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CAN THERE BE SUCH A THING AS NATIONAL STYLE? OTTO WAGNER AND NATIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN HUNGARY

Abstract: In 1915 Otto Wagner, the school-founding master of modern Central European architecture, was asked to share with his Hungarian colleagues his thoughts on the tasks of modern architecture, including his views on the issue of the potentials of national architecture. The elderly Austrian architect replied in a letter, which appeared in Budapest's leading architectural journal of the age, *Vállalkozók Lapja*. Based on this scarcely known letter and its Hungarian reception that together form an important episode in the discourse on national art and architecture, my paper investigates the conflicting ideals of nationalism and/or modernism, ideals that bear significance to architecture history, urbanism and the formation of national identity alike.

Keywords: Otto Wagner, Marcell Komor, Ödön Lechner, Hungarian National Style in architecture, urbanism, modernism in architecture

In 1915 Otto Wagner¹ (Fig. 1), the school-founding master of modern Central European architecture, was asked to share with his Hungarian colleagues his thoughts on the tasks of modern architecture, including his views on the issue of the potentials of national architecture. The elderly Austrian architect replied in a letter, which appeared in Budapest's leading architectural journal of the age, *Vállalkozók Lapja* (Fig. 2). In his reply Wagner identified practicality, usefulness and rationality as the primary tasks of architecture. In his view, seeking a national style was unnecessary, wrong and even irrelevant approaching the issue from the aspect of tasks to be addressed by modern metropolitan architecture. Not surprisingly, the controversial tone of his letter prompted a heated response from Hungarian architects. As a result of Wagner's text, there was a degree of polarisation which influenced

the development of the architectural scene in the coming years and decades.

Below I will examine this article and the ensuing debate from a number of viewpoints. On the one hand, I am interested to see where this text can be placed in the context of Wagner's other writings. On the other hand, I am seeking an answer to what the work and personality of the Viennese master meant for Budapest's circle of architects, and how well-known his views were in contemporary Hungary. In addition, my goal is also to show where in the history of the quest for a national architecture in Hungary the polemics that evolved around Wagner's article can be placed; in other words, to what extent the different phases and trends of this history dating back to the mid-nineteenth century can be found in the opinions articulated in the debate. And, last but not least, I believe attention should be devoted to the effect the revival of the concept of national architecture in 1915 had on the architectural canon centred on the concepts of modern versus national/historic in the following decades.²

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First let us look at the text itself. The architect writes as follows:

“At the thirty-fifth Christmas of *Vállalkozók Lapja*, this old mouthpiece of Hungarian architecture, it is with pleasure that I comply with the editorial office’s request to voice the sentiments and thoughts of Austrian architects. [...] A certain freshness, we could almost say courage, can be perceived as a particular national characteristic of the works of Hungarian architects. [...] The architectural creations that can be seen in Budapest raise the issue of whether there can be an artistic difference between Hungarian and Austrian architecture. Can a national artistic form of expression, a national style, evolve? [...] When talking about national artistic endeavours, primarily cities as cultural centres are considered. The style of a cultural state, and thus the style of its capital city, depends on its climate, the available [...] building materials, its basic values, the lifestyle of the urban population, the government authority and social welfare, which are naturally expressed in a characteristic way in cities, and finally on the artistic abilities prevailing in the metropolises. [...] It follows from this that the artistic expression of architectural creations should be similar in all cultural centres as the lifestyle and the state organisation is almost the same everywhere. If this argument is recognised, the thought must arise that national style as such cannot exist. Another important contributing factor is the identical nature and continuous expansion of the means of transport as well as the endeavour of all states to achieve an identical or even superior cultural level. The principles of necessity and economy sweep aside everything that does not comply with

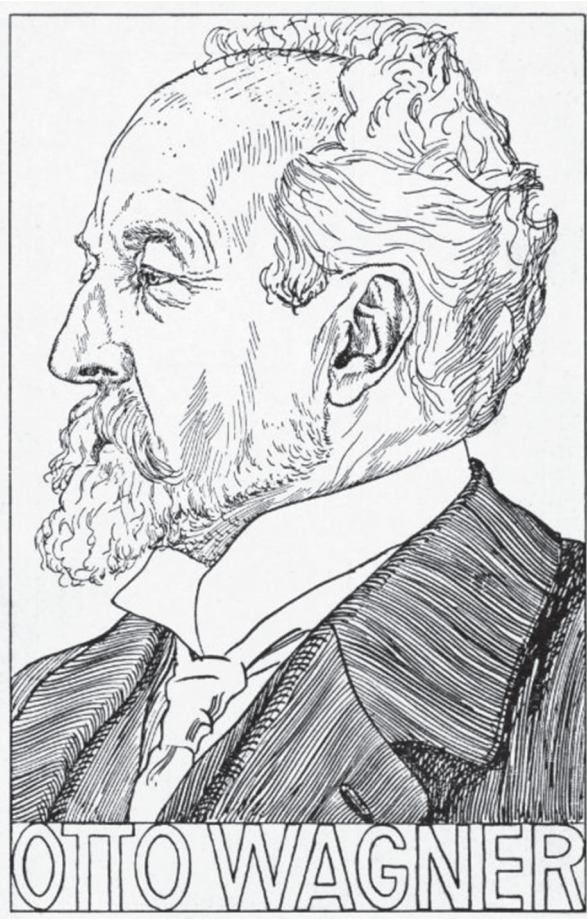


Fig. 1. Otto Wagner, cca 1911. Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, now Wien Museum, Vienna

their intentions and blocks their path to success. [...] As I have said many times, art is for people and not people for art. If art starts from this proposition, it will speak to humanity in an understandable language, more than ever before, and thus from an artistic viewpoint all trends which endeavour to conceal the artistic expression of the



Fig. 2. Headline of the periodical *Vállalkozók Lapja* (Budapest)

artworks of our age using the *masks of the forms of style of bygone ages* [my italics] must be discarded. Based on this concept, we must naturally regard all endeavours which seek to create a national style flawed, indeed even impossible. Our artistic integrity will refrain us from unnatural creations. Having spent time in Budapest at the invitation of the Hungarian Society of Engineers and Architects, we have found that their artistic endeavours are progressing in this desirable direction and we have thus expressed our unmitigated praise. Like us, Hungarian architects are on the right path. ...”

