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THESES OF PHD DISSERTATION



**Teaching architecture at the Budapest University of Technology
between 1945 and 1956
Personal stories of architectural turns**

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I. Introduction

Research topic, objectives

The doctoral research dealt with the history of architectural education at the Budapest University of Technology between 1945 and 1956 in detail, while the history of the period between the two world wars to the extent relevant to the topic. It examines how the gradually changing political, cultural, political and economic environment after 1945 led to changes in the Department of Architecture at the Technical University and, after its separation from the Department of Engineering, in the Faculty of Architecture.

How long could the modern architectural approach, which emerged in the 1920s and later became dominant at the Technical University, be maintained? What changes did the educational reforms of the period bring about in terms of curriculum and organizational structure? How and to what extent did the socialist realist style, imposed on architecture in April 1951, influence architectural education? Were there significant differences between the field of practice and the field of education in terms of response to the stylistic dictate? What kind of student designs were produced during the period under consideration? The research also sought to answer the question: how did the return to modern architecture at the University of Technology take place after the years of socialist realism? What role did the teachers play in the progress that could be tentatively described as a smooth 'transition', based on the findings of an earlier study dealt with the biographies of architects who had gone abroad in 1956?

Research methodology, sources

Based only on the publications in the periodicals of the time, we can conclude that after 1951 the earlier modern architectural education was completely replaced by the socialist realist methodology, which was based on the formal character of Hungarian classicist architecture and required a kind of stylistic design. The periodicals, but also the documents and minutes preserved in archives and public collections, as well as the literature dealing with the history of architectural education at the University of Technology, were not sufficient on their own to answer the questions mentioned above and to substantiate the initial hypotheses.

The research was supported by another important source material: the personal memories of former students. Twenty-six interviews conducted in recent years, supplemented by interviews with architects preserved in the Oral History Archive or previously published, provided details that could not be found in official documents. At the same time, it was essential to constantly compare and evaluate the two sources.

The database of student plans from 1945–1960, the timetables of the period and the database of students who graduated between 1945 and 1960 – the annexes to the dissertation – were also important sources and provided the basis for a number of conclusions.

II. Results of the research

1. Thesis: The research on the antecedents has helped to explore the connections for two reasons. Firstly, the reforms introduced between 1945 and 1956 also included innovations - such as specialization or the creation of the Department of Industrial Architecture – which basic ideas can in most cases be traced back to the period between the two world wars or even earlier.

The changes brought about by the modern movement can be traced back to the late 1920s in the history of architectural education. The year 1930 can be regarded as the most tangible epochal boundary, when the transformation became apparent to the general public in connection with the XIIth International Congress of Architects held in Budapest. The student exhibition at the University of Technology, which was part of the congress, clearly demonstrated the gradual displacement from the historical styles of the past. At the same time, in September 1930, Dezső Hülthl presented his views on the rise of the new architecture in his rector's speech, in which he expressed both his support and his reservations. Both Hülthl and Professor Iván Kotsis, who was most in tune with the modern approach, saw the so-called 'conservative progression' as the direction to follow, allowing the exploration of new ideas, methods and structures, while at the same time protecting students from the extremes of modernism.

The modern movement led to changes in the curriculum and the organization of the department. As a first step, the Department of Design was established in 1922 – officially in 1926 – under the direction of Kotsis, independent of the departments of historical styles, and design courses were increasingly placed at the center of the curriculum. This process culminated in 1945–46, when the Department of Design was strengthened by the addition of two new departments, Public building Design II and III. These were headed by Tibor Kiss and Károly Weichinger, two of the most influential professors of the following decade.

From the academic year 1948/49, however, the Faculty had to respond to the need to provide the necessary supply of engineers for the construction works envisaged in the first five-

year plan, to the socialist realist stylistic turn, to the advance of industrial architecture and prefabrication, and to the close relationship with “industry”, i.e. practical life.

The first two reforms were led by Máté Major, the third by György Kardos and the fourth by László Gábor. In each case, the main aim was to comply with the decisions of the ministries and the Architects' Congresses, but the constant reforms also provided an opportunity to introduce innovations that, thanks to their modernity, are still in use today or are being used again and again. These include the first methods of complex planning, the live, current designing exercises, the development of student design competitions, the involvement of external colleagues – from the design institutes – in consultations and design assessments, the introduction of the final examination, the recognition of the need for opportunities for teachers and students to acquire design practice, attempts at small studio training or the provision of specialist knowledge for students with different interests, the question of the establishment of a master's school.

