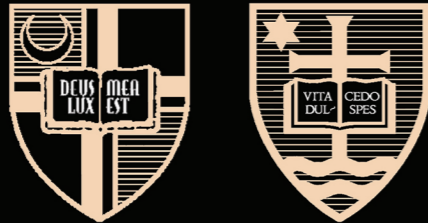


The Partnership for Sacred Architecture  
in cooperation with,  
The Catholic University of America  
School of Architecture & Planning  
Washington, DC

and  
The University of Notre Dame  
School of Architecture  
South Bend, IN



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*A Living Presence, Extending and Transforming  
the Tradition of Catholic Sacred Architecture*

# A *Living Presence*

Extending and Transforming  
the Tradition of Catholic  
Sacred Architecture



MARTIN

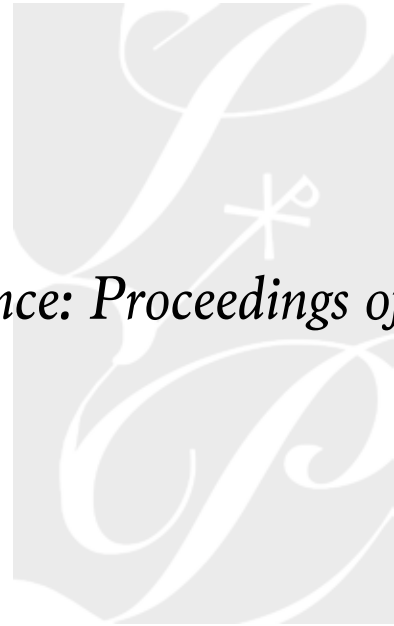
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A *Living  
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*A Living Presence: Proceedings of the Symposium*

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## Catholicism at the Eastern Border of Europe: Construction Works by the Catholic Church in the Post-Communist Countries at the Turn of the Millennium

Zoran Vukoszavlyev

Middle-Eastern Europe is on the historical ridge of Catholicism. In the history of the lands now consisting of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary the presence of Catholicism is dominant. For centuries, these most eastern countries of the Roman Catholic Church have been the combatants of faith located in the close vicinity of orthodoxy and Muslim states. The constructing activity of the Church was unbroken even in the changing state-formations. In the 20th century the international modern architecture of Europe has been enriched with outstanding compositions in the church-architecture of these countries. The progressive architectural style animated the new functional approach of the catholic reform movement as well: the composition



of churches followed the functional arrangement of early Christian sacral space even between the two world wars. The dynamically developing Church employed the most well-known architect, in this way the national styles could also appear beside modernism: the romantic buildings emerging from secession and using traditional vernacular forms.

The progressive architectural creations of the era have adapted the early-Christian liturgical space forms into the cubic mass formation of modern architecture - thus the functional arrangement of the churches has become clearly apparent in their mass-hierarchy. Behind the arched gate-formation of the church of Városmajor, the walls rise up like pylons, the mass forms, which are closed from outside, create a nearly ethereal space inside with the thin pillars vertically aiming up. The tower standing alone is a transcription of the Mediterranean campaniles. The monastery church of Pasarét is created by similarly simple forms; the architect, Gyula Rimanóczy designed it in the modernist style near to romanticism that was typical of the period's Italian architecture. Also the porch with columns and the arched inner spans of the gate are historical references; just as the beamed ceiling quoting the



F 01 : Hungary, Budapest-Városmajor catholic church, 1932.  
Architects: Aladár Árkay and Bertalan Árkay  
(Image by the Athor)





F 02 (left) : Hungary, Budapest-Pasarét, franciscan monastery, 1931-1934. Architect: Gyula Rimanóczy F 03 (right) : Slovakia, Rárósmulyad, roman catholic church, 1908-1910. Architect: István Medgyaszay

traditional sunk paneled ceilings. Medgyaszay's church in Rárósmulyad uses central space form and its organic space-formation creates a special communal space. The vernacular form-treasury is appearing not only in relation of decoration but also in the arched line of the layout and in the form of the tower. The church is special for the cover of the central space form, where the period's technical achievement is used in the thin reinforced concrete cupola forming vegetal petals.



However, this enrichment in architecture was followed by an extreme decline after the end of the 2nd World War. In the countries of the "eastern block", getting under the influence of the Soviet Union, church construction activity approached zero. It was more shocking than the wartime damages and socialization that in the socialist era a church could only be built at the site of a demolished former church – the construction of a new building was only possible as the representative manifestation of the communist state. In the once prosperous East-European catholic countries ideological oppression and even physical pogrom reigned for 40 years. In this atheist dictatorship Christianity was considered as something to be concealed.

