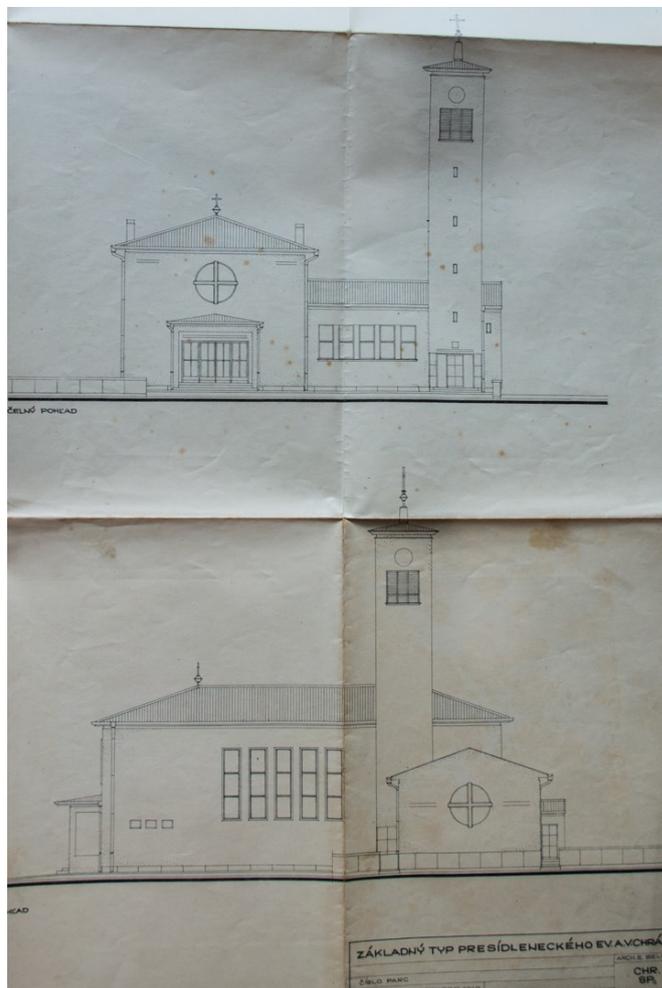
## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the Second World War ended, there was a period of great migration between European countries. The territorial and administrative structure of the countries has changed, and new borders have been drawn. With the regaining of its independence, the Czechoslovak Republic also established its own migration policy with several objectives. Among the most important ones were to increase the population of the state, in view of the war casualties, at the same time to prevent the assimilation of the population abroad and to raise national awareness among the citizens. Part of the 'cleansing' of the state was the expulsion of the inhabitants of foreign nationalities to achieve the ideal of a national state of Slovaks and Czechs.

Therefore, resettled Slovaks were mainly placed in the southern regions of Slovakia in order to strengthen the position of the established border with Hungary (Šutaj, 2010). Thus, on 27 June 1946, an agreement between Czechoslovakia and Hungary was made, which spoke of the exchange of an equal number of the population of Hungarian nationality for the population of Slovak (and Czech) nationality. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1946) In April 1947, more than 95,000 citizens of Slovak and Czech nationality expressed an interest in emigrating from Hungary, but due to obstructions by the Hungarian authorities, only just over 70,000 of them left in the end (Šutaj, 2010). They returned to villages, mainly in southern Slovakia, where Evangelical Church of A. C. (hereafter also ECAC) congregations were restored or re-established. The parish in Nesvady was founded in 1948 and in Senec in October 1947.

On 20 December 1948, the Construction Committee of the ECAC in Slovakia commissioned architects Emil Belluš and Eugen Kramár to design the Evangelical resettlement churches. At that time, the ECAC also expressed the request "whether it would not be possible to build these churches according to a uniform type and a uniform project, enlarged in some places and reduced in others according to the number of churchmen in the

congregation." One of the reasons was to save finances by using one project for several temples, but we can assume that the church or some of its leaders intended to create a completely new type of Evangelical temple, the so-called resettlement temple, referring to the type of tolerance or articular temple (Volková, 1999). The original drawings are also labelled as a "Basic Type of Resettlement Temple" without specifying the location (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Original views of resettlement churches. (Source: Archives of Church in Nesvady, Slovakia, 1949)

