



Hungary

Architecture in the era of awakening

From 26 March until 2 May 2014

Concept: Adolph Stiller, András Hadik, Zoltán Fehérvári (scientific advice)

Exhibition venue: Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm
1010 Vienna, Schottenring 30

Opening hours: Monday to Friday: 9 am to 6 pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)

Press tour: Tuesday, 25 March 2014, 11 am

Speakers: Adolph Stiller, András Hadik, Zoltán Fehérvári

Official Opening: Tuesday, 25 March 2014, 6.30 pm (by invitation only)

Enquiries to: Silvia Polan
T: +43 (0)50 390-21064
F: +43 (0)50 390 99-21064
E-Mail: presse@wst-versicherungsverein.at



The latest exhibition in Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein's Architektur im Ringturm series continues the examination of totalitarian regimes with a look at architecture during Hungary's socialist realist era. Against the backdrop of Europe's new political constellation, a formal doctrine originating in Moscow was adopted more or less to the letter in the architectural designs implemented in Budapest immediately following the post-war rebuilding of the city. Although not an artistic era in its own right, this period is often simply referred to as "the 1950s", reflecting the sense of nostalgia that now surrounds designs and fashions dating back to that time. The exhibition spotlights the cultural and political features of this period in order to paint a picture of its architectural antecedents and the broader Zeitgeist.

Architecture in a socio-political context

Between 1945 and 1948 post-war rebuilding shaped developments in Hungary, which had suffered widespread devastation during the conflict. The focus was on extending the modernist period, which was soon to undergo a fundamental reassessment.

In 1948 a pamphlet entitled "Theoretical questions on new architecture" was published, with the subheading of "Socialist realism in architecture". It was the work of dedicated left-wing architect Máté Major. Previously a member of the Hungarian group of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), Major was a committed proponent of modernist values. However, he eagerly embraced the emerging social trends of that time, declaring that architectural works *"must be monumental in a way that proclaims the glory of the workers who are building the country"*. In other words, new architecture was both *"socialist and realist"* in its content and form, as it *"served the working man by means of simple, clear, distinctive and meaningful tools"*.

The publication did not give an authoritative definition of supposedly socialist art movements, but rather comprised a series of philosophical and idealistic observations. Referring closely to the linguistic features of the dominant ideology in Hungary's sister country Russia – where the theoretical and historical foundations of changes in Hungary's cultural policy usually originated – Imre Perényi, who had recently returned from Moscow, wrote in his introduction to the pamphlet that *"the theoretical basis of today's new art is what we call 'socialist realism'"*.

The text was groundbreaking in that it sought to establish the hegemony of the socialist realist school. A ministerial decree issued in July 1949 stated that economic planning would not be the primary concern of activities in the government's planning offices. Invoking pseudo-aesthetic perspectives and in order to meet the tastes of the working classes, unnecessary pomp was often given the way to, instead of choosing economical solutions.

For a short period, owing to the demands of socialist cultural policy, classical-eclectic formal language came into its own. This shift was a consequence of the breakdown of Hungary's coalition government under increased Soviet pressure, among other factors. The ideals of modernism (functionality, form, social commitment and economic viability) came in for sharp criticism as abstract architecture that was a product of capitalist decadence, and were rejected in favour of more traditional designs.

The magazine "Building – Architecture" became the stage for what was known as the formalism debate, with seven of the leading proponents of the genre giving their views on questions posed by the editorial team. This controversy culminated in the "great architecture debate", which took place in the Department of Agitation and Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party in April 1951, with Máté Major and Imre Perényi as the protagonists.

The process of nationalisation that started in 1947 gave rise to what were known as “planning factories”. Hungary’s failure to live up to the example of the Soviet Union was attributed in part to the fact that urban planning was largely still in private hands. Private firms were gradually liquidated and replaced by a centralised super office under ministerial control, which handled every aspect of almost all planning projects until the fall of Communism.

Although this was only a short period in the history of Hungarian architecture, the socialist modernist era can be broken down into several phases, each of them characterised by significant events or constructions. The period was also shaped by heated debate on the direction of architectural design. As architectural developments are by their very nature long-term projects, with many years between the start of planning and completion of the building work, the constructions that emerged bear the hallmarks of both modernism and socialist realism.

The end of an era

Socialist realism went into decline following Stalin’s death in 1953, and the final nail in its coffin came on 7 December 1954 in the form of a speech by Party chairman Nikita Khrushchev to the congress of the Union of Architects of the USSR. The speech was published in Hungary under the title “On the widespread application of major industrial construction methods, and quality improvements and cost reductions in construction”. It also appeared in the GDR as a German-language brochure and a supplement to the *Bauzeitung* newspaper entitled “Better, quicker, more cost-effective construction”. This paradigm shift was a step taken out of pragmatic, not to mention purely economic necessity.

MÁVAUT bus station – modernism with a character all of its own (1949)

A former bus station comprising an ensemble of reinforced concrete skeleton constructions in the modernist style is a classic example of Hungarian architecture from this era. Located on the west side of Erzsébet tér, a square in the heart of the Pest side of Budapest, the bus station was completed in 1949.

The arrival and departure halls were located in two separate buildings joined by a two-storey reinforced concrete structure including a covered passageway. As a result this urban planning element is not separated from the green spaces of the park, and the passageway serves as a connection between the two. Apart from these openings, the only other features in the stone surface are upright Luxfer glass tile wall elements that enclose the stairwells, allowing light to enter the building but shielding the interiors from view. The rectangular canopy above the main entrance is a miniature version of the perforated, cantilevered slab that forms the roof and is supported by three I-beams. A reinforced concrete grid featuring glass and steel surfaces protrudes from the natural stone cladding of the park-facing facade. The roof is finished in red corrugated slate. The row of windows on the first floor leaves a diminutive impression. The stairwell on the southern side of the building extends to the roof, punctuating the facade with a Luxfer glass-tile wall flanked by two pilasters with natural stone cladding. The facade above the passageway, which includes natural stone cladding of different widths, is partitioned by a narrow glass-tile-fronted auxiliary staircase at the corner adjacent to the main facade, while the two-storey passageway intersects the park-facing section of the building.

The building was listed in 1977, and in 2005 a renovation project was initiated to meet the needs of the new resident, the Hungarian Design Center. However, the Design Center only moved into the premises in 2011. The historical significance of the bus station's architectural design lies in the style adopted by the modernist members of International Congresses of Modern Architecture. At the same time the building has a distinctive and unique character, and the approach to form and the use of materials also go beyond the principles advocated by the Bauhaus school.

The exhibition

In the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue, Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein spotlights a number of significant constructions that embody the influence of Hungary's political system between 1945 and 1960. Focusing on a selection of around 30 buildings, the exhibition shows how architects managed to sidestep political guidelines and official dictates, and incorporate elements of modernism into their designs. The show also highlights the defining features of Hungarian modernism from an international perspective.

Catalogue

Architektur im Ringturm XXXVI, Ungarn – Bauten der Aufbruchzeit 1945-1960. Adolph Stiller (ed.); appr. 150 pages; German; featuring contributions from: Mártá Branczik, Zoltán Fehérvári, András Hadik, Endre Prakfalvi; fully illustrated.
Price: EUR 26