In the light of Wagner’s writings which were also known in Hungary, it is worth asking what the motive of the editor of *Vállalkozók Lapja*, namely Marcell Komor (Fig. 3), for interviewing the ageing master in 1915 was. To answer this question, we must understand the extent to which Wagner’s views were known in Hungary at that time and which group of architects resonated to them most.³

In the writings of the Viennese master, the national issue was often touched upon in connection with the issues of modern architecture. Around 1900 he, like his contemporaries, was preoccupied with the forms of individual artistic expression. In this context he spoke about the necessity of going beyond the historicising approach, which takes no account of local characteristics.⁴ By way of illustration, he most often quoted the anachronism of the statue of Pallas Athene in front of the parliament building in Vienna. For Wagner at this time, modern architecture represented both abandoning the neo styles (*“Nicht um Stilarchitektur sondern um Baukunst handelt es sich”*) and local art particular to a place (*“wir marschieren [...] an der Spitze aller Kulturvölker mit: Unserer Kunst”*).⁵ At the same time, connecting the individual, the artistic inspiration with the *heimisch*, the concept of genius loci, is not unrelated to Gottfried Semper’s theory of ornament that evolved in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶ Wagner refers to Semper in several of his writings as the greatest architect of the age.⁷

Wagner saw the greatest task of modern architecture and architecture in general as expressing its own age as authentically as possible. He believed that new modern styles necessarily came into being as a result of the changes of the present, and new structures, new materials and new tasks. Consequently, the art of the present must also find the forms that best suit its abilities and lifestyle (*“die unserem Können, unserem Tun und Lassen entsprechen”*).⁸



Fig. 3. Marcell Komor, 1928. Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Művészettörténeti Intézet, Adattár [Archive of the Institute of Art History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences], Budapest

By the beginning of the 1910s, local characteristics and variations had less and less importance in Wagner’s system delineated by the concepts of practicality and modernity.

“Whatever does not satisfy its purpose cannot be beautiful. [...]”

“The architects of different countries use forms in differing ways and to differing extents to express the genius loci. Thus, for example, it is logical that the ideal of beauty varies for the southern and northern Germans, the French, British, Italians, etc. Indeed, in the course of searching for the right form of expression, the composition must come to emphasise the place, time and fashion always as appropriate.

[...] The precise consideration of the aforementioned factors influencing the composition must be clearly expressed in the creation, as this is precisely how the differences in the artistic expression of an object befitting the spirit of the place come into being. And most probably it is only in this natural way that the national element can be

incorporated into the art. Because of the similarities in the way of expression and lifestyle of the peoples of civilised countries, these differences will never be great, and evolve mainly due to the availability of materials and the climatic conditions.

For the above reasons it is pointless to rigidly insist on certain historic styles associated with building types or ethnic groups like, for instance, how we Germans were so beguiled by the Old German style years ago, though maybe merely due to its name."⁹ (Fig. 4)

It was not by chance that Wagner's person gained importance with the architects who gravitated around Ödön Lechner (Fig. 5), to a certain extent becoming a second point of reference. That circle regarded the Austrian master as Lechner's Viennese counterpart from the aspects of breaking with the historic approach, modernism, honesty and forward-looking endeavours.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, Wagner was first received in Hungary in this circle.

In 1902 Ödön Gerő wrote an article about the newly built Viennese Postal Savings Bank.¹¹ In 1911 Wagner and Lechner were awarded the golden medal for their life's work at the International Exhibition of Art in Rome. Between 7 and 10 December 1911, at the invitation of the Association of Hungarian Architects, Wagner visited Budapest representing the Gesellschaft Österreichischen Architekten in the company of G. Klimt and J. Hoffmann. During this time he gave a lecture on the quality of the activity of architects.¹² The architect József Vágó's article appraising the two masters was probably written on that occasion.¹³ The visit was reported by the architect, journalist and theatre critic Pál Relle,¹⁴ who (together with the journalist Mihály Pásztor) published a slim volume of a kindred spirit to Wagner's study *Großstadt*¹⁵ (Fig. 6) two years later.¹⁶ The reason why this visit had such an importance among Lechner's followers was that it was regarded as a major step in the neglected master's acknowledgment in Hungary. Apart from the visit, the person of the Viennese architect was significant for many from the aspect of assimilating Lechner's architecture, or more generally the modern architectural approach, in Hungary. Marcell Komor, Lechner's student in charge of editing the journal *Vállalkozók Lapja*, had similar intentions by giving space to publish the views of the doyen of Austrian architecture.

It is worth examining in more detail the nineteenth-century intellectual movements, together with

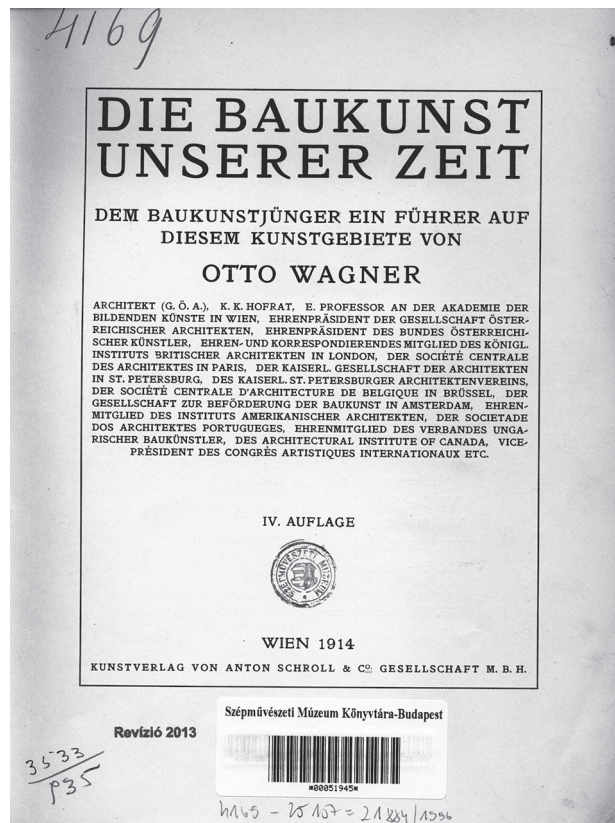


Fig. 4. Cover of *Die Baukunst unserer Zeit*, 1914. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Könyvtár [Library of the Museum of Fine Arts]; Budapest

their views on the concept of national art, that the writings on national architecture in the intense debate that erupted as a result of the letter drew on.

The discussion of national art was a constant part of the discourse on identity in Central European nation states in the nineteenth century.

In the first half of the century also in Hungary the national character was regarded as something special embracing the universal. Selected members of this virtual national community became representatives of universal art through their individuality, talent, uniqueness and originality.

