

Consensus and Lack of Consensus in the Quest for National Style

Revisiting Five Key Aspects of the Hungarian and Romanian Contexts

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Abstract. The paper examines the contested landscapes of national architectural styles in Hungary and Romania, highlighting their divergent approaches. While Hungary constantly struggled with a lack of consensus on its national architectural identity, characterised by conflicting views on originality versus reception, Romania had more successfully established a national style through synthesising historical and local elements. Hungarian architects explicitly grappled with the influence of external models without achieving unity, leading to ongoing debates about their identity. In contrast, Romanian architecture after years of tergiversation emerged from clearer historical lineages and consensus, effectively integrating vernacular roots with the premises of modernity. This study illuminates how historical context, cultural debates, and a changing demand for a national idiom shape the quest for identity mediation, revealing the distinct paths taken by Hungarian and Romanian architects.

Keywords: national style in architecture, Hungary, Romania, consensus, supply and demand, originality vs. reception

Introduction

If we adopt the definition that architecture qualifies as an adequate instrument of national self-expression only when it is recognised as such by its users and recipients, we render our task exceedingly complex. Nevertheless, at present, we have no better criterion for determining what does and does not count as national architecture. These communities are, of course, diverse and subject to change over time. In twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe, repeated political and economic regime changes further complicate the issue.

Taking these factors into account, it is striking how limited the consensus was—within communities linked to the Hungarian state—or favouring Hungarian culture and language use—regarding the principles and sources of national architecture and, ultimately, the appearance of buildings. This study seeks to assemble selected elements from the extensive primary and secondary literature on the subject and to compare them with the conditions in interwar Romania, a context that was likewise not free of controversy but displayed more balanced tendencies overall.

As an introduction, the paper clarifies its own theoretical premises, five in number: that the principles underlying the creation of a national style are scientific in nature; that they reflect on the universalist versus nationalist dilemma; that they can often be revealed only through bottom-up analysis; that they strive to employ universal laws in order to articulate regional meanings; and they operate according to market principles, following the logic of supply and demand. This also implies the necessity of meeting both internal and external expectations. These factors make the project of establishing a national visual culture particularly challenging and highly dependent on the interplay between a state's *Realpolitik* and the quality of its artistic education, not to mention the specific construction tasks. The latter constrains the hands of both supporters and opponents of a national language of form far more than in other fields, such as the fine arts.

With regard to specifically Hungarian architectural aspirations, neither contemporaries nor later critics have often arrived at a unified position. Even when such consensus appeared to emerge, statements that sought to codify it quickly became entangled in self-contradiction. An illustrative example is provided by Ákos Moravánszky in his selection of emblematic twentieth-century edifices from Hungary. He cites and comments on a pivotal idea put forward by a leading figure of interwar Hungarian cultural politics and heritage management:

“Tibor Gerevich, who in 1939 identified disciplined massing, a calm and light sense of rhythm, noble restraint, and formal balance as the essential characteristics of Hungarian architecture, was fully aware that these very qualities scarcely applied to the works of those actively seeking a distinct national style.”¹

One may, of course, question the extent to which the architects documenting the search for a Hungarian national style displayed monumental tendencies. It would, however, be difficult to claim that Ödön Lechner's most significant Budapest works from the perspective of a national architectural idiom—such as the Museum of

1 Moravánszky, “Tíz kanonikus épület,” 118. Its host volume itself constitutes one of the most recent pieces of evidence attesting to the continued relevance of debates in Hungary concerning architecture instrumentalised for the purposes of identity politics.

Applied Arts, the Saint Ladislaus parish of Kőbánya, the Geological Institute, and the Postal Savings Bank—sought to shape their surroundings through sober proportions and a human scale. Several major prewar investment projects fell victim to simplification during the interwar period, in the spirit of a more discreet and restrained worldview. Yet these were generally buildings that may also be interpreted as manifestos of early or proto-modernist architects working in broad, emphatic strokes—such as Aladár Árkay's Villa Babocsay (1910), which by the 1920s had attracted such criticism that its owner was compelled to alter its general outlook (Figure 1).²

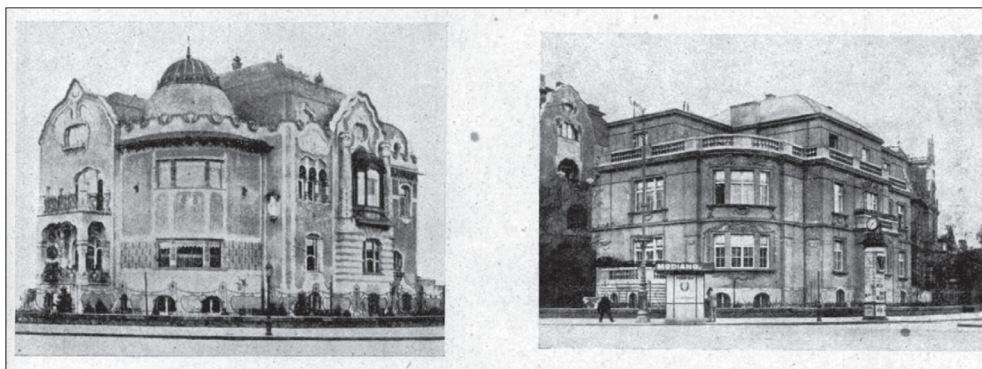


Figure 1 The Villa Babocsay (129 Andrásy út, Budapest): its 1910 state (architect: Aladár Árkay) and its 1927 remodelling (architect: Lajos Kozma)
Source: *A Magyar Mérnök- és Építész-Egylet Közlönye*, 31 July 1927, 180 and 183.

It is similarly difficult to discern moderation and formal balance as defining features in certain expressive examples of Hungarian Neo-Baroque architecture from the Horthy period. Doubts persist even when examining more reflective and critical examples, such as Lajos Kozma's Villa Kner (1925) (Figure 2), which offers an ironic inversion of the state-preferred Neo-Baroque monumentalism. If we turn to the monumental sculpture of national self-expression, to painting in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and to the related shaping of architectural space, the assessment of the issue becomes increasingly problematic. Of Gyula Rimanóczy's Postal Administration Building (1939), even a contemporary critic remarked that it was "difficult to judge"³—and this without yet mentioning its far from restrained sculptural decorations rooted in Hungarian mythology, or its now-lost ceiling fresco depicting the governor and celebrating, in explicit terms, contemporary diplomatic successes and the country's territorial expansion (Figure 3a–b).

2 See: *A Magyar Mérnök- és Építész-Egylet Közlönye*, 31 July 1927, 175–83. It serves as a good example for summarising the change in taste and its consequences.

3 *Tér és Forma*, vol. XIV nr. 4 (1941): 48.

Gerevich's view was shared by others in his time. The 1943 monograph on classicism by Anna Zádor and Jenő Rados⁴—one of the earliest examples of a monographic treatment of a seemingly forgotten and superseded architectural style—spoke approvingly of the art historian's thesis. Indeed, this calm, measured, and harmonious articulation of form accurately characterises Neo-Classical architecture; yet it can only be generalised if Neo-Classicism is accepted as the most adequate expression of Hungarian national identity. Since certain Hungarian theorists of Neo-Classicism played an active role in the debates of the 1950s aimed at the Stalinisation of Hungarian art,⁵ it was by no means easy to secure such a consensual position for the style in question—nor, understandably, did this effort succeed. How could one perceived and accepted Neo-Classicism in the 1950s as the appropriate historical style that simultaneously stood in opposition equally to Lechner, the Italian-trained monumentalists from the 1930s, and the international modernists from the same age?

