

Resistance to Oppression – Case Study of the Hungarian Catholic Church Architecture 1945-1989

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After the WWII the status of the churches took a significantly different direction in Western and East-Central Europe. With the communist takeover a new social order emerged, whose aim was to liquidate Christian Piety. Besides weakening the economic influence of churches, their public, political and educational activities were suppressed. The anti-clerical politics affected ecclesiastical architecture, thus church architecture, too. The State Office of Church Affairs was responsible for supervising the churches. This process took a turn in 1963, when the status of Catholicism began to normalize. The Hungarian government reached out to the Vatican and a partial agreement was conducted, the first amongst the countries of the Socialist block.

The Catholic Church had to face strong political pressure. In most settlements worship and church building could only be undertaken undercover. Immediately after the war, it was hardly possible to build new churches. Obtaining state permission for community centres and schools was easier, thus often the church stood behind those developments. New community centres were rebuilt as churches with the slackening of central influence.

Society's transformation process is well modelled by the shift in architecture. As a result of the liturgical and religious reforms, church architecture required a new vision. Compared to the innovative church buildings in Western Europe in the 1950s, in Hungary the form experiments began slowly and in small numbers. While fighting for existence, renewing the churches in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council seemed less important. In many places the effects of the new regulations were only applied a decade later, furthermore, insistence on "the old" remained important to the believers. Architecturally high-quality works experimenting with new space forms appeared only in the mid-1970s.

This study provides an insight into the church buildings of the Eastern Block during the period of political oppression.

1. RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF HUNGARY AFTER WWII AND BEFORE THE HOLY SEE'S *OSTPOLITIK*

After WWII the leading role and influence of the Catholic Church continued in the West, but Churches of the Eastern block fought for survival. After a few years of democratic realignment a political turning point occurred. The break of the Church in the Eastern block region was planned and coordinated directly from Moscow. The first step was the collectivization of Church land, followed by the weakening of its cultural-social influence¹.

After the war, the first task regarding church architecture was to repair the damaged churches, and to rebuild the collapsed ones. Already started building constructions were also completed. In the first years after WWII there was an unbroken continuity in religiousness, which was overshadowed only by intensi-

fying political repression. The land reform of 1945 was the first serious action of the Provisional National Government that sorely shook the Churches. Often the Church stood behind the community developments, as it was easier to get building permission for community centres or schools than for church construction.

The separation of Church and state happened in barely four years. While “mutual agreement” was reached with the Protestant Churches in 1949, only partial agreement was made with the Catholic Church in 1950. Despite the agreements, new restrictions came about. The suspension of the religious orders’ operation was an organizational issue, while it also served to hamstring direct contact with the community’s social base. The restriction of religious education in schools was the last step in prohibiting the Church any contact with the future generation. The State Office for Church Affairs was established in 1951 and, from that time, all internal and international connections had to go on through this office. Between 1953 and 1955 there seemed to be some relief, but also in this time the division of the Catholic Church was the real aim. Two orientations were formed inside the Church: the resistance, represented by Cardinal József Mindszenty, who stood for traditional values, and the Peace Movement of Priests whose followers represented a conformist attitude. These unpredictable conditions increased internal pressure².

The State’s changing anticlerical attitude defined the operation of the Church. After the bloodily suppressed revolution of 1956 the government became more conciliatory. The Peace Council was established in 1958, which tried to push the collaboration between the State and the Church. However, from 1958 to 1961, cruel arrests of clerics demolished all earlier hope for the peace. The turning point came in 1963-64, when the situation of Catholics began to normalize. After a general amnesty in 1963, the Hungarian government and the Holy See undertook partial agreements in 1964.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

After 1964 the Holy See started a common ecumenical opening and a dialogue began with 20th century society. Thanks to “ostpolitik”, diplomatic relations revived, which projected a unified Church³. Political steps were more predictable from the mid-1960s both in the architectural opportunities and religious questions. Soviet state power changed its church politics, and tried to show compromise. Thanks to the lessening of repression, the Church was disposed towards the compromised solutions and the news of the everyday secular events was mentioned more frequently during mass.