Imre Henszlmann (1813–1888), art historian and archaeologist, wrote the following in 1841: an artist can rise high only if (s)he is able to become one with his or her object (empiricism) and fill it with idea (spiritual element).¹⁷ Henszlmann also connects the national character to the national way of life.¹⁸ Similarly, he followed German Romanticists when he depicted national character (the most advanced stage of human existence) as the most distinguished way to satisfy the demands for variety. Concerning the artistic depiction of national character and the state of affairs



Fig. 5. Olga Máté: Ödön Lechner, cca 1910. Petöfi Irodalmi Múzeum [Petöfi Literary Museum], Budapest

in Hungary, Henszlmann suggested that “national style has to be established, which is the only one that can expect lasting existence.”¹⁹

The meaning of *national art* changed in the second half of the century. From then on apparently the historic viewpoint, fundamentally determining European thinking in the era, came to the fore in this area²⁰ as well. Reference to the nation’s common historic past and its illustrious moments started to form thinking about national art in the mid-nineteenth century. The change in the concept of *national* after the middle of the century was accompanied by the rise of historicism. This change had two consequences. On the one hand, the hitherto complementary concepts of *universal* and *national* received mutually exclusive meanings. On the other hand, as regards seeking and creating *national art*, from then on, the historic (source) value of artworks was given priority in appreciating their aesthetics. What became important from the *national* aspect remained particular seen from the *universal*. Similarly, in creations that had an importance to national art, instead of the eternal, universal values of art, the “spirit” of the national past was sought. In this view, national characteristics were defined by local tra-

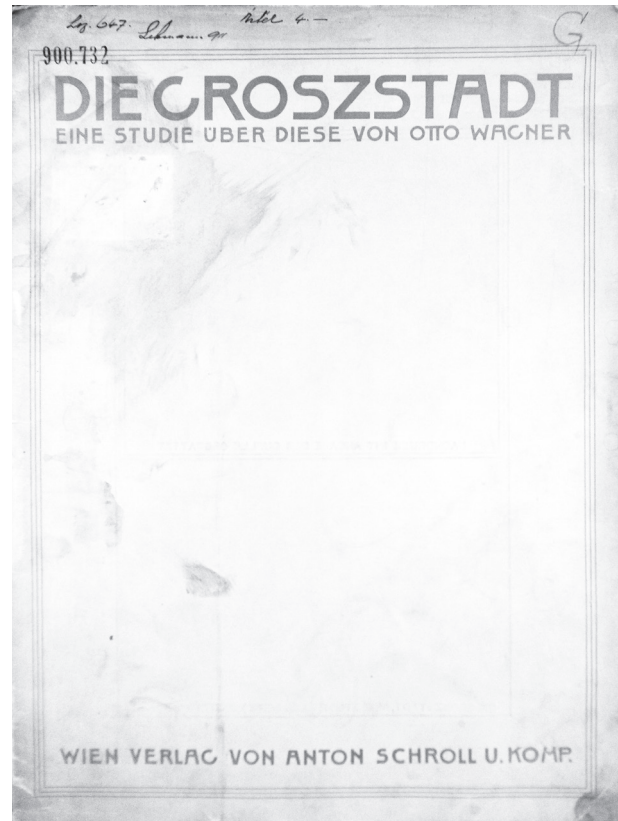


Fig. 6. Cover of Otto Wagner’s *Großstadt*, 1912. Budapesti Műszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem, Könyvtár [Library, Budapest University of Technology and Economics]

ditions, history and climatic conditions, aspects recalling the criteria of Herder’s concept of the nation. The quest for the historic roots of national art fitted into the context of systematically exploring the national past (divided according to academic discipline). It follows from this that the writings on defining the concept of and the endeavours aiming to create national architecture imagined finding the sources for the creation of a national architecture in the historic architectural styles and historic buildings.

As the main Hungarian expert on Gothic, Henszlmann, applying the ideas of Franz Mertens concerning the relationship between French and German Gothic,²¹ discussed Hungarian Gothic architecture in conjunction with that of the German-speaking lands, where the latter acted as the intermediary of French ideas;²² Henszlmann’s ideas about the path-setting potentials of the Middle Ages and Gothic had plenty of interlocutors in different contexts. He declared that a Hungarian national style did not exist just as there were no national architectural elements. The reasons for that lay in the nomadic origins of Hungarians, who used to copy foreign patterns. He continued to argue



Fig. 7. First page of Ödön LECHNER: *Önéletrajzi vázlat* [Biographical Sketch], *A Ház* IV, 1911, no. 9–10, 343.

that, in order to establish a national style of architecture, a choice had to be made from among the traditions that were already there. He deemed Gothic to be most suitable for that purpose. Instead of emphasizing pragmatism, he reasoned that this style could be easily connected to the past of the nation “because we should not forget that the golden ages of our history went hand in hand with Gothic architecture.”²³

The issue of the national style was usually raised in the nineteenth century in relation to buildings which were of decisive importance from the viewpoint of national identity. In the theoretical debate held in the columns of journals on architecture and the dailies, the opinions of others were also published besides those of the academics and architects who supported Henszlmann and medieval architecture.

There were architects who preferred the Romanesque style and its layers preserving Byzantine elements. The latter was especially popular among those architects who integrated the *Rudbogenstil*, which served as an important reference for Romanticism.

Concerning the building of the Pester Redoute, they claimed that Feszl “spotted the Byzantine style for us,” while searching for an architectural style fit-

ting the Hungarian spirit. In 1863 another reviewer wrote about one of his other projects, the so-called *Kistemplom* in Debrecen, that the Byzantine style from a national point of view “is more characteristic than any other architectural style.” Because of their similarity to Romanesque forms, Byzantine characteristics played an important role, even two decades later, as models for architecture based on the national past. In 1883, in the course of evaluating the plans for the new Parliament, an assessment concerning the plan in Byzantine style (Kálmán Gerster) states that it “suits Hungarian taste the best, and its Romanesque motifs retain an essence of old Hungarian architecture, which enables it to become a foundation for Hungarian style.”²⁴

Good examples for this were the buildings of the historical department at the millennial exhibition in Budapest in 1896, which serve as telling examples for the praxis of science-based imitation at the end of the century. Commemorating the millennium of the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin, the exhibition was supposed to depict the Hungarian past and present. The former was set in a building complex where artefacts from different periods of the nation’s past were exhibited. The styles of the buildings that were made up of architectural replicas were adjusted to the period of origin of the exhibited objects. Hence the history of Hungary was narrated from the time of the conquest until the eighteenth century, relying on the architectural framework provided by Roman-Gothic-Renaissance and Baroque annexes. The complex called Vajdahunyadvár (named after its most notable annex) can be seen as an ultimate synthesis of Hungarian historicism. The construction and after-life of the building complex shows the impasse of an architecture representing national identity. Furthermore, it sheds light on the limitations historicist architecture faced regarding the articulation of self-image. The exhibition-like setting showcased history as a theatrical scene, which contributed to the monument’s enrichment in content. The copies of historical buildings were seen as a means of shaping national identity and consciousness.²⁵ However, it seems that these copies did not live up to the high hopes they generated. Despite all the hard work academics put into them, the never-existing national architecture was not constructed. Gothic and Renaissance monuments of urban architecture in Upper Hungary were included in the collection of the samples of national architecture. However, it was the ideas they transmitted, rather than their architectural merits, that made them representatives of national consciousness. This in fact shows that

historicism (however meticulously it applied beloved historical forms) was not able to respond to the challenge that national architecture posed.²⁶