The task of the architects was to design plans for ten new churches in the villages where Slovaks moved in, and the congregations grew in number. These were churches for the towns and villages of Kalná, Kolárovo, Matuškovce, Nesvady, Nové Zámky, Mostová, Senec, Sládkovičovo, Tešedíkovo, and Želiezovce. It was envisaged that later on, more such churches would be gradually built to increase their number to a total of 20 or 22. (Jančík, Kožuch, 2017). At the turn of 1948 and 1949, the Church announced a collection to finance the building of new churches under the title "Church of the Returned Brethren". As a part of the event, a commemorative postcard picturing names of ten villages, in which the construction of new churches was planned, was sent out (Fig. 4). According to the contemporary witnesses, the goal was to raise more than 10 million korunas and the collection was very well received by the churchmen (Tomka, 2001). However, these ambitions were soon dampened due to significant political changes. Thus, all prospects for the construction of new churches, despite their importance and necessity for the resettled evangelicals, were very quickly terminated.

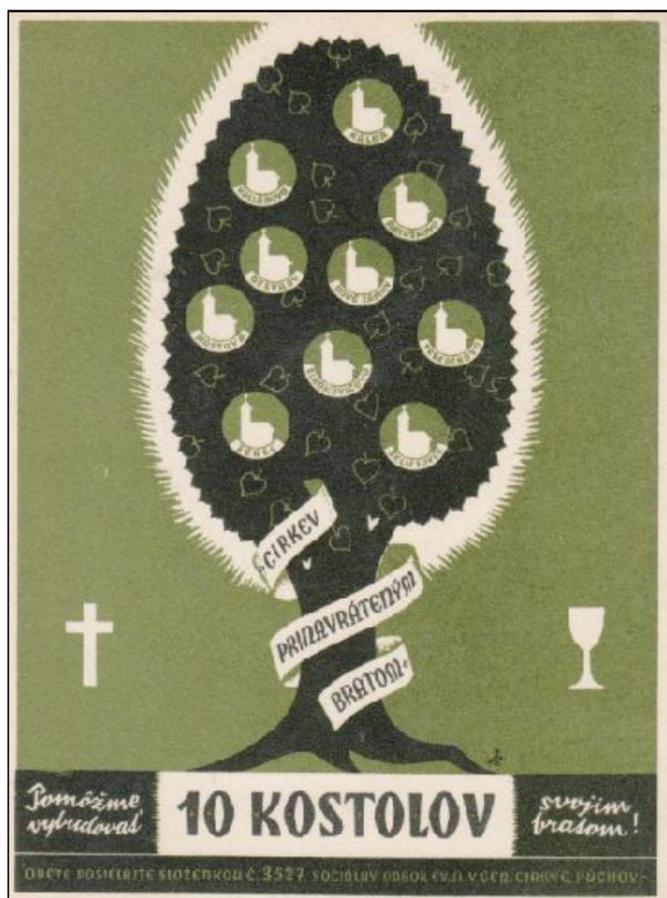


Fig. 4. A commemorative postcard with the names of the ten villages. (Source: Archives of Church in Nesvady, Slovakia, 1950)

### THE FIGURE OF EMIL BELLUŠ

Emil Belluš is one of the founding fathers of Slovak architecture, together with other important architects (not to mention M. M. Harminc, S. Jurkovič, etc.). Over the course of his life, he designed and built several dozen works with a wide variety of themes. He worked on public buildings, housing, technical buildings and, last but not least, sacral architecture. His portfolio includes iconic buildings of his time, such as the National House in Banská Bystrica, the Peasant House in Bratislava, the Municipal Savings Bank in Martin, the National Bank of Czechoslovakia in Bratislava, the Water Reservoir in Trnava, the Pavilion of the Theoretical Institutes of the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava (now Faculty of Architecture and Design, STU), many of which have the status of national cultural monuments.

