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Architecture as Nation-Building

The Searching for National Styles in Habsburg Central Europe during the Second Half of the Long 19th Century

Keywords: architecture, nationalism, nation-state, nation-building, urbanization, comparative history, fall of Habsburg Central Europe, Hungarian art nouveau, Czech rondocubism, Polish *dwór* style

Abstract: The issue of nationalities strained the Habsburg Empire between the revolutions of 1848 and the World War I. In the meantime national conflicts and claims surfaced in almost every sphere of the different societies. The demands for nation-building appeared in culture and even in architecture. Architects, just like writers or composers, sought ways of expressing their national identities and characteristics. The attempts at novel distinct national styles were the most powerful displays of this patriotic approach to architecture. In my PhD dissertation I am going to compare these often movement-like strivings and divide them into twin groups by socio- historical factors. According to my research, three macro dichotomies shaped the relationship between architecture and nationalism in Habsburg Central Europe.

First and foremost, these would-be styles emerged in Hungarian, Czech, and Polish architecture, while no peculiar Austrian (style) endeavour was elaborated. Due to an almost complete lack of Austrian (ethnic/national) identity, the issue was considered marginal or even dismissed among the Austro-Germans. Secondly, the sources of inspiration for these would-be nationalist styles varied. The Czechs stood under the influence of urban culture while the Hungarians and Poles were influenced by vernacular building and folk art. I could trace back this dichotomy to another socio-historical phenomenon (what could be grasped with statistical arguments): the unevenness of urbanisation and industrialisation within the empire’s distinct regions.

Thirdly, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish architects strove for comprehensive acknowledgement as national styles, whereas only some of them achieved this aim. It is striking that all of the successful efforts became fully-fledged under the aegis of an independent nation-state. Accordingly, the nationalist stirrings of the Hungarian architects, whose nation enjoyed a

semi- independent status within the empire since 1867, reached this fully-fledged condition prior to the collapse of Austria-Hungary. During the very same decades, Czech and Polish attempts had to wait for this achievement until the foundation of the Czechoslovakian and Polish nation-states in 1918. Thus the Great War split the general history of nationalist architecture in two since it radically redrew the map of Central Europe leaving behind new nation-states instead of the multiethnic empire. Consequently, the Polish and Czech would-be styles were crowned with success and disseminated only in the recently founded nation-states, just like their Hungarian parallel already before the war.

The hitherto unimplemented elaboration of the transnational history of national architectural style attempts has been opportune for a long time, since the (would-be) styles constituted a particular field of the art world of Habsburg Central Europe at turn-of-the-century. Furthermore, the topic also deserves the attention, because this history convincingly exemplifies how art and politics could pervade and impregnate each other.