The realization of these problems urged the reconsideration of the attitude towards the past. For the historicist view the monument was the perfect reflection of the past. Historicism treated this as the original hence the purest source. Therefore monuments, relics from a time long passed, retained historical value themselves. These principles had two important consequences. First, the conviction that historical value should be attributed to those monuments that were purified from the disturbing layers later ages added to them. Second, the distinction between old and historical, which gained further significance in Alois Riegl's theory concerning age value and historical value (*Moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und Seine Entstehung*, 1919). In this writing, Riegl touches upon imitation, as one of the fundamental questions in historicism. He claimed that the copy can gain historical value if the original one is lost. This viewpoint was extended to other artefacts as well in historicism (objects, texts). For an architect in the second half of the nineteenth century, the constructed past made up for the lack of its direct experience and thus the past became "a continuously enduring present for us" (to paraphrase Dilthey²⁷).

Criticism emerged as early as the 1880s against the various trends that sought to establish national characteristics based on diverse traditions. For those who interpreted Hungarian arts in aesthetic terms, approaching it within a European discourse and thus reflecting on current intellectual and artistic considerations, national art was not only past-focused but self-limiting. They attempted to put the concept of national arts into a different context. These intellectuals internalized positivism and Darwin's evolutionary theory. The art historian Károly Pulszky, director of the Museum of Applied Arts and later that of the National Picture Gallery, was among the chief proponents of this idea. In his writings, Pulszky re-evaluates the concept of national style. He discusses local taste and characteristics from the viewpoint of universal styles that have to be seen in historical perspective instead of a national framework. Applying the latest results of research on ornaments to the local context, which was an essential approach within the framework of national arts, he pointed out the fact that particular formal solutions were primarily tied to certain objects and materials rather than to peoples. Hence, motifs deemed to be nation-specific were in

fact present in the arts of various peoples with different traditions and vernaculars. Jenő Radisics, director of the Museum of Applied Arts, had similar ideas. On the one hand, he demonstrated the Europe-wide dissemination of folk motifs that became more and more popular at the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, he treated this repertoire of motifs as the starting point for the evolution of applied arts.²⁸

Partly in parallel with these endeavours, in the last third of the nineteenth century movements appeared which did not seek the inspirational source of national art in the relics of the joint history or in the various historic styles these could be linked to. Instead they looked for sources connected with the place and related to local traditions which changed less over the course of time and thus better preserved the community's own traditions. This ahistoric approach was represented by folk art, which conveyed an ancient "immutable" tradition. In this way, in the last third of the nineteenth century, folk art became capable of providing the inspiration for the creation of individual national architecture(s), of a type which – breaking away from the approach of historicism – also proved to be able to inspire the establishment of national architecture in Central Europe, including Hungary.

Gottfried Semper's research on ornamentation (*Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder die praktische Aesthetik*, 1860), which was influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, played a particularly important role in spreading this approach. Semper, in connection with the teachings of the evolution of ornament, proposed that there was an original primordial state which at its highest level resulted in differing national variations for different peoples in consequence of the particular characteristics of local architecture and craftsmanship. Although some elements of Semper's theory were criticized decades later,²⁹ the German architect brought back the ahistoric approach into the debates about local variants of architecture. The theory proposing that the ancient modes of expression folk and peasant art preserved were relevant to modern architecture³⁰ rapidly gained popularity. It was the first time in Central Europe, including Hungary, that the nation was approached, thanks to the novelties of Semper's work, from an ahistoric point of view. Ödön Lechner was the most important Hungarian representative of this model. Lechner's architecture showed novelty and yet had a great impact, because he was able to offer an alternative to the establishment of national architecture in a period when historical forms seemed to be devoid of meaning. Lech-

ner also needed to break with the historicist model, which responded to architectural challenges with the help of respective elements of fitting historical styles. Lechner was surrounded by this idea both in Budapest and in Berlin, where he was trained. He saw perspective in the originality suggested by contemporary French architecture he learnt in the early years of his career, and he himself started experimenting with the establishment of a style that did not exist before. Lechner was not alone in Central Europe with his attempts at creating a new national grammar of forms. Similar trends were in the making in other countries at the same time, testifying to the fact that linking national style to ahistoric, rather than historic discourses was a central tenet of the time. (The spread of the Zakopane style in Poland as well as the “discovery” of Czech and Slovak folk architecture were expressions of the same phenomenon.)³¹

Lechner's views were quite modern at that time. Based on his writings, the vision of an inclusive mass architecture that transcends national boundaries crystallizes. “Capitalism destroys the opportunities of old styles, erects giant warehouses on metal pedestals and digs day by day deeper into the ground beneath traditions that are degraded into craftsmanship. It creates the equal tenement house to equal people and the democratic mass of equal people will compose the image of the modern street and city, which is the symbol of this aggregate.”³² (Fig. 7)

Thus Wagner's letter appeared in Issue 51 of 1915 of *Vállalkozók Lapja*, the same copy which published Oszkár Róbert's account of his own visit to Otto Wagner. However, Komor's above outlined intention of using Wagner's views to reinforce the domestic position of Lechner's circle did not go according to plan. Probably the tone of the letter turned out to be stronger and more categorical than expected, which might have been the reason why Komor had not prepared an editorial comment for the letter. After its release, however, he felt the need for a contextualising comment.³³ The retrospective interpretation belongs to the series of writings which pair the Austrian master and Lechner. In addition to the intention of creating a canon, Komor analysed the characteristics of Wagner's work and, not insignificantly, his Viennese traits. This also shows that for Komor the Austrian master provided an example as Lechner's Viennese counterpart and not as the pioneering figure of modern urban architecture – in spite of the fact that, as illustrated by the quotation above, Lechner was also seriously interested in the urban architecture issues of his age.

The tension between the prestigious architect's person and views, however, did not only pose a problem for one of the most reflective-minded architects of the age, Marcell Komor. More vehement criticism of Wagner's views by an unknown author appeared in Issue 2 of 1916 of the journal.³⁴

“...Wagner... and the other great Viennese masters likewise created their own language but could not, or forgot to, write its grammar...”

Wagner inadvertently created his own style and own world language, and now wants the whole world to speak this language...

Hungarian architects! Do not on any account abandon your endeavours to achieve the Hungarian national style.”