The Second Vatican Council’s guidelines – in relation to the Church and Society and in the shaping of the architectural environment – were rooted in the reinterpretation of a Christ-centred life⁴. While in Western countries a towerless shape, adjusted in scale to the surrounding houses, was evolved as a result of the Council, in Hungary it had already developed earlier because of domestic political

necessity. A hidden tower and smaller architectural scale became common before the religious reforms. The church was a barely-tolerated building inside the town, thus its position often became peripheral.

The effects of the Second Vatican Council arrived to Hungary later. The first circular letter from the Bishops' Conference, which ordered the exordium of the new liturgy, was revealed in 1971. The new liturgical needs were handled from the mid-1960s, but the really extraordinary new buildings appeared in greater numbers only in the 1980s⁵.

The new religious pathfinding of the house church movements of the 1960s-1970s – which were commenced for many reasons – spread slowly in Hungary. This slowly unfolding process affected mainly the Hungarian Lutherans (the experiments of linking the sacral nave with the community function are traceable as late as the turn of the century). The nave was always in closer relation with the meeting room of the community in the Lutheran Church architecture, thus reflecting the possible practice of religion, according to the New Testament, happening in a small congregation room⁶.

The structural innovations in architecture symbolised the dynamic development and modernization of the State. The use of new technologies in sacral architecture became more general, as these – often industrial – materials were less rejected by the State authorities. Without the well-known traditional decorations the appearance of these churches became more profane.

Our case study focuses on one architect's work, whose church plans show his continuous effort to reach a closer linking of sacral and profane spaces within the confines of the fixed Catholic liturgy. István Szabó studied interior architecture, a designer. Thus he planned pavilions and interiors in the early stage of his oeuvre and later made plans of public buildings as well. He attended to religious architecture only after retirement.

The first steps towards the temporalism were in the mid-1970s. The most typical example is the architecture of István Szabó, who experimented with the innovative use of different building materials. The most exciting building of this extraordinary architectural manner is the All Saints Roman Catholic church in Budapest-Farkasrét, built in 1975-77. This building is a formal experimentation with traditional materials. István Szabó sought the elemental in the texture of materials and in the aesthetics of natural surfaces. Coloured glass windows can be seen on the facades in contrast to the raw industrial concrete blocks. This is the period of the really new church models with up-to-date innovative visual appearances. In the case of the All-Saints Catholic church the spatial structure shows a longitudinal nave arrangement, but actually it focuses on a central point. In a few years a conceptual approach appeared in design. After a short period of shifting interpretation, industrial technical innovations – like trusses, skeletal building structures, and large glass walls – appeared in church architecture as well. This new structural shaping can be seen in the Holy Cross Roman Catholic church in Budapest-Németvölgy, built in 1976-79. Despite the traditional pitched



FIGURE 1. István Szabó, All Saints Roman Catholic church, Budapest-Farkasrét, Hungary, 1975-1977. © Zorán Vukoszávlyev, 2015.



FIGURE 2. István Szabó, Holy Cross Roman Catholic church, Budapest-Németvölgy, Hungary, 1976-1979. © Erzsébet Urbán, 2016.



FIGURE 3. István Szabó and László Borsányi, St. Martin of Tours and St. Nicholas of Flüe Roman Catholic church, Budapest-Vízafogó, Hungary, 1982-1985. © Erzsébet Urbán, 2016.

roof, the steel structure is dominant in the interior. A complex building is hidden behind the simple spatial forms. The parish community function was built in one mass with the church. The community room and the nave cannot open into one space, as the always hierarchical Catholic liturgy does not require it. The church was transformed in the 1990s, so the renovation defines the recent appearance (the brick covering is also additional). The St. Martin of Tours and St. Nicholas of Flüe Roman Catholic Church in Budapest-Vízafogó, built in 1982-85, is a bit more introverted than the previous examples. The community room, the parsonage and the offices are on the ground level and the church space with the additional liturgical functions is upstairs. The tower, as a significant attribute of churches, is missing; the building is one compact form and just a huge steel cross rises up to the sky on the main façade. The entrance of the church level is in the corner of the quadratric space, so the liturgical elements are arranged on a diagonal axis⁷. The spatial organization focuses the eyes on the altar.