Emil Belluš was born on 19 September 1899 in Slovenská Lupča. His relationship with architecture and the Church was formed during his childhood and youth in Banská Bystrica (Dulla, 2010). From an early age he was interested in drawing and art and was encouraged to study painting at the university. After graduating from grammar school, however, he decided to study architecture at the Technical University in Budapest, from which he later moved to Prague (Šlachta, Gašparec, 1992) due to the change in the state system after the end of the Second World War. Then his steps directed to Bratislava, where he established his own studio in 1925, but he also became a co-founder and an active member of the Society of Slovak Artists. He married the daughter of an Evangelical pastor (later a professor at the Faculty of Evangelical Theology in Bratislava), Ján Jamnický (Krivošová, 1999), that was perhaps the result of his interest in and relationship to this denomination and its personalities. However, Matúš Dulla says that we have no knowledge of

political or religious beliefs of Belluš, nor does Belluš himself mention them in his personal memoirs, although he was a baptised evangelical (Dulla, 2010).

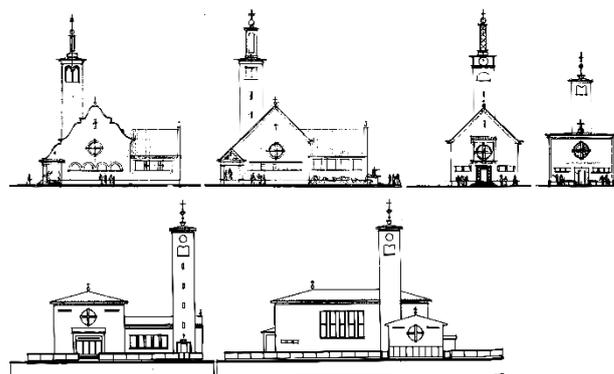


Fig. 5. Original propositions of resettlement churches by Emil Belluš. (Source: Archive of Slovak National Gallery, Slovakia, cat. n. A-772/3, A-772/4, 1950)



Fig. 6. An exterior detail of an evangelical church in Senec. (Photo: Lívia Búliková, 2022)

Thus, his work includes not only profane buildings of a predominantly public character, but also various designs for sacral buildings, mainly for the Evangelical Church of A. C. From an early age he took part in competitions—for the evangelical church in Trnava (built in 1924, architect J. Marek), for Legionárska Street in Bratislava (built in 1927–1931, architect M. M. Harminc) or in Žilina (built in 1934, architect M. M.

Harminc). He is the author of designs for the choir house in Brezno, the Evangelical rectory of the dormitory on Vajnorská Street in Bratislava, as well as for an Orthodox Church on Záhradnícka Street in Bratislava. None of these projects were implemented, but this did not discourage him from continuing his active work. Perhaps it was these earlier experiences and contacts that brought him a commission to design new resettlement churches at the end of his creative period. Several different variants emerged, initially based on more historicist forms and ornaments, mainly in the design of the façades. The material division into three interconnected parts (church, prayer room, tower) was a fundamental element of the design and was reflected in each of the proposed solutions (Fig. 5). However, decorative elements are not found in the final project, perhaps the only reminder being the tympanum in the façade of the church in Senec (Fig. 6). The form of the temples and their façades thus crystallised into a legible functionalism form, which has been preserved in the temples up to the present days. The churches, despite several reconstructions, have maintained their original mass-spatial structure.

### **Belluš on the construction of an evangelical church**

Thanks to the preservation of a transcript of the architect's lecture and its subsequent publication in the magazine *Projekt* (1999), on the occasion of the centenary of the architect's birth we gain a direct insight into the soul of Belluš and his relationship to architecture of the Evangelical Confession. The lecture was given at the Štúr Evangelical Society in Bratislava on 27 January 1943, years before the idea of resettlement churches was even conceived, but already demonstrating the architect's years-long experience in previous architectural and theoretical work and writings.