As this shows, the author of the article regarded modern architecture, which Wagner contrasted with the futility of searching for the *national*, as the Austrian master's own style that Wagner wished to force onto other peoples. Nevertheless, the fact that he referred to the general problems of modern architecture as part of an individual architectural language does not mean that the concept of modernism was not known in Hungarian architecture of the period. The concept was used by exactly that official architectural trend whose views Komor wished to alter somewhat. The generally accepted early twentieth-century interpretation of the concept was the use of modern materials in buildings dressed in historical guise. It is understandable that the more fundamental approach of modern architecture with an urban planning dimension was rejected.

Another article that reviewed an essay by Felix Salten³⁵ in the journal in mid-February not only refuted the Wagnerian theory of universal architecture but also marginalised the endeavours of the apostle of modern Hungarian architecture, Lechner, and the influence he exerted on contemporary architecture.³⁶

“...The new Hungarian style, if such a thing already exists, does not have centuries-long traditions. Its past is little more than a name, that of Ödön Lechner, ... but it may still have a future.

The Hungarian architect does not share Wagner's concept that all cultural centres have a uniform way of dressing and thus the style of architecture should also be uniform and international [...] First of all, the Hungarian style must be given a soul. And this soul cannot be shown in either Wagner's cosmopolitan uniform or in Salten's

outdated ceremonial national attire. Modern Hungarian architecture [...] of the new times [...] may only find its most individual forms of expression drawing on itself. The only question is whether it will manage to create these.”

There was another reason why Wagner’s views rejecting the national aspect were not received favourably in Hungary. This was the strengthening of nationalist sentiments due to the Great War. An article by Béla Gonda Junior in the March issue of the journal dealt with this issue.³⁷ He wrote: “In the arts... we search for original, true national values, a form of language that expresses our Hungarian souls and sentiments faithfully, in the same way as the endurance, suffering and courage of our soldiers are the original form of language and style of the individual character of Hungarians.” He suggests the reason for the existence of the Hungarian style is best felt in the midst of war. Thus, the task of architects is to raise this connection onto a conscious (intellectual) level by educating the public in the national aesthetics.

This national narrative generated by the War was reinforced due to Hungary losing much of its territory. Buildings recalling bygone historic grandeur and their references evoked a feeling of familiarity. As memorials to the thus created and carefully nurtured national glory, they suggested the hope of the return of the much longed-for past.

In these circumstances it was not long before the Hungarian Society of Engineers and Architects, the official organisation of Hungary’s architects, also reacted to the national versus international problem. There was a lively debate on the issue at the organisation’s meeting on 15 May 1916. No architectural issue in Hungary had generated such strong reactions in a forum moderated by official circles since the 1860s. To put it more dramatically, the followers of historicism clashed with the believers in the functionalist approach to architecture. In the debate, which was chaired by the architect, ministerial representative and later state secretary Róbert K. Kertész – an influential figure in Hungarian architectural circles – well-known personalities from the profession spoke, including Virgil Nagy, a professor at the Budapest Technical University, the architect and Lechner follower Zoltán Bálint, and the architect and conservative writer on architecture Jenő Lechner. In his account of the debate, Marcell Komor – taking the same approach as in his January article, reflecting on the climate of the architectural scene and interpreting the aim of his journal in retrospect – emphasised

the intention of generating a professional discussion in connection with the published letter, which was meant to rouse the “lethargic indifference related to national architecture” prevailing in recent years. At the Society’s debate the more reflective, modern-thinking architects (such as Zoltán Bálint and Béla Ney) only made restrained comments. After the meeting, it became clear that the Society firmly rejected the proposal to break with the national architectural tradition. Moreover, in order to emphasise this position as the profession’s single opinion, the chair’s lecture on the issue was published in instalments by the two leading trade journals of the age (*Vállalkozók Lapja* and *Építő Ipar-Építő Művészet*).³⁸ Furthermore, to disseminate the lecture as the official viewpoint, its text also appeared as an independent publication the following year.

In this text Kertész questioned placing Wagnerian practicality above all other aspects on the one hand and, on the other, he wrote about the ties of architecture with nations and the people’s mentality. With this comment, he evoked the post-mid-nineteenth-century period of the creation of national architecture, and the Herder-based approach of the trio of conditions, tradition, history and climate. A sentence referring to the limits of the Wagnerian approach was added to this dictum. ... Explaining the historical approach with ethnic criteria, and thus in fact legitimising it, was nevertheless striking in 1916.

By publishing Kertész’s text, Komor also opened the way for a new narrative for national art in which the Lechner followers only received a marginal place. In other words, the revival of the ahistoric folk tradition in architecture and the applied arts was put in parentheses. The evolutionist developmental history of ornamentation, which instead of turning to the historic past created an opportunity for reconciling local tradition with universal modernity, provided Wagner with an answer to the current challenges of architecture in the same way that it gave a theoretical handhold for Lechner to create modern architecture with Hungarian traditions. However, instead of this, the new discourse on national architecture elevated the national characteristic found in the local historic monuments to be the model, and in this, besides Kertész, the “apostle” of Upper Hungarian Renaissance Jenő Kismarty Lechner was in the vanguard. With this step the historic approach which had been prevalent in the self-expression of the Central European nations fifty years beforehand was made quasi official (cf. the Renaissance of the so-called Old German style around 1860 in German architecture and applied arts).

If we compare the vehemence of the statements and guidelines articulated at the public debate organised by the Hungarian Society of Engineers and Architects with the tone of Wagner's letter, there seems to have been something of an overreaction. Although Wagner did not intend his text to be a polemic essay, the official Hungarian architectural scene seemed to regard it as such. They debated but not directly with the Austrian master. The letter rather acted as a prompt for defining the tasks of Hungarian architects in the second decade of the twentieth century. This was reinforced by the national sentiment which intensified during the war on the one hand and the need of the architectural scene to create a kind of official trend on the other. It must be recognised that, through the latter attempt, this was the first time in the history of Hungarian architecture that an architectural/historic concept was promoted in contrast with other views. In 1915 different, in part contradictory architectural movements existed side by side. One was the circle of architects following in the footsteps of Lechner who were involved in the creation of a national ornamental style drawing on folk motifs. They regarded Wagner, who had been brought up on historicism but moved away to use Secessionist ornamental style (thus being modern) and established a major school, as an "uncle". Alongside them there was the generation of young architects, the Young Group, who, in contrast with the Lechner circle, talked about the authenticity and ahistoric originality of folk craftsmanship in a like-minded manner to Ruskin's approach. Compared with this, an influential part of the Hungarian architects' society consisted of professionals with a traditional approach designing in the language of historicism who reflected the changes of the age's architecture primarily in Hungary and secondarily abroad in their own way. In part they themselves employed novel architectural and engineering solutions.³⁹ At the same time, as for example the contemporary speeches and writings of Alajos Hauszmann bear witness,⁴⁰ they kept the thematisation (and reinterpretation of concepts) of the discourse on architecture to themselves.