The problem, of course, is that a similarly complex web of conflicts can be reconstructed at numerous points in the history of Hungarian architecture—even if this complexity also points to the existence of diverse and highly significant international networks of professional and academic exchange.⁶

Five aspects of examining architecture that expresses national identity

In recent years, the scholarly literature addressing the problems of national style movements instrumentalised for the purposes of empire- and nation-building has



Figure 2 A front elevation volute of the Kner Villa (1925, architect: Lajos Kozma), shown in a photograph taken after the World War II

Source: Határ Győző Municipal Library, Gyomaendrőd.

4 Zádor and Rados, *A klasszicizmus építészete Magyarországon*, 16.

5 See for more: Moravánszky, "The Specificity of Architecture."

6 Recently, attention has been drawn to the fact that during the construction of Hungarian socialist realism, a not insignificant international network was also activated. Anderson, *Against CIAM*.

grown exponentially.⁷ This expansion has been motivated by several factors beyond the renewed effort to expose the obsolescence of state formations that were not necessarily receptive to progressive change and that, in part, collapsed at the end of World War I.

One significant impetus has been the recognition that the distinctive ‘national’ styles developed in parallel across Europe from the mid-nineteenth century onward—paradoxical as it may initially seem—simultaneously advanced the causes of modernisation and nationalism. The search for and construction of a national style thus constituted a modern project in its own right, no less so than artistic movements grounded in abstraction, such as Constructivism or the later tendencies of so-called ‘Concrete’ art.

Another crucial consideration is the particular circumstance that the visual and stylistic searches undertaken by imperial formations and by increasingly assertive nation-state movements proceeded in strikingly similar ways, both deriving from the identity-political instrumentalisation of a dominant culture. In such cases, it becomes difficult to draw a clear distinction between progressive–modern and conservative–tradition-oriented stylistic preferences, since in each instance the objective was the consolidation of an ‘identity’ construed within relatively broad and flexible boundaries.⁸

7 See, in this regard, Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History*, as well as the activities of the ERC-research group he led at Masaryk University, CRAACE (Continuity and Rupture: Art and Architecture in Central Europe 1918–1939).

The analysis of the Austro-Hungarian context constitutes only one aspect of this broader inquiry, yet it is an especially instructive one. For a long time, a major influence in this field was the widely translated and highly influential book by Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. The central thesis of the volume was that the ‘early’ modernist or proto-modern artistic movements should primarily be understood as the terrain of a growing urban middle class composed of actors—often of Jewish and Slavic origin—who were excluded from symbolic power and only partially integrated into the political order.

Within the artistic sphere, a related thesis was echoed in the notion of Art Nouveau and Secession as an urban, ‘Jewish’ style, in which references to an alleged Eastern origin were less significant than visual elements expressing a dual identity shaped by partial integration—marked by humor and a grotesque expressivity. See, in this relation: Klein, “Secession, ‘un goût juif’?” Hungarian version in *Múlt és Jövő* 4 (2008): 5–33.

In the Hungarian context, a notable recent example of this approach is provided by the doctoral dissertation of Veress, *Nemzetépítők*.

8 For example, Cosmin Minea has recently demonstrated, in the case of Ion Mincu—revered as the founding figure of the Romanian national style—that the emblematic figure of Romanian national romanticism sought to incorporate respect for tradition into the formation of a national style in such a way that it could simultaneously integrate architects receptive to modernisation and to modern functional solutions. See: Minea, “Beyond National Style.”

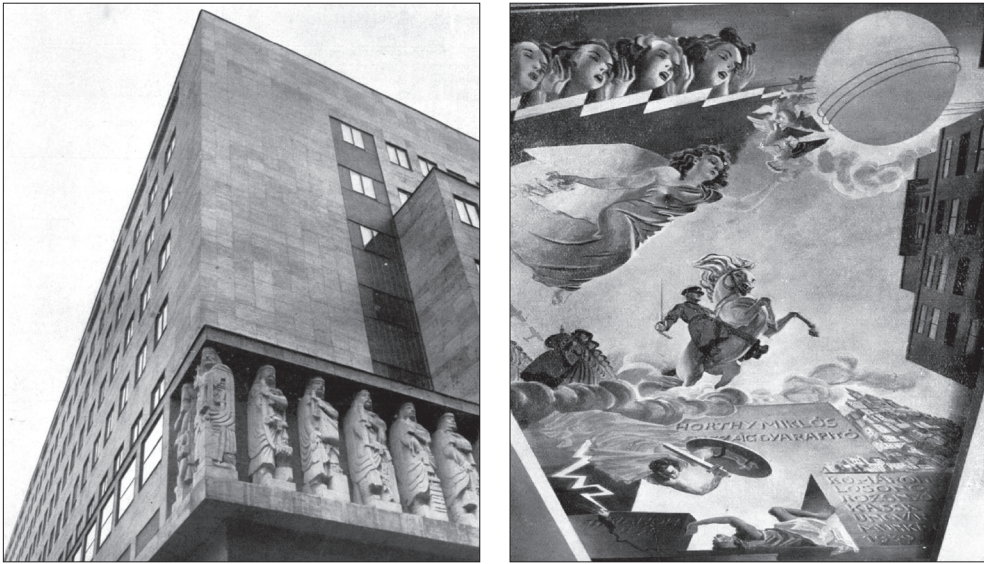


Figure 3a–b Conflicting visual markers: The Postal Administration Palace (75–81 Dob utca, Budapest, 1939; architects: Gyula Rimanóczy, Lajos Hidasi, and Imre Papp): (a) corner view of the building; (b) the former ceiling fresco of the entrance hall depicting Governor Horthy as the “realm-expander”

Source: *Tér és Forma*, 1941/4, 53 and 57.

We know that many projects of modernisation enjoyed state support⁹ even prior to the establishment of modern twentieth-century nation-states, or at the very moment of their emergence. It has also become increasingly evident that the embrace of folk or vernacular architecture was informed by the recognition that vernacular building practices—through their rational use of materials and structural solutions—could be aligned with functionalism and, ultimately, with modernism itself.¹⁰

9 See: Van Heerde, *Staat und Kunst*. One of the book’s major innovations was to demonstrate that, despite their frequent complaints, representatives of the Viennese Secession received numerous state commissions. It also showed that Austrian imperial identity politics regarded the emphasis on ‘internationalism’ as a virtue, promoting geometrisation, abstraction as a repertoire and a mode of representation drawing on abstracted and classical mythological motifs intended to foreground universal intelligibility. The receptivity to geometrising and abstraction-based so-called ‘form art’ (*Formkunst*)—as others have likewise observed—owed a great deal to the Austro-Hungarian public education system, which placed considerable emphasis on the teaching of descriptive geometry. See, in this regard, Husslein-Arco and Klee, eds, *Kubismus, Konstruktivismus, Formkunst*. The volume is, in fact, the catalogue of the highly successful exhibition from the same year held at the Belvedere in Vienna.