Comparing these three churches to each other, a continuously closer relation of the community function and the church space can be identified in the architect's works. The first case is quite simple with its sub- and super-ordinated relation (it is still a slightly fragmented shape), the second church models a co-ordinating arrangement (in spite of it the community function is secondary because the entrance leads directly to the nave), and the third example is also organised on two levels, but it is in one compact form (the community function obviously

comprises the base of the higher liturgical practice, thus the role of the Church is in one concise unity). First and last, a recognisable evolution can be seen in the relation of the profane and sacral functions by reading these examples.

3. CONCLUSION

Churches were never separate buildings; they were always surrounded by public functions. Architects started to combine the community functions and the service unities with the nave from early modernism, and this process spread quickly from the 1970-1980s. This connection became architecturally stronger over time, but the direct connection of the nave and community room was typically not evolved in Catholic Church architecture at that time. Profane and sacral functions complemented each other within one complex, but always the liturgical spaces had the hierarchical accendency. All these related to the aesthetic ambitions: the spaces of churches were more open, the decorations disappeared, the interiors were almost industrial, and the whole construction became simpler in terms of the materials and structure. The significance of Church art grew slowly. The general theory was that concentrated simple art works, just like signs, helped to focus on God. Natural light had an important role in the composition, but these observations lead us back to the modern architectural principals, and it starts the evaluation of the 1980-1990s church architecture⁸.

Despite the increasing religious freedom relatively few architecturally valuable churches were built between the WWII and the change of regime in 1989. Due to the lack of professional construction techniques and the modest financial background these buildings have a low building structure quality. Because of growing expectations of comfort and the ageing engineering-electrical systems, it was necessary to modernise a lot of churches and it sometimes went hand-in-hand with significant transformations as well. While in Western Europe we are talking about the transformation of churches because of the disappearance of the faithful, church attendance in the former communist countries of East-Central Europe is still satisfactory. Theological, liturgical and architectural changes were slowly put into practice. The Hungarian Catholic Church stayed relatively conservative despite the religious renewal movements around the world⁹. New, sometimes striking forms were always hard to accept in this period. The faithful preferred the traditional spaces, so new architectural forms were often greeted with serious conflict.

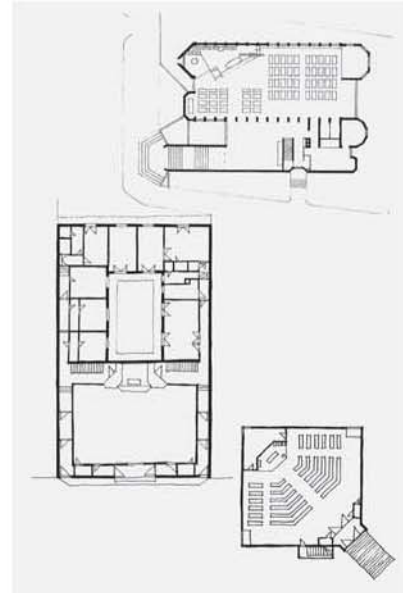


FIGURE 4. Sketches of the original plans of three churches of István Szabó, Budapest, Hungary.

Upon the whole, reconstruction of old churches was sponsored and supervised by the State during the socialist era (it was the real dawn of the monument protection in the country), but new constructions were the community's responsibility. Nevertheless, the tradition of the longitudinal arrangement with simple pitched roof was still widespread and the preservation of the few experimental buildings is obviously important because they are significant stages of our church heritage.

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NOTES

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