Komor's uncertainty probably also contributed to, and in a certain sense prompted, the strong reaction of the more conservative section of the architectural profession.

However, the heat of the argument dissipated relatively quickly. The power relations and the political and public conditions in 1916–17 also played a role in ensuring that the quest for national traditions remained a central theme in Hungarian architecture.

The debate slowly faded away although a few articles directly or indirectly connected with Wagner's letter still appeared the following year. The architect Henrik Bauer and Béla Ney both wrote pieces endeavouring to impart a multifaceted approach to the national concept.⁴¹ Bauer's article, reflecting on the lecture of Róbert K. Kertész the previous year, proposed a new structure for the theme.⁴² As regards applying the national in the arts, Bauer considered the so-called national nature of the arts not as an objective to be achieved but a result that can be interpreted in terms of art history. In this he formulated a radically different viewpoint from his contemporaries. Moreover, in his approach he separated national sentiment and thought from the artistic idea, the act of creation and its embodiment. In this sense he talked about architectural creation, whose aim is to bring into being a structure that embodies the ideal concept. It is easy to see that this primary artistic objective is outside the limits of interpretation of the national or, more precisely, it may be evident in the architect's approach and choice of form. And thus Bauer reconnected with the national-type art concept of the mid-nineteenth century, which advocates that the artist's personality and originality makes the work of art unique and thus national. In this narrative, in Bauer's opinion, the national accent is present in the works of Hauszmann, Alpár and Ybl as it is in the works of Schulek, Steindl or Pecz. Linking the national feature with the personality of the artist led Bauer to the recognition that the national is nothing other than a particular instinctive feeling which is part of the content of the collective consciousness linked to a place and nation filtered through the individual. At this point he turns to the approach of Otto Wagner. In Bauer's interpretation the national feature is overwritten by the universal nature and expedience of modern architecture. Finally, he narrowed the segment in which he wished to show the national to the diversity of ornamentation. However, with a flick he relativized even this, saying these local versions will in time approach each other. Like Wagner, for Bauer, too, this did not mean seeing universal modern architecture as the opposite of the *national*. With his gesture intended to reconcile the two narratives, he did not only evoke the concept of the *national* seen as part of the *universal* in the first half of the nineteenth century, but at the same time also outlined a visionary image that incorporated the architectural directions existing in modern and national ideas, which was decidedly idealistic in the increasingly polarised world of the profession and the public in 1917.

In response to Bauer's article, a study by Béla Ney entitled "National Architecture and Style" appeared. In this article Ney accepted Bauer's approach of regarding national art as an art history construct and not an aesthetic category. While discussing the prospects of architecture becoming international, he could not prescind from the local accent. This led him to believe that contemporary innovations arising in the field of building materials and construction were an aim in themselves. In his thought process he attempted to legitimise national art and architecture in a modern framework. He outlined a vision of contemporary architecture that can be created, in his words, "based on the lessons drawn from the development of historic styles." In spite of all the flexibility and reflective nature of his piece, it is apparent that in his idea indicating the active role of Hungarian architecture in the process of creating universal modern architecture he returned to his own idea from about forty years beforehand.

We can see that, of all the Hungarian architects reflecting on Wagner's letter, Bauer was the only one who could fully distance himself from the historic viewpoint. He alone placed the concept of national art in the context of art history. Extending the concept of the national to a global scale, he relativized it. In this spirit, he separated the purposeless differences related to place and culture in the formation of architectural works from the nineteenth-century concept of the national. It was he who reacted the most sensitively to the Wagnerian vision of contemporary architecture, and not Marcell Komor, who in a sense prompted the debate.

Although the articles of both Bauer and Ney, which were strikingly open, raised more questions, neither led to the further discussion of the topic. Their pieces in effect drew no response. With the end of the World War, the issue of national architecture was forced into the background. When it re-emerged in

the wake of the post-1919 political shift to the right (counter-revolution) and the 1920 Treaty of Trianon concluding the First World War, which dismantled historic Hungary by raising new political borders, the figure of the by then deceased Wagner and his views on architectural theory and urban architecture had lost their relevance.

In the light of the above, what can the outcome of Otto Wagner's letter addressed to Hungarian architects be said to be?

It appears that the intention of Komor's circle to strengthen their own position by publishing Wagner's letter backfired. The proposal outlined by the Austrian master concerning the tasks of contemporary architecture and the role devoted in this to national architecture seemed a drastic vision to almost all the members of the Hungarian architectural profession. In the history of searching for a national architecture in Hungary, even the trends using the ahistorical fin-de-siècle approach had not been able to fully abandon the mentality of historicism to an extent (see Lechner's historicism) that would have allowed the reception of a concept envisaging the birth of universal architecture instead of the continuation of local traditions.

In the final analysis, the group of early twentieth-century architects who searched for national traditions in different areas while distancing themselves from historicism and who were more receptive to current architectural problems could not take the step of internalising Wagner's view in order to strengthen their own position in the profession. In the absence of this, the letter gave fresh impetus to redefining the already waning national canon. This, however, influenced the development of the architectural scene in interwar Hungary as regards both the survival of architectural historicism in the twentieth century and the emergence of architects who ventured to break with the historical views.

NOTES

¹ Several books, articles and catalogues were published on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Wagner's death, such as *Otto Wagner*, hrsg. von. NIERHAUS, Andreas – OROSZ, Eva-Maria, Vienna: Wien Museum / Residenz Verlag, 2018; *Post Otto Wagner. Von der Postsparkasse zur Postmoderne / From the Postal Savings Bank to Post-Modernism*, eds. THUNHOHENSTEIN, Christoph – HACKENSCHMIDT, Sebastian, Vienna: MAK / Birkhäuser Verlag, 2018.

² Wagner's letter and the subsequent debate was analysed for the first time in the field of architecture history by András FERKAI (Nemzeti építészet a polgári sajtó tükrében I.

1920–1930 [National Architecture in the Mirror of the Civil Press], *Építés-, Építészettudomány* 20. 1989. 3–4. 331–364: 332–336). But while for him the debate was a starting point of national architectural movements of the interwar period, my goal was placing this important architectural polemic of the first half of the twentieth century into the broader context of the idea of national architecture in the nineteenth century.

³ A current paper concerning this topic, see: MAREK, Michaela: Die Wagner-Rezeption im Kultur- und Identitätspolitischen Kontext der späten Habsburgermonarchie, in *Otto Wagner* 2018, *op. cit.*, 136–142.