In his lecture, entitled "On the construction of an evangelical church" Belluš comments objectively, if rigorously, on the state of the art in the design and construction of new evangelical churches at the time. He is particularly critical of the immutability and template layouts, the oscillations between historicism and misinterpreted functional modern art. He considers the layout arrangement to be the most fundamental component of the temple building, which is based on the unique and individual rules and dogmas of its denomination or cult. Specifically, the Evangelical Church of A. C. uses the form of primarily interpreting and listening to the Word of God, to which the creation of the gathering space—the temple—should be directed so that the worshippers can concentrate on the Divine Word interpreted from a designated place. It highlights the unique approach of the Evangelical Church of A. C., its worldly outlook and striving for directness of action, realism, and the need to return to purity and simplicity in listening to the Word of God. Evangelical churches should therefore reflect these teachings in mass-spatial and layout form.

He also mentions the Evangelical pastor Fedor Ruppeldt, who published his own text in the magazine *Cirkevné listy* (Church letters) in 1925, which was supposed to help with the construction of evangelical churches. The treatise is a comprehensive conception of the relationship between spirituality and architecture, emphasising the importance of the connections between the different parts of the whole. Among other things, for example, it presents the amphitheatre layout as the most appropriate arrangement with regard to the concept of the liturgy. It was used by Josef Marek in the construction of the church in Trnava following up on the aforementioned text (Haberlandová, 2015). Belluš, however, disagrees with the idealisation of such a layout and offers a more appropriate solution, especially for congregations with a smaller number of

worshippers, in simpler forms, but with a reasonable layout of the interior furnishings.

Although he does not directly use the terms tradition and innovation, the text shows the architect's attitude towards both phenomena. There is a strong push to use new structural systems, new forms of layout that meet the needs of modern congregations. He criticises the lack of use of these achievements, which have long been active in the world of profane architecture, and a kind of reticence to use them also in sacred architecture. He demands quality workmanship and well-executed work even when using new and perhaps more complex design and construction principles. He justifies this on the grounds of factuality and the intention to preserve the character of the temple as a permanent structure. The classification and use of older styles is also interesting. Belluš talks about how the styles of buildings have been continually stabilised, he sees the building of the temple as a changing and unfinished process. He concludes with a strong rejection of the use of historicising Gothic, Baroque or Romanesque styles in contemporary architecture, which he attributes to the ignorance of their detailed principles in the hands of contemporary builders (Belluš, 1999).

The author's enthusiasm and deep immersion in the field of evangelical sacral architecture are clearly evident in the text. Emil Belluš' aim was to make an appeal to use new constructions, principles, and innovative layouts that would also meet the needs of the churchmen of his time. Overruling to all practical ideas stands the idea of creating a high quality and valuable sacred space, which, by itself, would be able to support and positively influence the religiosity and culture of the society.

### **THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

To search for and identify innovative trends in the architecture of the two selected churches in Nesvady and Senec, we used different research methods that were interrelated and intertwined. In particular, we focused on architectural-historical research in situ. In this context, the oral history method was also used, evaluating the unique memories and knowledge of the parish priests, which updated and supplemented the knowledge already acquired. By in-situ research in temples of the Evangelical Church of A. C., conducted in an intimate and directly participatory way, we were able to obtain even seemingly minor but valuable information complementing the overall picture and knowledge about the churches.

We focused on a detailed characterisation of the building, its construction system, layout arrangement, mass-spatial composition, materials used and other aspects that could not be described without a direct visit. We have not overlooked any legible changes or renovations compared to the original plans and documents of the temple at the time of its completion. Information of a factual nature was sought in period archives, as well as in current monographs, collections, or other publications, particularly concerning the construction, financing, personalities involved and other circumstances. Archival research was closely linked to the in-situ research, as priests keep their own archives in their parishes, so we had access to original drawings directly from the pen of the architect Emil Belluš, or their reproductions. These and other materials were the starting point for naming the researched innovative trends in the sacral architecture of the Evangelical Church of A. C.

## COMPARISON OF EVANGELICAL A. C. CHURCHES IN NESVADY AND SENEC

Due to the high degree of similarity and identity between the two temples, we will characterise and evaluate them together, highlighting any possible differences directly in the individual areas of examination (Fig. 7).