During the socialist-communist dictatorship, sacral buildings could be built only under very strict control. With achieving a political stabilization, the construction of these certain buildings became possible as a favor toward people – the satisfaction of social needs was intended to consolidate the counter-balance of democratic movements. Uprisings started in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968; but in both cases they were suppressed by the troops of the "Varsaw Pact" marching in.

The Hungarian State, in order to represent its social indulgence, commissioned László Csaba with the design of a new church to the place of a small church that had been demolished for the sake of an industrial investment. Expressive formation and complex program of related arts show the era's architectural approach which does not stand opportunism.

The expressive triangular formation, the unique use of lights has made this building be an outstanding creation. The crematorium near Bratislava, deigned by Milučky is of the same high standard and can be recognized as the gem of modern architecture. On the edge of woods the long running parallel walls are adapted to the hillside. Between them the space coverings create



the architectural spaces: a mortuary is formed which is wide opened to the sight of woods by the huge glass walls. In this way the mystery of farewell becomes part of the landscape. Beside the use of natural materials (natural stone walls, solid wood furniture, details, light timber-lamella fences) the concept of modern detail formation appears as well: the flowing spaces are bordered by the membranes of glass walls installed on thin steel profiles.



F 04 : Slovakia, Bratislava-Lamač, crematory, 1962-1968.  
Architect: Ferdinand Milučky

Political changes have started with the election of John Paul II as pope (16th October 1978) – Karol Józef Wojtyła coming from the communist Poland preached for peace, and his consistent forgiving attitude made more permissive not only the leaders of his own nation but the political leaders of Czechoslovakia and Hungary as well.

The church of the worker's town Nova Huta next to Kraków had been being built for decades before it was consecrated in 1977. The building has an organic layout, and its ceiling of an enormous span is held by the steel load bearing structures produced by the steel factory and it is covered with timber cladding. The arched line of the walls tries to set itself free from the bleak purity of buildings constructed



from prefabricated panels. An obvious relationship can be found between this building and the magnificent work of Corbusier in Ronchamp.

In the eighties the building activity of the Church slowly became tolerated, but the real break-through was the fall of the socialist block and the start of democratic changes. Beyond financial rehabilitation, the new freedom of soul was much more important – the gates of churches could be wide opened again, the houses of God were crowded for masses. The religious communities of the extensive building estates pulled up during socialism intended to build churches for their own and the worker-colonies of the industrial areas aspired to a home as well. After 1989, several churches were built trying to compensate for the decades-long backlog.

In an architectural sense, we can talk about the continuation of architectural activity of the 20th century being interrupted in the 40's. The definition of a national character is even more forceful in these countries, since at time of the constructions in this re-gained freedom, the results of the Second Vatican

Council have had a very old perspective. The turn of the millennium can be described with the search for architectural status and with the re-definition of lost identity. In Poland, the homeland of John Paul II, the pope's great spiritual work has always been a great power - so the self-identification of the Church could become unbroken on the basis of the believers' strong faith. In the



F 05 : Poland, Cracow, The Ark of the Lord catholic church, 1967-1977.  
Architects: Wojciech Pietrzyk and Jan Grabacki



former Czechoslovakia the challenges are more complex: the different cultural characters of the two nations require unique solutions to the continuation of the construction works. In the middle of the 20th century the suppression of the Church was the most shocking in Hungary, the country where the order of St. Paul was founded, but maybe this gave strength for the resumption.



F 06 : Hungary, Paks, roman catholic church, 1988-1992.  
Architect: Imre Makovecz

The constructions related to political changes were established in areas where the ease from strong political oppression had resulted in a very fast counter-reaction. In several industrial towns that had been settled under socialism, the churches appeared nearly simultaneously to the changes. The catholic church of the internationally known architect Imre Makovecz has been built on the skirts of the concrete plattenbau of Paks, the town in Middle-Hungary famous of its nuclear power plant. Hungarian organic architecture is inspired by ancient vernacular architecture – the composition seems like something before Christianity, carrying the vernacular religion of the thousand year old Christian state and determining a place within the world of the turn of the millennium at the same time. A building-organism was born from the anthropomorphic signs; the composition forms a heart shape. The cross rises on top of the entrance tower, but underneath, the symbols of sun and moon appear as

well. The main gate is guarded by two angels: the angel of Darkness on the north side and angel of Light on the south. The timber structures are raised high from the layout to the heart-shaped skylight of the ridge, just like the two angles who accompany Christ turn to the light with their



outstretched wings. Makovecz has balanced the uncertain period of political changes and social transition with the conscious use of this specific language of forms – the treasury of Hungarian vernacular forms becomes the embodiment of religious traditions.

The vernacular tradition or the previously presented church's organic layout arrangement is seeking for the architectural space of the turn of millennium in term of new formal approaches. This search for style is typical of that churches too where the historic forms and details are adapted more directly.