10 During the interwar period, this idea emerged with increasing frequency among proponents of vernacular-inspired architecture. See, for example, Borbíró, “Bauerarchitektur.” One of the earliest architects of internationally acknowledged stature in the historiography of modernism

Such insights, however, often fell victim to interpretations that cast the progressive/reactionary distinction as a rigid dichotomy. They were likewise subordinated to a historiographical strategy that treated the end of World War I as a decisive rupture, one that ostensibly revealed who was more, and who was less open—primarily in political terms—to the direction of progress.¹¹ Artistic ‘progressivism’ or ‘reaction’ thereby came to function many times as the mirror image of political openness or closure.¹² In order to signal that this analytical framework is not merely relevant but also far from binary—indeed, highly reflective and diverse—we would like briefly to touch upon five questions.

1. Scientific outlook

One of the less frequently emphasised yet essential aspects of the problem of national architectures is their markedly ‘scientific’ character, consciously grounded in the natural-scientific foundations of architecture as the art of construction. In the Hungarian context, this situation is well illustrated by the 1852 London lecture of Imre Henszlmann, in which he argued¹³ that the Gothic style ought to be accorded primacy over other styles because it could be demonstrated—mathematically and from an engineering perspective—to surpass them.

According to Henszlmann, the principle of Gothic construction was both “mathematical and organic.” It was in this style, he maintained, that one could most readily determine whether something merely imitated certain elements at the level of ornamentation or was capable—through the design of load-bearing structures—of securing a style’s professional and structural integrity. A given constellation of stylistic elements could thus form a homogeneous whole only if it were harmonised in an engineerically original manner, thereby guaranteeing a level of quality that might

to emphasise the affinity between vernacular and modern architecture—particularly with regard to their rationality and sensitivity to environmental context—was Josef Hoffmann, “Architektonisches von der Insel Capri.” For further discussion of this issue, see Hausmann and Zuh, “Kocka vagy modern?”

- 11 János Bonta. Tanulások és prognózis [Lesson and Prognosis]. In *Új építészet, új társadalom 1945–1978*, edited by Máté Major and Judit Osskó, 181–87. Budapest: Corvina, 1960.
- 12 Far less often does one encounter an account that lays bare the paradox of modernism fusing, for a time, the means-end rationalism of technological progress with the anti-materialist undercurrents of irrationalist ideology. See: Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*.
- 13 Cp., for example, Antal Tasner’s summary of Henszlmann’s lecture delivered at the Royal Institute of British Architects, originally published in *Akadémiai Értesítő* (1852, XII/2), and later republished in Anna Zádor’s “Henszlmann Imre építészetelmélete és a ‘gótizálás’ kialakulása,” especially 218–22. Important contextual contributions to the theoretical background of the doctrine concerning the primacy of styles grounded in original natural-scientific insights are likewise provided in Zádor’s paper. See also in this issue: Papp, “»Such a Style«,” 116–19.

cast the specific characteristics of a region or a state in a positive light. Scientifically demonstrable quality, in this sense, served not only professional standards but also the identity-political ambitions of the state.

2. The role of universal laws

This issue partly derives from the preceding considerations. Phenomena that can be understood through general laws are more likely to achieve universal intelligibility—that is, to be comprehensible beyond the boundaries of any specific state or nation—and consequently possess a greater potential to elucidate and accentuate distinct local or regional characteristics. When the intellectual—and later state-centred—aspirations of Prague invested in geometrising abstraction and in the Cubist expressivity that emerged from it, they effectively aligned themselves with a language of form that was, in principle, accessible to all. The universal intelligibility of abstraction had already constituted an important field of inquiry for the anti-nationalist art historians and theorists of the *fin de siècle*, such as Alois Riegl and Max Dvořák. Riegl emphasised this dimension in his university lectures just as Otto Wagner had done earlier in his theoretical writings.

Czech architects proved particularly adept at mobilising these insights in order to assert the universal validity of their democratic national aspirations and, through this universalism, to foreground the distinctive—yet positively construed—features of a new state that was, in geographical and historical terms, quite precisely delimited.

3. The market as a decisive factor

The universally intelligible and scientifically grounded character of national stylistic endeavours could also contribute to making individual national traits recognisable in both inland and international markets. In the relationship between patron and architect, the commissioner's demands are often aligned with the complexities of identity formation and representation. These dynamics elevate the process of mediation to a more intricate level, where notions of national 'character' must be articulated for a broader—and at times less directly engaged—audience beyond the immediate cultural sphere.

National architectural characteristics, initially developed experimentally and later in an increasingly codified manner, played a particularly important role with the resurgence of world exhibitions in the second half of the nineteenth century, enabling states to project themselves onto economic, touristic, and ideological markets. Stylistic elements that are distinctive and consistently applied—even in structural solutions—are always more easily recognisable than those relying solely

on ornamental devices. This helps explain the success of Romanian pavilions, for example, which promoted a Romanian national style by skilfully combining carefully highlighted stylistic elements with increasingly rationalised structural solutions over several decades. It is likewise no coincidence that the Hungarian pavilion in the Giardini, Venice, remained successful despite various adversities, owing to its integration of modern structural techniques with regionally determined ornamentation—outperforming many world exhibition buildings that presented more heterogeneous concepts.¹⁴ Returning to the Hungarian examples, it is also telling how unsuccessful the so-called ‘Hungarian order’ of Johann Nepomuk Schauf from the late eighteenth century proved to be: a design that, while referencing classical models, was consistently inapplicable in terms of motifs and offered nothing new in structural solutions.¹⁵

4. The importance of bottom-up nationalism

Historical theories of nationalism—including summaries in identity politics—are predominantly constructivist, emphasising that national identities were not simply discovered but consciously constructed. Nevertheless, such approaches often overlook the fact that national communities are only partially shaped by top-down (etatist or political) initiatives. After all, they still depend on the participation of social actors—what one might describe in aesthetic terms as the ‘receptive contribution’ of the audience.¹⁶ In the case of the audience’s contribution, there is no need to invoke any complex aesthetic category or theory. This is not a question of the beautiful or the sublime, and even the social distribution of taste only becomes relevant in a secondary sense.

Let us consider a simple, though hypothetical, example: a Slovak butcher from the Great Hungarian Plain sends all three of his sons to serve in the Austro-Hungarian army on the Eastern Front during World War I, where they are highly likely to fall at the fortress of Przemyśl. We can also consider two concrete, personalised examples.

14 It is further instructive to compare how consistently the so-called Neo-Romanian style (or Romanian national style) was applied at various international economic and artistic exhibitions from 1890 to 1940, and how consistently Hungarian pavilions were able to adhere to similar principles during the same period. By contrast, the Hungarian pavilion in Venice demonstrates how certain visual characteristics have allowed it to remain recognisable over the past century, despite modifications to some of its basic features.

