

On Tamás Tomay's building conversions

Modern transformations

– every act of building is supplementary

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Abstract

Building conversion is a current topic of architecture. While historic architecture treats conversion and rebuilding of older structures as evident, nowadays the fetish of newly built often shadows the value of the intervention. Utmost works of our office are also building conversions. While designing the conversion of the semi-detached house of modernist master Farkas Molnár as my masterwork, I looked at Tamás Tomay's conversions of early modernist houses regularly for reference. This work inspired me to create a subjective selection of Tomay's works. His works were regularly published by him or others in architectural magazines, but the documentation of his complete works are still missing.

The essay focuses on the building conversions of Tamás Tomay's and tries to shed light on the process how each idea is transformed into architecture by him. My own series of interviews with Tamás Tomay are key references. Through the conversations, he made me understand better how and what he thinks about architecture. The essay consists of six chapters: His works are organized under six themes. In each chapter, my writing is supplemented by relevant segments of the interviews. Each chapter is concluded with the description of a selected project of Tomay's.

The selected houses are still occupied by their original residents – for whom the conversion was designed. They understand and appreciate the intellectual surplus that makes their homes unique. Documentation of the existing buildings now, still at their original state, has hence a key importance. This essay is intended as a step towards a monography that dives more deeply into Tomay's unique thinking which dismantles every idea into its essential parts. Because of his analytical thinking of architecture, such a monograph would surely be a valuable asset for educational purposes as well.

1. Thesis: crafting and zeitgeist

The design method of Tamás Tomay is tied to hand drawing, this results an “analog” drawing process. Hand drawing allows him to keep the necessary level of abstraction while designing and documenting. Tomay only produces floor plans and sections, but never any axonometry or perspective drawing. The spatial conceptualization takes place only in his mind.

2. Thesis: modernity and the present

It would be misleading to identify the architecture of Tamás Tomay as simply modernist. He uses the reductive formal vocabulary of pre- and late modernism, successfully creating his own charismatic architectural style. To the modernism, as a movement, technological innovation was both an instrument and a purpose. In Tomay’s case, the real novelty is not related to technology, at all: instead, he transforms the unique setting with its architectural context and the new requirements into an intuitive, artistic collage.

3. Thesis: place and assimilation

The conversions designed by Tamás Tomay are his statements about the site and its context. His designs are informed by, and linked to their very location. They are local (in a way truly Hungarian), as he clearly understands, and is inspired the financial limits of his clients. He observes any project he takes on, with a mixture of experimental and critical attitude.

4. Thesis: unique and universal

Through the small-scale tasks such as residential houses, Tamás Tomay has a chance to experiment with no compromise. The concentrated architectural statements which his buildings become, are hence the result of the scale.

5. Thesis: changing and constant

The silently rebellious, or outcast nature of Tamás Tomay's architecture results from his favoring of beauty over unprecedented. Moreover, it might be more precise in his case to use the term „sincere“ instead of „beauty“.

6. Thesis: who le and sincere

In Tomay's conversions any addition is equally important on both a theoretical and material level. The new composition reached by building further is a new equilibrium, resulting a more closed or complete volume than before. Tomay does not simply add elements to the existing structure, but he transforms the whole building. Contradicting his own interest in transforming an old building into something new, his conversions seem to be complete, lacking any possibility of addition. He does not simply conserve or extend a building, he *finishes* them in his own unique way.