⁴ For Wagner and the modernism see: OECHSLIN, Werner: Historische Verwerfungen. *Otto Wagner* und die immer noch nicht bereinigte Geschichte der modernen Architektur, in *Otto Wagner* 2018, *op. cit.*, 16–23; WHITE, Iain Boyd: Otto Wagners “Moderne” jenseits der Doppelmonarchie, in *Otto Wagner* 2018, *op. cit.*, 36–43.

⁵ “Unsere Kunst” manuscript (1903). Wiener Stadtbibliothek. I.N. 194.895. publ.: GRAF, Otto Antonia: *Otto Wagner*. Bd. 2.1. *Das Werk des Architekten 1903–1918*. Wien–Köln–Graz, Böhlau, 1985. 451–454; Hungarian edition: KERÉKGYÁRTÓ, Béla (ed.): *Otto Wagner. Írások, tervek, épületek* [Writings, Plans, Buildings]. Budapest: Terc Publishing House, 2012. 214–216.

⁶ SEMPER, Gottfried: *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Aesthetik. Ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*. I. Bd. *Die textile Kunst für sich betrachtet und in Beziehung zur Baukunst*, Frankfurt am Main – München, 1860; II. Bd. *Keramik, Tektonik, Stereometrie, Metallotechnik für sich betrachtet und in Beziehung zur Baukunst*, Frankfurt am Main – München, 1863; Semper’s Theory of Ornaments see: HOUZE, Rebecca: *Textiles, Fashion, and Design Reform in Austria-Hungary before the First World War*, Farnham–Burlington, 2015. 46, 55–57, 120; HOUZE, Rebecca: Hungarian Nationalism, Gottfried Semper, and the Budapest Museum of Applied Art, *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 16. 2009. No. 2, 7–38.

⁷ WAGNER, Otto: *Moderne Architektur*, 1896. 54 – 55 (see: GRAF 1985, *op. cit.*, Bd. 1. *Das Werk des Architekten. 1860–1902*, Wien–Köln–Graz: Böhlau, 1985, 275–276); WAGNER, Otto: *Großstadt*, Wien, 1911. 24 (see: GRAF 1985, *op. cit.*, Bd. 2.1. 646). Concerning Wagner’s reaction to Semper, see: MALLGRAVE, Henry Francis (ed.): *Otto Wagner, Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, Santa Monica, CA: Getty, 1993. 161.

⁸ GRAF 1985, *op. cit.*, Bd. 1. 270.

⁹ WAGNER, Otto: *Baukunst unserer Zeit*, Wien, 1914 (earlier editions: 1896, 1898, 1902; Hungarian edition: KERÉKGYÁRTÓ 2012, *op. cit.*, 110–191, in particular 138.

¹⁰ For the comparison of Wagner’s and Lechner’s impact on the junior generation of architects, see: TOPP, Leslie: Otto Wagner und die junge Generation. Inspiration, Rückzug, Kritik, in *Otto Wagner* 2018, *op. cit.*, 118–125; VYBIRAL, Jindrich: Die Wagner-Schule zwischen Mythos und Realität, in *Otto Wagner* 2018, *op. cit.*, 126–135.

¹¹ GERŐ, Ödön: A Postatakarékpénztár háza [The House of the Postal Savings Bank], *Művészet* 1. 1902. 41–55.

¹² He first held the lecture entitled “Die Qualität des Baukünstlers” in Vienna in February of the same year. See GRAF 1985, *op. cit.*, Bd. 2.1. 651–657; AURENHAMMER, Hans H.: Max Dvorak und die moderne Architektur. Bemerkungen zum Vortrag “Die letzte Renaissance” (1912), *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 50. 1997. 23–40.

¹³ VÁGÓ, József: Wagner és Lechner, *A Ház* 4. 1911. No. 9/10, 365–366.

¹⁴ Bécsi művészek látogatása Budapesten, *Világ* 2. 1911. No. 290 (7. Dec), 9–10.

¹⁵ The text was based on a lecture held by Wagner at Columbia University in 1910 at the request of the university’s professor of architecture, Alfred Dwight Foster Hamlin. The lecture was published in Vienna in 1911. See GRAF 1985, *op. cit.*, Bd. 2.1. 641–647. For Wagner and city architecture, see: MORAVÁNSZKY, Ákos: “Projekt und Projektion”.

Ein Vortrag an der Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg, Juni 2005. Hamburg: Textem Verlag, 2017. (Auf der Suche nach einer Theorie der Architektur, Bd. 20, hrsg. von FRANK, Hartmut – PETER-BÖSENBERG, Katrin); MORAVÁNSZKY, Ákos, “Ewige Dauer und Ökonomie”. Die Stofflichkeit der Großstadt Otto Wagners, in *Otto Wagner* 2018, *op. cit.*, 24–29; SONNE, Wolfgang: Großstadtbaukunst. Otto Wagners Städtebau im internationalen Kontext, in *Otto Wagner* 2018, *op. cit.*, 52–59; SCHWARZ, Werner Michael: Die Kunst der Bewegung. Otto Wagners Theorie und Politik der Großstadt, in *Otto Wagner* 2018, *op. cit.*, 60–67.

¹⁶ RELLE, Pál and PÁSZTOR, Mihály: *A mi városunk*, Budapest: Singer és Wolfner, 1913.

¹⁷ HENSZLMANN, Imre: *Párhuzam az ó- és újkor művészeti nézetek és nevelések közt különös tekintettel a művészeti fejlődésre Magyarországon* [Parallels between the Artistic Views and Education of the Ancient and the Modern Age, with Special Regard to the Development of Arts in Hungary], Pest, 1841.

¹⁸ See PAPP, Gábor György: “Vezessük be minél előbb nemzeti hagyományainkat a modern világba” A nemzeti építészet fogalmának változásai az építészeti szakirodalomban Magyarországon [Let’s Introduce Our National Traditions into the Modern World. The Changes in Conceptualizing National Architecture in Hungarian Architectural Literature], *Korall* 62. 2015. 167–189; PAPP, Gábor György: Medievalism in Nineteenth-Century Hungarian Architecture, in BARRAL I ALTET, Xavier – LÓVEI, Pál – LUCHERINI, Vinni – TAKÁCS, Imre (eds.): *The Art of Medieval Hungary*, Roma: Viella, 2018. (Bibliotheca Academiae Hungariae – Roma. Studia; 7)

¹⁹ HENSZLMANN 1841, *op. cit.*

²⁰ See KOSELLECK, Reinhart: *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Boston: MIT Press, 1985.

²¹ MERTENS, Franz: Die bisherigen Studien über die Baukunst des Mittelalters, *Museum. Blätter für bildende Kunst* 1835.

²² HENSZLMANN, Imre: *Kassa városának ónémet stíli templomai* [Old German Style Churches of Kassa], Pest: Landerer és Heckenast, 1846.