15 Pál Ligeti aptly remarked in his 1929 response article: “[...] whoever consciously seeks to be Hungarian will receive only a contrived Hungarian-ness, not an instinctive sense of being Hungarian.” In a footnote, he added: “See, for example, János Schauf’s strikingly ridiculous national order of columns from 1790.” Ligeti, “Felelet Vámos Ferenc cikkére,” 117.

16 A particularly clear formulation of this idea is provided by Eric J. Hobsbawm in his classic work, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, especially 9–12.

In one, a philosophy professor from Göttingen of Jewish origin but already converted to the Evangelical faith has two sons who voluntarily enlist in the German Imperial Army. While the father even offers his personal collection of astronomical lenses to support the military effort, one of his sons falls at Verdun.¹⁷ In the other example, the son of a postal officer with German ancestry from inner Transylvania, who works as an arts and technical specialist researching Hungarian national architecture, decides at the end of World War I to investigate the question of 'Eastern origins' in architecture and urban planning in the capital of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁸

Similar cases abound when reading twentieth-century family histories. It is often difficult to understand what motivates these individuals to voluntarily undertake actions—sometimes even endangering the unity of their own families—under historically and ideologically fraught circumstances, particularly when their ancestry does not necessarily predetermine such behaviour. This kind of motivation does not always stem from nationalist seduction, and it is hard to imagine it arising purely out of coercion over the long term. One possible explanation is to take seriously the processes in which the state, on the supply side, is able to present virtues to which its citizens on the demand side are receptive and in which they are willing to participate. Strengthening and consolidating the middle class is always a prominently state-led project, which can play a relevant role in nation-building by civilisational means, encouraging participation even from those outside the dominant culture.

Such initiatives do not always achieve their intended goals, but, as many have increasingly pointed out, the accelerated social development at the end of the nineteenth century cannot be explained primarily by the growing nationalism of social actors thinking in terms of nation-states, nor by the decline of imperial governance. In Central and Eastern Europe, even at the end of the imperial era, and in parallel with the emergence of nation-states, it was well understood that more people were willing to participate in initiatives such as the development of public and higher education, the rapid reform of transportation infrastructure, or the communicative processes generated by the innovative potential of new technologies (for example, the dissemination of affordable, high-quality reproduced materials) than those unwilling to abide by such evolutions.¹⁹

This is followed—and almost invariably followed—by the question of the social

17 Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) was born in Prostejov (formerly Prossnitz) and, after studying in Vienna, held professorships in Göttingen and Freiburg. He was the founder of the phenomenological movement in twentieth-century philosophy and one of the most influential continental thinkers of the twentieth century.

18 This refers to the book resulting from Károly Kós 1917 scholarship in Constantinople. See: Kós *Sztambul. Várostörténet és architektúra*.

19 Cp. Rampley, *Myths of Modernism*.

distribution of taste. In parallel with the accessibility of higher education programs involved in the production of visual outputs—that is, faculties of fine arts, applied arts, and architecture—a middle-class mass develops that increasingly understands and debates the social and economic roles of artistic products. In doing so, it contributes to the evolution of public taste, whatever directions that may take. From a sociological perspective, this also renders members of society more receptive to visual, and thus architectural, meanings, both in terms of their reception and, through critical engagement, their dissemination.

5. Overcoming the nationalist/universalist dichotomy

For any national architecture, the crucial point is neither the degree to which it is nationalist—that is, how strongly it invests in the central importance of its own ethnic group or state—nor how universalist it is, in terms of believing in the common foundations for communication and cooperation between the people and the state. It is also not always decisive to ask to what extent a given state apparatus upholds the importance of historical roots, or conversely, resists them. The main argument is that, when we consider competing regional ideologies, they generally operate in very similar directions. Namely toward legitimising their own statehood, and only secondarily invoke the intellectual and ideological supplies of internationalism. Even state-supported international modernist tendencies often aimed at the same goal: publicly emphasising the significance of a particular administrative-state framework and prioritising a specific worldview. Indeed, in both the First Czechoslovak Republic and the First German (Weimar) Republic, the promotion of international modernity was as politically charged as movements such as Cubism or Expressionism. In other words, international modernism had—and continues to have—an identity-political function; moreover, it was employed as an ideological tool to modernise regions deemed backward, thereby asserting a form of cultural superiority.²⁰

The central question, therefore, is much more about the extent to which political nation-building efforts were able to succeed in a context of intense regional competition. In certain cases, this competitive environment was so strong that the leadership of a given state had little choice but to follow strategies similar to those of its neighbours. Moreover, it is not certain that they had significant leeway in integrating minorities or disseminating a sense of communal identity. For example, before 1914, Romanian, Hungarian, and Serbian strategies were strikingly similar: to identify powerful symbols, construct a coherent ideological and visual identity from them, and simultaneously encourage participation through development initiatives.

20 Cp. Hnídková, ed., *A Spirit at Work*.

In summary, the five aspects discussed may be articulated as follows. First, national architecture is concerned with identity formation grounded in both scientific and emotional foundations. Second, it must communicate intelligible elements and coherent messages, thereby rendering the buildings it produces legible, even if not always immediately accessible. Third, it establishes a structured arena for debates surrounding marketability, in which recognisability and identifiability emerge as central criteria. Fourth, it acknowledges that nationalism is only partially constructed through top-down processes. Fifth, it recognises that state strategies reinforce the identity-political dimension embodied in new forms of architecture, including in contexts where such dynamics have not traditionally been prominent. This development reflects an adaptation to conditions of intensified regional competition.

Towards a case study: Hungary and the dilemmas of adopting a new national style

One important feature of the Hungarian context is that, although the difficulty of accepting innovative ideas is a universal characteristic within any existing system, the specific historical situation and the multitude of changes in *Realpolitik* were not conducive to the consolidation of new styles.

With regard to the distinctive language of form expressing Hungarian national identity, debates had already taken place in Hungary during the nineteenth century without reaching any substantive consensus. As Gábor György Papp recently remarked in his book:

“If we are to answer the question posed in the title (was there a Hungarian architectural style in the nineteenth century?) [...] we must respond that there was not. There were attempts and proposals aimed at creating one, but these mostly offered more or less concrete suggestions as to what Hungarian architecture could be [...].”²¹

However, this type of uncertainty generally tended to be passed on over time. Since a significant portion of members of the Hungarian artistic milieu—who before World War I had demonstrated a very high level of architectural and material culture²²—participated in some capacity in the controversially judged 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, the aftermath of the war and the associated defeat effectively split the artistic, and consequently the architectural, public sphere from the outset.²³

21 Papp, *Volt-e magyar építészeti stílus a 19. században?*, 167.

22 As a representative compendium, see: Kohmoto, Csekey, and Hadik, eds, *Panorama*.

23 Merényi, *A magyar építészet*, 23.

However, the roots of this type of division run much deeper. They can be traced back to around 1902, when Gyula Wlassics, Hungarian Minister of Public Education and Culture, delivered a parliamentary speech that not only sparked a debate but also solidified the fault lines that would come to characterise many areas of Hungarian intellectual life for the long term. A striking example of this is the debate surrounding distinctly Hungarian philosophical thought, which closely resembles the dilemmas appearing in architectural discourse. The arguments typically present mutually exclusive disjunctions: originality *or* imitation and reception, with a third alternative rarely offered. The resulting diagnosis is strikingly similar in both cases: in historical terms, neither a Hungarian philosophy²⁴ nor a Hungarian architectural idiom²⁵ exists.