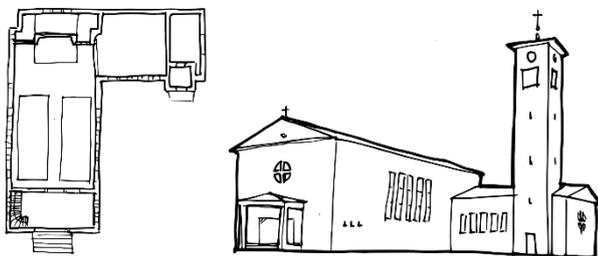


Fig. 7. A sketch of floor plan and perspective of the Senec evangelical church, Slovakia. (Source: Búliková, 2022)

### The characteristics of the temples

When comparing the evangelical churches in Senec and Nesvady, it is interesting to note the location of the two buildings, which depended on several factors, especially the choice of available land. The two churches have the same orientation to the street line and are set further away from it, but their effect on the urban development is different. Despite its status as a town, Nesvady is characterised by a predominantly rural form of development. The evangelical church is located outside the town centre, in one of the streets formed by a row of detached family houses. The church looks similar to a house at first sight. Its height does not significantly exceed the surrounding buildings, but it differs from them by the tower, which is situated deeper at the lot. The church is surrounded by a parish garden, which was and is an important part of the building complex of the Evangelical Church of A. C. There are now tall trees that partially block the direct view of the whole mass of the church. The church in Senec is situated on a street corner, next to a larger historic building of the grammar school. The streets have a denser urban character, partly due to their more central location within the town. The position of the church in the corner makes it more open to the passers-by, despite the dense greenery of the parish garden, and the church thus clearly presents its function (Fig. 8).

Functionalism manifestations can be read directly in the material composition of the church, which consists of three parts. The annexed choir room, as an important part of the functioning of the Evangelical congregation, directly to the church was an innovative feature. The church is made up of the nave, the presbytery, which is perpendicular to the position of the altar, and the bell tower, which is accentuated in the corner of the choir room (Fig. 9). The connection of the choir room with the main auditorium of the church has already been used in the Slovak environment by the architect M. M. Harminc in the evangelical church in Žilina (Pohaničová, Vodrážka, 2018). Examining the exterior appearance of the churches in Nesvady and Senec, the first thing that distinguishes them is the form of the roof, where the church in Senec has a gabled roof with a tympanum and an elliptical window in the façade, while the church in Nesvady has a more classical hip roof, perhaps because of its adaptation to the surrounding rural buildings (Fig. 10, 11). The same is true of the bell tower; in Senec the low hipped roof looks almost flat, in Nesvady it is significantly higher and more legible.

The simple, open, single nave of the church is covered by a wooden coffered ceiling, freeing it from other structural elements and leaving the space clear, with a direct view of the altar (Fig. 12). Above the main entrance, there is a matroneum—a choir illuminated by a round window, typical of functionalism (Fig. 13). From the lowered and more enclosed space of the entrance hall, there is a view through the glass wall and passageway to the open space of the main nave, adding to the majesty of the whole temple. The positioning of the organ in the altar area leaves more space for seating in the choir above the entrance, moving it away from its typical position on the sides of the nave.

Krivošová writes about the central part of the church: *"He framed the altar with wooden panelling into which he inserted the organ as a part, as a gradation, as an enhancement of the artistic effect of the altar—just as music and religious song are part of the Divine Service."* (Krivošová, 1999) Instead of the altarpiece there is a stained-glass window made by the academic painter Jarmila Záborská and professor Vladimír Sychra (Krivošová, 2001). Behind it there is a large window that should provide light (Fig. 14). However, in the church in Senec, due to its poor technical condition (leakage and thermal discomfort), the window has been replaced by a window with a full plastic filling without illumination. The window has been preserved in Nesvady. The illumination of the nave is provided by a series of narrow vertical windows on each side of the nave. The window and door openings have an appropriate proportion and placement in relation to the mass of the church, in keeping with the functionalism tendencies of the time.