A church in Budapest in the near vicinity of university and office buildings, lays on the banks of the river Danube. The main sacral space is determined by the cupola with flat arch and circle-shaped layout, emerging in the ring of tiny glass skylights – quoting the central churches of the medieval Hungary. The unusual asymmetry of the space with triforium is balanced by the axis of the space-row starting from the baptistery at the entrance to the syntherion of the altar apsis. Outside the homogeneous mass of the monumental copper cupola,



F 07 : Hungary, Budapest-Lágymányos, roman catholic church, 1994-1996. Architect: Ferenc Török and Mihály Balázs  
(Image by the Architect © Ferenc Török and Mihály Balázs)

which is supported by stone plinth, is embraced by the Stations of the Cross climbing the ramp. At the gate of the entrance-bridge a gothic gable greets the visitor with the aim of leading him to the entrance between the buildings – in this way creating an urban space within the separate buildings of the campus. Historic spirit and direct architectural quotations try to find their way.



The accelerated construction works in the first decade following 1989 were typical for their search for style: to find the desired national character has led to several errors, while the traditions of modernism seemed to be a misunderstood language for a long time. Beyond all question, the ideological oppression has broken a tradition, which previously had meant the most adequate architectural attitude due to the continuous development of the Church and the culture of the given nation. Nevertheless, the constructions of the new decade show a more clarified picture.



F 08 : Bohemia, Novy Dvur, trappist monastery, 1999-2004. Architect: John Pawson

The rooms of silence have been created in the formation of a Czech Trappist (Cistercian) monastery. In the mountains near to Prague, the ruins of a baroque farm building were reconstructed by



the Czech monks returning from French exile. Following the plans of John Pawson, the U-shaped layout was altered to a closed yard with building wings on all four sides, in this way modeling the Cistercian monasteries being typical since the Middle Ages. With the rooms of the refectory and dormitory, harmonically adapted building parts have been attached to the beautifully renovated baroque wing; the Sacristy, Chapter room and Scriptorium are placed in the new wing. The chorus of the monks has become the centre of the long, narrow church space; the sounds of hymns are dissolved in the play of lights within the abstract space created by white walls.

A song in colours gives the most direct image of the building complex designed in a dense urban environment. The hierarchic-order of the three main functions (church, vicarage, community house) results in a liberal composition. The central yard is bordered by building blocks from three sides. The fourth side is open to the surrounding: the heterogeneous forms of family houses and panel blocks are appeased by the calm composition being open in the bay-like formation. Arriving from the small park, the side-wings' facade rhythmically articulated with pillars escorts us-



F 09 : Hungary, Gödöllő, roman catholic church, 2001-2007.  
Architect: Tamás Nagy (Image by the Architect © Tamás Nagy)

or rather leads us to the church that frontally welcomes us with its monumental elevation. A harmony is born from the delicate sonority of rhythm and scales of openings; while formal leanness and consistency hardly gives a chance for emotional attachments. The spaces of nearly evangelical purity are drawn into a genial and intimate one with the use of wonderful wooden furniture and white structural elements. In the semi-arch apsis of



the altar, the glass windows glow with the lights of saturated colours, presenting a colour-sound transcription of the Gregorian melody of Kyrie eleison.

At the turn of the millennium, the most important need of the human race is silence itself. The dynamism of the visual world around us has to be changed by the calm environment of the church, where the aesthetics of structure and moderate decoration can provide peaceful surroundings for the meeting with God.



F 10 : Poland, Tarnów, chapel, 2009.  
Architects:  
Marta Rowińska & Lech Rowiński  
(Image by the Architect © beton)

The design method concentrating on conceptual elements, which is typical of the young architect generation, gives well readable answers. The small chapel located in the nature reservation area near Tarnów, Poland is built of homogenous materials. All its structure, claddings and furniture are made of wood. The simplicity of the tiny chapel referring to the farm buildings of vernacular architecture creates a pathetic space. The pattern of a shed is a profane room but with the presence of the congregation it becomes a sacral space. The Word is completed in Eucharist – Christ comes to join directly the people.

Presently we live in the era of tradition being fulfilled. The recognized tradition addresses the believers in a contemporary language of forms, and they feel at home again in the churches. The goal of our study has been to present these different languages. We consider the self-identification found in historical



forms as well as the contemporary way of clear/minimalist architectural formation, manifested in abstraction. Are the quotations from vernacular architecture, the forms of classicism or the engineering aesthetics of modernism the most effective from the aspect of historical continuity of the Catholic Church? The catholic churches of the European post-communist countries built on the turn of the millennium represent the revival of tradition.

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This research has been funded by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund No. OTKA 68610 and by the Bolyai Grant of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.