We can speak of the copying and reception of Western trends, but not of original achievements. If one wants to produce works that nevertheless reflect such national characteristics, they must be consciously created—assembled, as it were—from elements that minimise the possibility of mere reception or imitation, while emphasising their original features. When, later, the styles created by architects and cultural actors are compared with styles that have developed organically from tradition, the historical actors remain caught in the same dilemma. The either-or question only serves to polarise the debate further.

Many have argued that Gyula Wlassics's parliamentary speech on 17 April 1902 played a significant role in the rapid decline of Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture, was considered as a national style by its founder, Ödön Lechner, was called as 'szecessziós stílus' (Secessionist style) by Wlassics, and which lasted only about fifteen to seventeen²⁶ years. The speech caused a considerable stir and marked the beginning of both the rejection of Art Nouveau and the narrative of Ödön Lechner's decline. Indeed, for Lechner's followers, it was even perceived as one of the symptomatic manifestations of contemporary Hungarian antisemitism.²⁷

24 See for more: Percz, "Hungary, philosophy."

25 This was further reinforced by Ödön Lechner's programmatic essay, "A magyar formanyelv nem volt, hanem lesz." The text was also published separately in the same year.

26 If we consider that Victor Horta, arguably the first architect of Art Nouveau, already employed a re-classicising vocabulary on the façade of the Hôtel Max Hallet, completed in 1906, we can conclude that this period did not last any longer elsewhere either.

27 See Klein, "Secession: un goût juif?" In discussing Wlassics, Klein even states that he "passed a decree" (119). However, there is no evidence of any such legal obligation. On the one hand, the Ministry of Public Education and Culture itself would have violated this law in several subsequent constructions. On the other hand, we would have expected to find a concrete regulatory formulation concerning national style, one that defined the concept of 'Hungarian style' reflected by a parliamentary act or governmental decree. Research would also have been greatly facilitated if such a formulation had indeed existed.

Károly Lyka's article,²⁸ followed by Lechner's famous manifesto, dramatically exaggerated the significance of the former Minister of Culture, who had already left office in 1903. According to this account, Hungarian Art Nouveau was implicitly 'banned' in the state sphere following Wlassics's speech. From that point on, only Lechner's pupils—and then only in private commissions—were able to secure architectural projects. The subject of the parliamentary speech in question, however, was highly relevant in its own right.²⁹

To what extent can a national style be compatible with a new artistic visual culture that sidelines historical inspiration? This is a question that Lechner's pupils and admirers themselves later approached critically. What Wlassics said in the incriminated speech was assembled with far more sense of reality than many of his contemporaries appreciated. József Vágó, who rarely concealed his admiration for Lechner, in the 1930—after multiple setbacks in the Hungarian political sphere—almost verbatim recapitulated Wlassics's lesson: a national style becomes problematic when it decorates otherwise conventional building structures with stylised and expressively exaggerated folk motifs. He then adds that, from this perspective, Lechner—unlike the Central European national style efforts around World War I—stood the test of time.³⁰ And no matter how harsh contemporary critics were toward Lechner, Wlassics himself was not targeting Lechner personally, but rather the second generation of the movement.³¹

28 Originally: Lyka, "Szecessziós stílus – Magyar stílus." Second appearance Lyka, *Kis könyv a művészetről*, 221–42. The considerable reception of Lyka's article contributed significantly to the notoriety of Wlassics's statements. Lyka was also active in the daily press, where he warned of a more systematic attack on then-contemporary takes on the country's national idiom. See: Lyka K.: Hajsza a magyar stílus ellen [Backlash against the Hungarian Style], in: *Új Idők* 1902/23: 509.

29 A much more realistic assessment of the speech was offered by Mendöl, "A magyar formatörekvések és az ornamentika problémája építészetünkben," 433. The substantive content of Wlassics's statement has more recently been examined by Papp, *Volt-e magyar építészeti stílus*, 162.

After Károly Lyka and Ödön Lechner, it was Jenő Padányi-Gulyás—particularly critical of Lechner's endeavours—who responded to Wlassics's speech. See: Padányi-Gulyás, "A háború előtti évek építőművészetének tanulságai." Padányi remarks that the Minister's address has to be regarded in its political context.

30 József Vágó: *Városokon keresztül*, 15. He adds, essaying on Pavel Janák and Josef Gočár's then-contemporary works: "The brutally enlarged and restyled folk motifs, now made grimy by the plaster that has since become dirty, are meaninglessly stuck onto the wall of the house." In contrast, he says that a national style cannot arise solely from external intention: "In every previous era as well, alongside the great international characteristics of the age (Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque), the different ways how people live and the varying climates of countries always gave rise, spontaneously, to national particularities."

31 In a similar vein, after World War I, the influential Minister of Culture, Count Kuno Klebelsberg, spoke in 1928—not criticising the truly original visionaries, but rather the second-generation

The context of the highly controversial parliamentary speech, however, looks quite different upon closer examination than many early critics have reconstructed. In 1902, Wlassics was responding to an interpellation by Pál Nessi, a lawyer and member of House of Commons. His primary aim was to reject the accusation that he acted in cultural matters according to instructions from the Viennese court. As he points out, the Ministry of Culture had been pursuing an independent policy in the Hungarian capital since the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (1867), and he therefore did not understand the charge of implementing Viennese directives. In this context, he turns, in a single paragraph, to his now infamous summary:

“[...] I called the head of the architectural department and had him told that I do not like the Secessionist style, and since very often under the name of Hungarian style one encounters Secessionist motifs, this Secessionist style does not suit my taste, as I too have the right to hold certain aesthetic preferences. However, I have never placed any obstacles in the way of a Hungarian style; on the contrary, I go so far as to say that if any—albeit mistaken—trend emerges, if it is new, it should be given space. I invite you to examine several of our buildings, and you will see that I have allowed the Hungarian style to prevail. [...] I only wish to point out that in architecture style has two components. One is architectural style, which is primary; the other is decoration. Therefore, if someone uses a Hungarian rooster as decoration, that alone does not make the style Hungarian [...]; thus, while I will strive to prevent a Secessionist-oriented style from emerging within the ministry entrusted to my leadership, I do not consider this to pertain to the genuine Hungarian style.”³²

Wlassics's demonised speech thus entailed an argument widely familiar even in a late Semperian, nineteenth-century architectural education: the distinction between structural form and artistic form (*Bauform/Kunstform*). We still do not know what constitutes a Hungarian style. What we do know, however, is that mere decorative trends applied to architectural elements do not satisfy the requirements of a 'true'

followers: “[In architecture] a welcome sobering is underway, which I also seek to reinforce by sending a remarkably large number of young architects to Rome on scholarships at the Palazzo Falconieri. I readily acknowledge the genius of the elder Lechner; his works are individual and, precisely through their unique genius, secure a lasting place in Hungarian art history. But his less fortunate imitators fundamentally attempted, in the spirit of Viennese Secession, to create a pseudo-Hungarian style, which the Hungarian nation's aesthetic sensibility did not accept. I believe that the younger generation of our greater masters is on the right path when, abandoning the routes of Hungarian Secession, they seek engagement with the traditional formal vocabulary of architecture in a modern spirit.” *Pesti Napló*, 29 July 1928, 1.