Fig. 8. An exterior overview of the Senec evangelical church, Slovakia. (Photo: Lívia Búliková, 2022)



Fig. 9. Historical photograph of an evangelical church in Nesvady. (Source: Archives of Church in Nesvady, Slovakia, ca. 1951)



**Fig. 10.** A frontal view of the Nesvady evangelical church. (Photo: Lívia Búliková, 2022)



**Fig. 11.** A frontal view of the Senec evangelical church. (Photo: Lívia Búliková, 2022)



**Fig. 12.** A view of frontal altar space of the Nesvady evangelical church. (Photo: Lívia Búliková, 2022)



**Fig. 13.** A view of a matroneum of the Nesvady evangelical church. (Photo: Lívia Búliková, 2022)



**Fig. 14.** A view of frontal altar space of the Senec evangelical church. (Photo: Lívia Búliková, 2022)

The structural system consists of reinforced concrete frames supplemented by infill brickwork. The temple was plastered with a rough concrete plaster in a brown-grey colour shade. In Senec the façade has been preserved, in Nesvady the original colour was changed to light blue during a more extensive reconstruction in 2001 (Fig. 15). This colour has significant symbolism in Christianity, representing celestial purity, clarity and hope (Tomka, 2001). The roofs of the churches are made of standing steamed metal, red in Nesvady and grey in Senec. All interior elements are made of the same material, dark stained wood. The space is dominated by a coffered wooden ceiling, which is echoed in the wall behind the altar, panelled by the same wood from floor to ceiling. The pews, choir stalls, pulpit and baptismal font are also made of the same material. A similar finish is applied to the door structures (Fig. 16). Originally, the windows of both temples were made of aluminium, precisely because of the slenderness and lightness of their construction, but this proved unsatisfactory over time, especially from a thermo-technical point of view. The worshippers decided to replace them with new plastic ones. However, despite the similar colour scheme, they have lost the lightness and grace of the original aluminium construction (Fig. 17).



**Fig. 15.** An exterior view of a choir room with a tower, evangelical church in Nesvady. (Photo: Lívía Búliková, 2022)



**Fig. 16.** A view of a matroneum of the Senec evangelical church. (Photo: Lívía Búliková, 2022)



**Fig. 17.** An interior view of windows of an evangelical church in Nesvady. (Photo: Lívía Búliková, 2022)

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can evaluate that both evangelical churches, in Nesvady and Senec, were carriers of architectural innovations, ranging from mass-spatial design, construction systems, to materials and layout. The architect Emil Belluš created a functional church, a complex that provides space and facilities in a form that responds to current liturgical and social needs. Today, 70 years later, the timelessness of the functionalism approach is enhanced by its age and the passage of time, which in 2019 translated into the declaration of the church in Nesvady a national cultural monument. It will only bring positive effects if, in time, the same occurs for the church in Senec. The inclusion of the church in the list of National cultural monuments in Slovakia thus recognised the unique qualities of evangelical sacral architecture and the mastery of Belluš' professional thinking. In spite of their location in small villages in the south of Slovakia or their more moderate expression, the valuable contribution of these churches (we can certainly refer to both of them although only one is listed) to the cultural and spiritual society was acknowledged.

We are not referring to innovations in the sense of their first use; we focused on the translation of new approaches in the world of architecture into the field of evangelical sacred work. The architect Belluš used morphological elements of the new style, functionalism, which also reflected the programmatic content in the mass-spatial division. He was not afraid to bring new matters, materials, and systems to the traditional form of the church that were up-to-date and of high quality. The reinforced concrete structural system was not used for the first time by Belluš; M. M. Harminc used a similar design in the church on Legionárska Street in Bratislava (Pohaničová, Dulla, 2014); residential and civic buildings had been based on these principles for years already. However, their use in the construction of sacral buildings was still not quite common and established. The quality and accuracy of the overall design is evidenced, for example, by the location of the choir room within the church and its extensive use today, where the parishes organise various prayer meetings, children's meetings, and meetings of the young, middle, and older generations. The active use thus confirms Belluš' thesis and insistence on a modern and updated approach to the spatial design of temples.

So how did Emil Belluš and the Evangelical Church of A. C. contribute to architectural innovation? The Evangelical Church was open to development, changes in liturgy, new ideas and the needs of the community. Belluš actively used the resulting demands to devise a new form and method of temple construction and was able to translate them into the design of a

functional and spiritually valuable temple, benefitting from current trends in construction and architecture.

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