

***Motherland and Progress. Hungarian Architecture and Design 1800-1900.***

**József Sisa (ed.), translated by Stephen Kane. Birkhäuser, 2016. 996 pp., 767**

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Budapest's spectacular architectural presence is, in large part, a legacy of Hungary's nineteenth-century development from a subordinate region of the Habsburg Empire to an equal partner in the Dual Monarchy after 1867. Ideological ideas of 'progress' and nation-building, bound up with political, economic and socio-cultural development, found their most powerful material expression in the urban fabric of the capital which, according to the book's editor József Sisa, 'rose from slumbering provincialism to international brilliance within a hundred years' (11).

Sisa is the leading authority on Hungarian nineteenth-century architectural history and this impressive 1000-page tome is the culmination of years of research. Published originally in Hungarian and now admirably translated by Stephen Kane, this is a major contribution to the field. International scholarly coverage of Hungarian architecture and design has always been rather patchy, with some strong studies of the country's vibrant national style developments at the turn of the twentieth century, but significant gaps elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> For non-Hungarian readers, therefore, this book is an invaluable resource, offering unparalleled access to a vast, well-written and meticulously assembled corpus of material covering the whole nineteenth century. Sisa is to be commended for his editorial dexterity in marshalling the work of his sixteen co-writers, as well as for his own substantial authorial contributions.

Topics range from major public and residential buildings to church, synagogue and palace architecture, town planning, spas, parks and gardens, industrial architecture and monument restoration. Design is treated primarily as it relates to architecture. Thus each section of the book ends with subsidiary discussions of trends in furniture making, interior design, building decoration, ironwork and ‘material culture’ (the latter a catch-all term for minor luxury goods such as porcelain, silver, glass, costume and bookbinding). As with architecture, the examples offered are primarily the ‘*pièces de résistance*’ of high culture (409); there is little analysis of popular culture and the peasant appears only as a subject of romantic iconography or in terms of upper class appropriation of vernacular costume as a form of passive resistance to Austrian rule (418-19). While one might wish for a more reflective awareness of critical and inclusive approaches to design history (for example, a focus on gender, race, popular media or transnational exchange),<sup>2</sup> there is still much here to interest the design historian, helpfully framed by introductory essays on Hungarian art historiography and the state of research into nineteenth-century applied arts.

In its choice of title, borrowed from the motto of nineteenth-century Hungarian reformers, *Motherland and Progress* openly states its teleological premises, mapping progress to the rise of national ideals: ‘following the Compromise and the unification of the city in 1873, [Budapest] grew into a dazzling, world-class metropolis within a single generation’ (11). ‘Progress’ is also implicit in the book’s periodization, structured into three stylistically-determined blocks: Neo-Classicism (1800-1840), Romanticism (1840-1870) and a monumental 400-page survey of Historicism (1870-1900). Here the narrative reaches a climax in the triumphant historicism of the pavilions and monuments of the 1896 Hungarian Millennial Celebrations. Among

these, the Museum of Applied Arts by Ödön Lechner and Gyula Pártos proposed a creative new idiom for moving beyond historicism and crafting a distinctive modern style for the ‘Motherland’. It is a fitting final work for a book that views the relationship between architecture and design primarily in Semperian terms: the striking, polychromatic patterns of the museum’s roof use Zsolnay pyrogranite tiles to evoke folk textiles in a celebration of ornament as symbolic *Bekleidung* (dressing).

The rather traditional, style-based approach to periodization, which contrasts with the wider tendency to frame Habsburg nineteenth-century developments within key political turning points,<sup>3</sup> is perhaps understandable in the context of the broader project of which this book is a part: the endeavour by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences since the 1970s to produce a comprehensive, multi-volume series of handbooks of Hungarian art.<sup>4</sup> The original Hungarian version of Sisa’s book was published in 2013; since then, political developments have made the reader, if not slightly wary, then at least hopeful of a degree of critical reflection on the cultural politics surrounding terms like ‘Motherland’ and ‘progress’. Architecture and design are, after all, at their most political when harnessed to nation-building, yet the book’s structure and approach carefully neutralise such issues. For example, although analysing material from across the lands that geographically made up Greater Hungary (comprising parts of present-day Serbia, Croatia, Slovakia and Romania), the discussion does not engage with the sensitive matter of cultural representation by the ethnically diverse minorities, then under pressure from the Magyarization of the national project.

One hopes, therefore, that this weighty opus will act as a starting point for new critical assessments of the relationship between architecture, design, style and the ideological projects of nation-building. With its excellent illustrations, rich bibliography, detailed people and place indexes and helpful case studies of individual buildings, Sisa's impressive work will most certainly serve as the core reference point in the field for years to come.

Shona Kallestrup

Associate Lecturer, School of Art History, University of St Andrews

Senior Research Fellow, New Europe College, Bucharest

sk61@st-andrews.ac.uk

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the Hungarian section in J.-Y. Andrieux, F. Chevallier & A. Kervanto Nevanlinna (eds.), *Idée nationale et architecture en Europe 1860-1919* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006), or monographs on key turn-of-the-century architects: Z. Jékely, *Ödön Lechner in Context* (Budapest: Museum of Applied Arts, 2015); A. Lambrichs, *József Vágó: un architecte hongrois dans la tourmente européenne*, (Brussels, Archives d'architecture moderne, 2003). Sisa, together with the late Dora Wiebenson, produced the first major English-language survey of Hungarian architecture: *The Architecture of Historic Hungary*, (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> As demonstrated by R. Houze in her discussions of gender in *Textiles, Fashion, and Design Reform in Austria-Hungary Before the First World War. Principles of Dress*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); or by the investigations of transnational interaction in G. Ernyey (ed.), *Britain and Hungary: Contacts in Architecture, Design, Art and Theory During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 3 vols. (Budapest: Hungarian University of Craft and Design, 1999-2005).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example A. Moravánsky's *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918*, (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1998), or A. Alofsin, *When Buildings Speak: Architecture as Language in the Habsburg Empire and Its Aftermath, 1867-1933* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Even Sisa and Wiebenson's 1998 book structured its chapters according to the caesurae of the 1848 Revolution and 1918 Imperial collapse.

<sup>4</sup> The different volumes of the project are discussed by Béla Kerékgyártó in his review of Sisa's book for the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 77, no. 2 (June 2018): 224-6.