32 Az 1901. évi október hó 24-re hirdetett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója, 398.

Hungarian formal language. This is remarkably clear reasoning, which also acknowledges that, in order to form even a negative judgment about this style, certain buildings—sometimes even supported by the state—had to be constructed. Another matter is that Wlassics had little time to resist: a year and a half later, he was no longer Minister of Public Education and Culture, even if he continued to hold significant governmental positions.

Compared with this text, similar contemporary statements by the architect Alajos Hauszmann in his inaugural speech³³ as rector of the Budapest Royal Joseph Technical University appear considerably more doctrinaire. Seizing the opportunity of being the first architect to hold the rectorate at the university, Hauszmann felt it his duty to express his views on the current state of Hungarian architecture. The new rector indeed censures all forms of Art Nouveau architecture and emphasises that architecture can only be practiced on a historical basis and with technological awareness. Moreover, he is careful not to use the term ‘national style’ himself, mentioning it only as a misapplied concept by the representatives of Art Nouveau of Lechner, an illustration of their conflated conceptual framework. National sentiment is necessary, but this does not imply the need to develop an independent national architectural or artistic style, deserting established architectural traditions. Hauszmann characterises the representatives of Hungarian Art Nouveau (‘Secession’):

“[T]heir openly avowed aim is to break completely with tradition, to erase the art of past times from their memory [...] and to create a new art that pays no heed to historical precedent, but expresses only the individual perception and feeling of the present.”³⁴

“Efforts to invent a new style, or entirely new artistic forms starting from a completely different foundation, are just as futile as attempts to discover a new language.”³⁵

It is another matter that the new main building of the University of Technology, constructed largely under Hauszmann’s direction (today’s Building K, completed in 1909), contains considerable Art Nouveau features, albeit interpreted through a historically sensitive, national-romantic perspective that reimagined medieval elements. The key distinction, however, is that while Wlassics’s critique was directed primarily at a certain segment of the architectural profession—those experimenting with new building styles—Hauszmann’s polemic was specifically targeted at Lechner, who

33 See: “Hauszmann Alajos műegyetemi rektor megnyitó beszéde” [Inaugural Address as Rector of the Budapest University of Technology], *Építő Ipar*, September 17, 1903, 245–47.

34 “Hauszmann Alajos műegyetemi rektor megnyitó beszéde” [Inaugural Address as Rector of the Budapest University of Technology], *Építő Ipar*, September 17, 1903, 246.

35 “Hauszmann Alajos műegyetemi rektor megnyitó beszéde” [Inaugural Address as Rector of the Budapest University of Technology], *Építő Ipar*, September 17, 1903, 247.

brought an independent vision to architectural education.³⁶ At the same time, we must note that Hauszmann—drawing heavily on the fundamentally rational, craft-based nature of architecture—highlights that the ‘originality versus imitation and reception’ dilemma is futile and false. Specific commissions strongly influence the formal solutions that are used and interpreted.

Despite the restrictions allegedly linked to Wlassics, Sándor Baumgarten, a colleague and follower of Lechner, was not prevented from receiving numerous commissions from Wlassics’s former ministry beginning in 1903, through which he was able to implement Lechnerian stylistic features.³⁷

Nevertheless, in the field of applied arts—which, both in its idiom and its institutional connections, was entirely inseparable from contemporary architecture—the search for a Hungarian style was, so to speak, a state-supported domain. Commissions and grants were plentiful within a network that was consciously cultivated by the political sphere.³⁸

A far more serious competition for the Lechnerian language of form came from a proto-modernist–technicist approach hinged on material change associated with Károly Kós and his contemporaries—linked to the so-called ‘Young Ones’ circle—which drew not only on vernacular but also on Gothic sources. These examples could be augmented with the material changes initiated by István Medgyaszay, who was acting on Otto Wagner-inspired precedents and used reinforced concrete to reinterpret a registry of vernacular forms.³⁹ Building on the professional collaborations and ethnographic fieldwork of Béla Lajta and Dezső Malonyay, these creators increasingly identified the ethnographic regions from which they could draw not only ornamentation but also the associated architectural masses and economical construction techniques, and were able to apply these to meet the demands of new types of residential and public functions. As Károly Kós phrased it in 1929:

“I rejected every style considered strictly historical and, taking into account everything that I saw and regarded as typical in the folk architecture and folk art of the Hungarian population of Transylvania—especially that of the Székelys—I applied these, somewhat ennobled, to a modern floor plan designed to serve specific needs, in such a way that it would be self-evidently natural and artistically monumental.”⁴⁰

36 Sisa, *Lechner, a Creative Genius*.

37 Some examples include: Rožňava, (Rozsnyó, now Slovakia), Lutheran Gymnasium, 1904; Bonyhád, Lutheran Gymnasium, 1908; Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely, now Romania), Calvinist Gymnasium, 1909.

38 See for details: Jurecskó, “A magyar iparművészet szervezői és K[orongi] Lippich Elek.”

39 Cp. Moravánszky, *Stoffwechsel*, 274–75.

40 Kós, “A Székely Nemzeti Múzeum építése,” 28.

Medgyaszay's 1909–1910 Saint Elizabeth parish church at Múľa (Rárósmúlyad, today Slovakia) from, which followed Kalotaszeg patterns cast or reinterpreted in reinforced concrete, and Petre Antonescu's later proposals for the technical refinement of Transylvanian Romanian sacred wooden architecture, thus show—as we will see below—more affinity with each other than with the works of their contemporaries in the strict sense (Figure 4).

Consensus as a way to overcome the dilemma of reception vs. originality

In the Hungarian case, the lack of even partial consensus regarding a national style can be approached from several perspectives. The general diagnosis stated the existence of a permanent quarrel.⁴¹ It would, however, be difficult to ignore the question of how much the Hungarian state's failures in the twentieth century shaped these debates. Two lost world wars, the collapse of the 1918–1919 republics are important assets. Another crucial point for the understanding of the Hungarian context was the high proportion of local actors with a Jewish origin



Figure 4 Petre Antonescu's proposal for the structural refinement of the massing of a wooden church in a mountainous region through the use of reinforced concrete

Source: *Arhitectura* VIII (1942), nos. 3–4, 13.

