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Architecture as Nation-Building

Searching for national styles in Hungary and in Europe, 1850s–1925

[Comparative overview of national style strivings]

Keywords: architecture, nationalism, nation-building, comparative history, multiscopic approach

The aim of my multiscopic dissertation is to provide two overlapping histories: one of the Hungarian national styles in architecture before 1925, and another of the former’s European context, that is, to deliver a European *histoire croisée* of the idea of “national architecture”. Though the statements of a European history are evidently more dubious than those of a national one, the fellows at the Doktorandenforum might be more interested in the dissertation’s macroscopic/Europe-wide part, thus I am going to focus on that in the present abstract.

Nationalism affected all architectural scenes of the continent, but it had radically different impact on the architects in Western Europe and beyond. In Northern, Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the Balkans many architects were busy finding their national styles. They devoted plenty of thoughts and designs in order to find a style that, as they believed, were characteristic for their nation. In the same decades, Western architectural discourses were engaged with retrospective nationalization of revival styles or with the invention of universal, incidentally regional formal languages, but they showed no interest in developing new styles for their people. From the aspect in question, the difference between Western Europe and other parts of the continent is almost clear-cut: according to the research done until now, 17 European nations had architects, usually several dozens, who elaborated or followed a distinct national style, while amongst these 17 nations only two were Western European (nota bene: both stateless nations): the Catalanian and the Breton. (It should be noted here that the

estimation of the German *Heimatstil*[s] needs further investigation, since it [they] can be positioned in the domains of national as well as regional architecture at the same time.)

With the above-mentioned 17 nations and the ca. 25 national styles which arose from their architectural discourses, two patterns seem to be the most striking: a geographical and a chronological one. First, one can easily distinguish three macro-regional branches of national styles. *In Scandinavia* the patriotic architects drew mostly on pre-medieval and medieval models, at the same time they were keen on the quality and tractability of cladding stone materials, while they applied scanty ornaments. Hence the samples of the Danish, Norwegian and Finnish national romanticisms (as they were labelled uniformly – and retrospectively) seemed archaic, even ageless and robust. *In the Balkans* national styles converged towards each other due to the architects' common interests in Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture, that is, they parallelly utilized the visual representation of orthodoxy which was the distinctive feature vis-à-vis the Ottomans as well as the main pillar of the Romanian, Bulgarian and Serbian national identities. *In Central and Eastern Europe*, from the Czech lands to Russia, one could also set apart a third branch. Notwithstanding national styles in this region were the most manifold, they had common characteristics as the inclination towards folk art, vernacular building traditions and more or less timber. All told, in comparison with the strivings elaborated by their current fellow architects in the North and the South, Central/Eastern European national styles were the less affected by academic/historicist aesthetics, yet their samples were more ornamented.

Second, the diachronic inspection of the rise and length of the strivings for national styles sketches out a chronological pattern with three distinct periods. *In the 1850s* Serbian, Hungarian and Russian architects raised the idea of founding distinct styles for their nations instead of merely embellishing their buildings with a few national motives. After a long gap, the Europe-wide wave of movement-like national style strivings started *in the 1880s* and lasted until 1914. *World War I* marked a bold caesura in this history. On the one hand, in the newly proclaimed nation-states patriotic architects gained support from their governments as well as from the momentarily enthusiastic bourgeoisie; on the other, style strivings (in general) became diverging, less movement-like, hence less easily distinguishable from the current tendencies of classicism and regionalisms.