Most of the innovations mentioned above, introduced in the 1940s and 1950s, had already been conceived by some of the professors of the time in the first two decades of the 20th century, but had not reached the stage of implementation.

Publications related to this thesis: 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10.

Thesis 2: The academic year 1948/49 marked a real epoch in the history of architectural education at the University of Technology, when the first and second academic reforms after the Second World War led to changes in the curriculum and teaching staff, and the politicization of certain subjects. Despite this, the modern approach to teaching architecture at the Technical University continued until the second semester of the 1951/52 academic year.

In the context of the political transformation, the academic year 1948/49 brought several changes in the life of the Department of Architecture, affecting the curriculum on the one hand and the teaching staff on the other. The removal of 'unreliable elements' from the teaching staff began in the autumn of 1948, with the dismissal of Endre Kotsis, and at the same time the arrival of teachers who were reliable from the Party's point of view. Among the latter was Máté Major, who from the autumn of 1948 gave his Introduction to Architecture lecture, which was a completely new addition to the curriculum and was interspersed with politics.

The reform in 1948/49, in line with the figures set out in the first five-year plan – the aim was to train 600 architects a year – introduced a system of classes and specialization for easier management, modified the examination system and began to regulate summer internships.

In 1950, 421 students enrolled for the first semester in the Faculty of Architecture, which became independent of the Faculty of Engineering. The class system with 20-25 students and the role of tutors were further strengthened. The second reform also involved the profiling of the existing and new design departments, as well as the special courses. Construction (civil engineering or B) and design (architectural or A) students were separated from the first year and their curricula were more distinct than before, with the importance of specialized subjects being increased. The profiles and names of the design departments were adapted to the system of the large state design institutes that had been created in the meantime, with the creation of the old-new departments of Residential Building Design, Public Building Design I and II, Industrial Building Design and Urban Design. In connection with the profiling of the departments, extraordinary department meetings were convened, at which the head of each department reported on the work schedule, the results achieved and planned, the progress of the students, the study of Soviet literature and the process of learning Russian.

Around 1950, the student plans, which were still modern and functionalist, were criticized to a greater or lesser extent by the field of fine arts and associated arts, and the wind of the so-called “formalism debate” reached the students through Major's subject, but the dictate of style socialist realism left architectural education practically untouched until the second semester of the academic year of 1951/52. The best evidence of this is the student design material published in 1950 and the Faculty Council meeting of 2 October 1951, at which the results of the so-called Great Architectural Debate of April 1951 were discussed only among the heads of department.

Publications related to this thesis: 7, 11.

Thesis 3: The socialist realist style in architectural education started about a year and a half behind the world of design institutions. The curriculum influenced by new architectural style mainly affected the course of architectural design, i.e. about one third of the students.

The search for a social realist path had already begun in some design institutes in the second half of the 1950s, but the style became binding with the conclusion of the architectural debate in April 1951. The large firms began to create social realist architecture in Hungary in order to be able to present the results at the Congress of Architects in October 1951. The debate made it clear that training at the Faculty of Architecture would also have to be radically transformed, but at the request of the newly elected dean, György Kardos, the students were not informed of developments until after the congress held in October.

In the summer of 1951, new departments were established, new professors were appointed and the teaching of history of architecture was strengthened, but it was a year later, in the summer of 1952, that the special curriculum of the course of architectural design, which was considered to be the basis of designing in socialist realist style, was adopted. It included a completely new group of subjects, based on the Soviet model, which promoted socialist realist design and lasted several semesters. While the design institutes were required to report on their achievements in October 1951, the teachers at the University of Technology were required to do so in September 1952. At the exhibition and debate organized by the Association of Hungarian Architects, the students' designs from the previous semester, which had been cautiously moving towards socialist realist architecture, were presented, but the socialist realist curriculum was only introduced at the same time, in September 1952. The first nine-semester architecture students, who were already following the socialist realist curriculum from the third year onwards, defended their diploma plans in April 1954. At the time when the first conference and general assembly of the AHA (MÉSZ) had already taken stock of the mistakes of the last three years of architecture and tried to give directions for the future.

Publications related to this thesis: 7, 12, 13.