41 Jenő Padányi-Gulyás aptly characterises the atmosphere of the years preceding 1914: "Moreover, a movement in style embarks with almost hopeless prospects in times when the constraining burdens of public life entangle aesthetic, social, and economic questions in a confused in a confused hubbub. Creation calls for far less chatter, and far more silence and calm, than prevailed then. Far less anxious speculation about a style not yet even born, and far more courageous resolve. Far less politics, and far more creative drive." In other words, he considered that even before the war, debates concerning national architecture were already hampered by excessively divergent and distracting controversies. Padányi, "A háború előtti évek építőművészetének tanulságai," 178. This assessment merits consideration despite the fact that the young Padányi—prior to his political engagement in the 1930s—clearly maintained a critical stance toward the stylistic initiatives that broke with the traditional architectural forms at the turn of the century.

compared to neighbouring countries having an important share in rebuilding the Hungarian middle class after the Austro-Hungarian compromise and the emancipation of ethnic minorities in 1867–1868. This contributed to the emergence of a particularly sensitive ‘Jewish question.’ The presence of an exceptionally large number of actors of Jewish background in the visual arts⁴² created a distinctive situation, which some interpreted as beneficial to the architectural scene, while others—especially in the wake of World War I—used it to express their grievances and to discredit their fellow citizens. In other words, if the country was already grappling with a persistent lack of consensus regarding the recognition of ethnic minorities’ contributions to the quality of everyday life, it is hardly surprising that such a specific—yet fundamentally identity-forming—issue would prove difficult to resolve.⁴³

The extent to which a general national language of form—and more specifically, a national architectural style—preoccupied the Hungarian professionals is perhaps best evidenced by the sheer number of books, studies, journalistic articles, and lectures devoted to the subject. From 1900 to 1947, that is, from the last two decades of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy up to the end of the post-World War II coalition period, the issue was addressed regularly. Even in 1951, during the show-trial-style debate aimed at Sovietising Hungarian architecture, the question of a national architectural style resurfaced. Between the two world wars, however, an astonishing volume of writings and contributions emerged.⁴⁴

The debates also featured figures whose activity spanned several decades, such as Béla Jászky, who, as one of the designers of the Roman Catholic church in Zebegény (alongside Károly Kós), was already a significant actor in the vernacular-inspired National Romantic movements before World War I. Jászky remained active during the Hungarian Soviet Republic,⁴⁵ although he did not hold any major position. He again took a stand in the debates over national style in 1929⁴⁶ and 1939.⁴⁷ In 1929,

42 See for more: Klein, *Synagogues in Hungary*, 9–19.

43 For a detailed analysis see: Ferkai, “Nemzeti építészet a polgári sajtó tükrében I.,” especially 340–42.

44 See also: Ferkai, op. cit., and Ferkai, “Viták a nemzeti építészeztől II.” A concise synthesis of the interwar period is provided in: Ferkai, “Hungarian Architecture Between the Wars.” For a bibliographical overview useful for studying the debate culture between the two world wars, see: Merényi, *A magyar építészet*, 162–67.

45 Cp. Correspondence of Elek Falus and Sándor Bortnyik: Falus to Bortnyik (1946 or 1948), in: Archives of the Hungarian National Gallery (Museum of Fine Arts), Ms. nr. 24495/2008/130. During the Soviet Republic of 1919, Jászky was in charge of the 1st of May redecoration of the National Theatre in downtown Budapest.

46 Jászky, *A magyar formatörekvések története építészetünkben*.

47 Jászky, “A magyar formára való törekvések kritikai megvilágításban I.”

as the executive officer of the recently founded Lechner Ödön Society,⁴⁸ he opposed the diagnosis previously articulated by Jenő Padányi-Gulyás, which had proclaimed Lechner's individualism—and thus the impossibility of achieving a national consensus in architecture. The minutes of the Society's founding meeting also summarise Jászky's plea:

“Béla Jászky offers a synthesis of Ödön Lechner's aims and, in impassioned terms, expounds the master's credo, which was so frequently misunderstood at the time [...]. Lechner proclaimed and maintained that the Hungarian people—of Asian origin, cast into the Carpathian Basin and living in linguistic isolation—could demonstrate their right to existence and secure their survival only if they were capable of producing genuine cultural value [...]. Such authentic values, however, can only be those that bear the national imprint of a given populace [...] and not the skilful arrangement into bouquets of the withered, fallen flowers of foreign cultures and of art forms long past their bloom [...].”⁴⁹

In other words, even here the imperative to break with historical building styles already appears. What is truly original does not simply appropriate the increasingly outdated Western architectural manners. At the same time, closely related to this, the opening sentence of the 1929 volume is particularly important: “In the artistic competition of nations, only genuine value—just what is original—counts.”⁵⁰ On the one hand, there was a competition among nations in contemporary Europe, and to participate successfully, one had to offer a product capable of performing in that arena. The principal criterion for this was originality, which made the product recognisable.

In 1939, Jászky, consistent with his earlier position, expressed his refined views. He argued that folk inspiration should primarily be structural rather than decorative. In other words, we ought to learn the tradition of rational construction from vernacular builders, rather than merely copying their ornamentation while failing to make use of the practical knowledge accumulated in their building practices. He mentions a couple of houses of folk inspiration designed for the National Exhibition and Fair of Pécs in 1907:

48 The Lechner Ödön Society—conceived and initially supported by several prominent intellectuals of the time but primarily consisting of architects and art scholars—was founded in July 1928, symbolically in the Ernst Museum building, which features a staircase designed by Ödön Lechner himself. For the minutes of this founding, see: Lechner Ödön Society, Minutes of the General Assembly, in: Ferenc Vámos' estate, in the Hungarian Architectural Museum and Heritage Documentation Centre, manuscript.

49 Minutes of the Inaugural General Assembly, Ms. 2.

50 Jászky, *A magyar formatörekvések története építészetünkben*, 3.

“English and American architects expressed astonishment at these houses. They found it particularly difficult to believe that the structural framework of the so-called post-based house had not been conceived by an architect at a drafting table. With its ingenious beam foundation and remarkably sophisticated system of joinery, it remains exemplary even today as a structure elevated from the ground rather than embedded within it—constructed without continuous foundation walls and thus providing an almost ideal degree of security against earthquakes. I repeat: they could scarcely accept that these Hungarian architectural specimens were the work of simple master craftsmen, long since returned to dust.

That the unifying and synthesising spirit of a Hungarian style did not likewise embrace the city is evident. The reason, however, was not any supposed lack of architectural aptitude on the part of the Hungarian people. Rather, it lay in the disparagement of rural customs and sensibilities, the gradual erosion of communal self-confidence, the decline of Hungarian village craft industries, and in a pronounced insensitivity—hardly excusable even among those of foreign origin—that ultimately erected a barrier preventing the intellectual and cultural expression of a people deemed backward.”⁵¹

On the other hand, he once again defended Lechner. According to Jászky, the advocate of Hungarian national style had been at the forefront of precisely what was most neglected in the decoration-focused search for a national style: simplification, rationalisation, and—above all—the promotion of sensible, functional construction. In this regard, he became invested earlier than anyone else. His work, therefore, was not only closely aligned with the highest echelons of Hungarian architecture but was also capable of engaging in discourse with the broader European modern architectural movement.