²³ Henszlmann Magyarázata, in SZABÓ, Júlia – VÁLINÉ POGÁNY, Jolán (eds.): *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia palotájának pályázati tervei* [Competition Designs for the Palace of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences], Budapest: MTA Művészettörténeti Kutatóintézet, 1996. 89–93 (91).

²⁴ *Budapesti Hírlap* no 111 (1883. április 22.) 2. See GÁBOR, Eszter – VERŐ, Mária (eds.): *Az Ország háza. Buda-pesti országháza tervek 1784–1884* [House of the Nation. Parliament Plans for Buda-Pest 1784–1884.], Budapest: Országház, 2000. 148, 362.

²⁵ See: BÁLINT, Zoltán: *Az ezredéves kiállítás architektúrája* [The Architecture of the Millennial Exhibition], Budapest, 1897. 37.

²⁶ See: PAPP, Gábor György: ‘Királyaink korának lehellelte’. A millenniumi kiállítás történelmi épületei és szerepük a nemzeti identitás formálásában, [“The Air of the Age of Our Kings”. The Historic Buildings of the Millennial Exhibition and Their Role in Forming a National Identity], in SZILÁGYI, Adrienn – BOLLÓK, Ádám (eds.): *Nemzet és tudomány Magyarországon a 19. században* [Nation and Science in Hungary in the 19th Century], Budapest: MTA, 2017. 224–248; PAPP, Gábor György: Present Constructed from the Past.

Attempts to Shape National Architecture in 19th-Century Hungary, in GYÁNI, Gábor – HALMESVIRTA, Anssi (eds.): *Cultural Nationalism in a Finnish-Hungarian Historical Context*, Budapest: MTA, 2018. 146–163.

²⁷ Wilhelm, Dilthey (1833–1911), *Selected Works*, eds. MAKREEL, R.A. and RODI, F., Vol. III. *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002. 229.

²⁸ See PULSZKY, Károly Iparművészet és stíl [Károly Pulszky Applied Arts and Style], in VARGA, Bálint – CIEGER, András (eds.), *Tudomány és művészet a magyar nemzetépítés szolgálatában. Szöveggyűjtemény* [Science and Art in the Service of Hungarian Nationbuilding], Budapest: MTA, 2017. 394–400; RADISICS, Jenő ismertetése Huszka József A magyar díszítő stíl című könyvéről [Jenő Radisics's Review about József Huszka's Work: Hungarian Decorative Style], in VARGA – CIEGER 2017, *op.cit.*, 150–154.

²⁹ See FALKE, Jakob von: *Aesthetik des Kunstgewerbes*, 1883.

³⁰ See SEMPER, Gottfried: *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder die praktische Aesthetik*, 1860.

³¹ See CROWLEY, David: Finding Poland in the Margins: The Case of the Zakopane Style, *Journal of Design History* 14. 2001. no. 2, 105–116; CROWLEY, David: Zakopane Style – National Style, *Autoportret* 3 [32]. 2010. 32–39; FILIPOVÁ, Marta: National Treasure or a Redundant Relic: The Roles of the Vernacular in Czech Art, *RIHA Journal* 0066 (26 February 2013), 29–40 (<http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2013/2013-jan-mar/filipova-national-treasure-or-a-redundant-relic> [25 Oct 2017]).

³² LECHNER, Ödön: Önéletrajzi vázlat [Biographical Sketch], *A Ház* IV. 1911. no. 9–10, 343–346, 355–356.

³³ EZREY [KOMOR, Marcell]: Üdv Wagner Ottonak, *Vállalkozók Lapja* 37. no. 1. (5 Jan 1916), 3–4.

³⁴ N.A., Nemzeti stílus [National Style], *Vállalkozók Lapja* 37. no. 2. (12 Jan 1916), 5.

³⁵ SALTEN, Felix (Siegmond Salzman, 1869, Budapest – 1945, Zürich), writer and critic in Vienna.

³⁶ Budapest díszmagyart hord kötestén? Salten Felix építészettünkről [Does Budapest wear Hungarian Court Dress

on its Body of Stone? Felix Salten on our Architecture], *Vállalkozók Lapja* 37. no. 7. (16 Feb 1916), 4.

³⁷ GONDA Junior, Béla: A magyar stílus és a közönség [Hungarian Style and Its Audience], *Vállalkozók Lapja* 37. no. 10. (8 Mar 1916), 4–5.; 37. no. 11. (15 Mar 1916), 5.

³⁸ KERTÉSZ, K. Róbert: A nemzeti építőművészetéről [On the National Architecture], *Vállalkozók Lapja* 37. no. 21. (24 May 1916), 4–5; 37. no. 22. (31 May 1916), 5; 37. no. 23. (7 June 1916), 5; *Építő Ipar–Építő Művészet* 40. no. 22. (28 May 1916), 131–132; 40. no. 23. (4 June 1916), 137–139.

³⁹ See the shaping of the bright foyer and its wide vault in the building of the quondam Supreme Court in Budapest (Kúria) designed by Alajos Hauszmann.

⁴⁰ HAUSZMANN, Alajos: *Székhogyaló beszéd, melyet Hauszmann Alajos ny. r. tanár, mint a kir. József-műegyetem választott rektora MDCCCCIII. évi szeptember hó 16-án tartott* [Inaugural Speech as the President of the Technical University Budapest], Budapest, 1903; HAUSZMANN, Alajos: Néhány szó a modern építészetéről [Few Words on the Modern Architecture], *Magyar Mérnök- és Építész-Egylet (MMÉE) Heti Értesítője*, 27. no. 11. (2 March 1908), 101–105.

⁴¹ BAUER, Henrik: Nemzeti építőművészet [National Architecture], *MMÉE Közleményei* 1917. 22–26; NEY, Béla: Nemzeti építőművészet és stílus [National Architecture and Style], *Építő Ipar–Építő Művészet* 41. no. 23. (10 June 1917), 141–143; 41. no. 24. (17 June 1917), 147–149.

⁴² In his writing he mentioned – reflected on Komor's aforesaid comment about the lethargy concerning the national architecture – that in the publications from the beginning of the twentieth century the phrase “national style” came into light several times. Such as in 1905, when the Association “Kisfaludy” circulated a call with the title: “A nemzeti stílus jelentősége és feltételei a művészetekben” [The Significance and Premises of National Style in the Art]. See: *Művészi Ipar* 2. no. 3. (15 Mar 1906), 80; *A Kisfaludy-Társaság Évlapjai* 42. 1907–1908, 141. In 1908 Jenő LECHNER wrote an article which evoked an intensive polemy: Modern és nemzeti építőművészet [Modern and National Architecture], *MMÉE Heti Értesítője* 27. no. 16 (3 May 1908), 165–170.