Thesis 4: The methodology, oral history, used in the research showed that, thanks to some teachers, it was possible to introduce the "bracketed" modern architectural approach even during the socialist realist stylistic dictate. Various methods were available to achieve this goal, as reported by former students in their memoirs.

The most obvious way to introduce modern architecture would have been to use projected images, but this was not possible under the style dictation. Some professors therefore held secret lectures and meetings for a small, trusted group of students. It was of course possible to show a few pictures of modern architecture during the lectures, but this had to be done with a negative omen. It was also possible to obtain information on modern architecture from journals and books in the departmental and central libraries.

Some students were allowed to make two plans for submission, one official in socialist realist style and one secret in modern architectural style. A simpler solution was for the professors to concentrate on function and structure in their lectures, leaving the question of style to the assistant lecturers who led the consultations. Many of the latter reinforced in the students a tendency to think of the socialist realist style as a kind of application. In other words, the building, which was essentially modern and functional, should be decorated with the necessary ornamentation at the end of the design. At the same time, they pointed the way to another avenue, the classicist modern architecture of the Nordic countries, for which there was also a considerable literature available in the departmental libraries thanks to the so-called “Danish Group”.

There was also the vernacular, urban and industrial architecture, where there were no great expectations of style to begin with. In connection to this engineering students (B), who had little access to the socialist realist curriculum, were in most cases given a diploma project on industrial or agricultural themes.

Publications related to this thesis: 1, 2, 8, 12, 13, 14.

Thesis 5: The instructor-designer attitude, which was present in the background during the socialist realist period and went beyond stylistic issues, was a guarantee that quality designs would be produced on the drawing boards of teachers and students during the stylistic dictation. It also ensured a smooth and almost immediate return to modernity in architectural education after the new turn in 1954-55, earlier than in practice.

The AHA (MÉSZ) conference and general assembly in March 1954, and then Khrushchev's speech in December 1954, had an impact not only on the architectural profession, but also on education. Moreover, it was easier to react to the new turnaround at the Technical University, where

the stakes were lower and no socialist realist buildings were under construction. As a result, from the second half of the academic year 1954/55 onwards, the strict socialist realist designs of the Faculty of Architecture began to disappear, slowly giving way to transitional styles that led back to modern architecture, as is evidenced by the surviving student diploma projects and the associated minutes.

Having learned the lessons of the AHA (MÉSZ) conference and Khrushchev's speech, the Technical University, under the leadership of Dean László Gábor, began to develop a new, stable curriculum. As the name suggests, the faculty wanted to think in a long-term solution, rather than the alternating reforms of the past. The stable curriculum brought the two specializations closer together again, on the one hand by separating their courses only from the seventh semester, and on the other hand by eliminating the big differences in the timetables of the last year and a half. The socialist realist subject group was removed from the curriculum of that course which was consciously called design and not architectural.

The fourth reform, which was quickly implemented, meant that no classes really benefited fully from the socialist realist curriculum, but the dictates of style still left their mark on the studies of several students. Nevertheless, the modernist approach in the background made it easy for them to return to or switch to a more modern architecture.

As a result of this research, a better understanding of the period between the two world wars has led to the outlining of a concept or principle that was able to control the changes brought about by the modern movement and which, strengthened in the 1940s, proved to be authoritative during the dictation of style as well.

In short, the principle of “conservative progression” or “meaningful simplicity” was able to protect students from extremes during their studies, whether they were following a fashion trend or a style dictated from above. Rather than necessarily following current trends, the lecturers felt that it was more important to equip future architects with the basic knowledge that would provide a solid starting point for any design task. From a certain point of view, this may have seemed to leave no room for imagination or the most modern form and structure, but there was a reason for this.

By adopting a cross-period approach, lecturers in the socialist realist period warned students against slavish adherence to a prescribed style and instead sought to highlight functional, technical and economic problems that went beyond stylistic issues. This is borne out not only by the recollections of former students, but also by the criticism in diploma project reports and the questions posed by the committee, which generally questioned the legitimacy of a particular motif

chosen for the socialist realist style. One or two years later, in the diploma projects defended in the academic year 1956/57, the young designers had to justify the solutions already known from modernism.

This “conservative progression” in architectural education can be seen as a tradition that developed in the second half of the 1920s in response to the modern movement, and which, thanks to the master-student relationship, has been passed on for many decades and is perhaps still a characteristic of university architectural education.

Publications related to the thesis: 5, 14, 15

List of publications related to the theses:

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