“Ödön Lechner articulated the principles of rational architecture earlier than his contemporary German or French counterparts. A careful reading of articles published forty, thirty, or twenty-five years ago in various Hungarian art journals reveals, perhaps unexpectedly, that it was precisely the advocates of a distinctively Hungarian language of form who proved to be the most radical reformers of architecture. One discovers, with some surprise, that there is scarcely a single tenet among what are now regarded as Gropiusian or Le Corbusian dogmas that this small intellectual circle had not already formulated in substance—albeit in different terminology.”⁵²

51 Jászky, “A magyar formára való törekvések kritikai megvilágításban I.”, 283.

52 Jászky, “A magyar formára való törekvések kritikai megvilágításban I.”, 285.

What is certain is that his struggle with his contemporaries was far from simple, as he was repeatedly forced to reiterate his arguments decade after decade. Moreover, debates on national architecture continuously crossed the threshold of political attention. Since Wlassics, state officials as well as members of public life with political ambitions regularly participated in discussions concerning architecture. Géza Féja's sociographic observations and Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky's contributions, for example, trace a striking arc in the public debates that erupted in 1939, just prior to the outbreak of World War II. Once again, the tension between a) consciously devised, original architecture and b) forms that developed naturally from tradition came to the fore with considerable intensity. Very few attempted to move beyond this dual determinism—among them, notably, Virgil Bierbauer (and in part Jászky), who challenged the restrictive framing of the debate.

The question of a national architectural language was kept consistently on the agenda by the work of Bierbauer. Not only did he publish on the topic in *Tér és Forma* (Space and Form) and engage with the relevant literature, but as one of the first scholars engaging with the Hungarian reform-age Neo-Classicism, he repeatedly took a position on the issue.⁵³ One of his most relevant thoughts was that the dichotomy of 'originality versus reception' constitutes a flawed interpretive framework.

As concluded by Bierbauer in the early 1940s, the debate over the distinctiveness of Hungarian architecture was ultimately undecidable:

“[T]he Hungarian builder gladly learned from the artistic forms of Europe, and indeed from the peoples with whom he lived, yet in the end he sought and was able to find his own form. Our architecture was always European, but at the same time distinctively Hungarian—it never deliberately or stubbornly positioned itself in opposition to European stylistic fashions, nor did it seek to separate itself from European culture through such defiance.”⁵⁴

The intensity and long-term lack of consensus in debates over Hungarian architecture and a Hungarian language of form can be traced precisely to the fact that Hungarian state and cultural architectural efforts were always embedded within Western traditions. The question, therefore, was how well they could respond to their own local and regional particularities. Hungarian architecture has always followed Western styles, and its meaning could only be understood within that context—sometimes with greater, sometimes with lesser success. As Western styles evolved, so too did the Hungarian approach. In other words, the question of a 'Hungarian style' is simultaneously a question about Western architectural styles: how can one convey identity and particularity, make oneself recognisable, while remaining intelligible in a universal sense?

53 See Ferkai and Sebestyén, “Borbíró (Bierbauer) Virgil.”

54 Bierbauer, “Mai magyar építészet,” 255.

The Romanian national style and the issue of consensus

In 1927, the newspaper *Politica* published an interview with Nicolae Ghika-Budești. The interviewer asked a simple set of questions: Is there a specifically Romanian element in art? And, does a Romanian style exist? Ghika-Budești responded in a manner that brooked no contradiction—an answer that may sound fairly unusual to those familiar with Hungarian scholarship. He answered the first question as follows: “Certainly, as it does among all peoples whose ethnic character is distinctly and strongly defined.”⁵⁵ He responded to the second question even more decisively:

“From the answers given to the preceding questions, it may be inferred that we possess the necessary elements for the formation of a style. It may further be affirmed that we indeed had a Romanian style in the past. The study of architecture in the Romanian lands from the fourteenth through the nineteenth century clearly demonstrates this fact.”⁵⁶

Coming from an architectural historian specialising in the monographic study of Wallachian church architecture⁵⁷—someone fully aware of its extraordinarily complex nature, and knowing but also de-emphasising Balkan, Anatolian, and Middle-Eastern roots of the local ecclesiastical buildings—this extraordinary confidence may seem striking. Yet the conviction underlying it is entirely understandable: since the local craftsmen did not merely copy from models, but rather adapted and reinterpreted Byzantine and Balkan-Serbian-Orthodox precedents, it is entirely reasonable to recognise the originality⁵⁸ and distinctive characteristics of their work without hesitation.

From neither a biblical nor a social-scientific perspective can we speak of an ‘original’ consensus. Consensus is always something that either emerges or is actively constructed. A common position must be negotiated, or, if not, one must wait for it to form. Viewed from this perspective, the emergence of the Romanian national style was by no means free from often intense debates. One need only think of Lecomte de Noüy’s conservation projects in Iași and Craiova, which at the time provoked strong reactions precisely because he subjected the heritage he sought to preserve to a pragmatic engineering approach, often heavily romanticising the forms.⁵⁹

55 Comarnescu, “Arta românească.”

56 Comarnescu, “Arta românească.”

57 Ghika-Budești, “Evoluția Arhitecturii în Muntenia și în Oltenia I–IV.”

58 To emphasise this point, Ghika-Budești also translated in 1924 a study by a French colleague: Bréhier, “Arta română.”

59 See also: Minea, “The Monastery of Curtea de Argeș and Romanian Architectural Heritage in the Late 19th Century.” Earlier, Peter Derer discussed Lecomte de Noüy’s interventions: Derer, “Lecomte de Noüy,” 70: “Lecomte de Noüy, a product of the French school of builders, could not

The Romanian national style was not fundamentally consistent nor the product of any pre-existing consensus. Mincu's building ensembles and their chosen ornamentation from the Brâncoveanu period, Ghika-Budești's more austere Western Gothic moldings, and the expressive, geometrically-inflected Eastern façades—smooth, carpet-like surfaces pierced by Byzantine dwarf galleries—clearly do not represent variations of a single homogeneous formal language. Rather, they are combinations of historical stylistic elements that the researching architect intentionally synthesised with contemporary construction technologies to shape a national identity. The periods of Romanian national style were themselves diverse and fraught with contradictions.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, in each case, architects could take concrete steps to define and consolidate certain elements of a formal language intended to express national identity. The foundation for such definition was always the parallel study and synthesis of accepted historical building styles or vernacular architecture. Moreover, great attention was paid to incorporating elements among the locally recognisable features that would be comprehensible and familiar to a Western-trained architect, drawn from the universal catalogue of architectural forms. Romanian national architecture, therefore, had to participate in the broader discourse concerning Western building styles.⁶¹

The reception of the Romanian national style was neither unambiguous nor unidirectional. Sometimes even the life cycle of the Romanian national style, put forward by Mincu, Antonescu and Ghika-Budești, has been questioned. Particularly striking is Paul Constantin's surprisingly neutral narrative, which sought to situate Mincu's historicism—incorporating industrial elements such as mass-produced building ceramics and the use of glazed industrial surfaces—within the stylistic developments of the early 1900s. This approach highlights how Mincu's work synthesised the vernacular architecture of the Romanian principalities with the crystallised forms of modern housing needs that emerged before World War I. According to Constantin, the Neo-Romanian style emerged in the 1890s (just like Western Art Nouveau) and, alongside other new building styles, largely disappeared after World War I.⁶²

accept deviations from the technical standards of the time. He appears to have examined the structural framework as a whole: he identified irregularities in the foundations or the base (St. Dumitru – Craiova, Curtea de Argeș), cracks in the masonry, deviations from vertical alignment (Treierari, St. Nicholas – Iași), sectioning and twisting of the towers (Curtea de Argeș, the Old Metropolitan Church – Târgoviște), and the rotting of the interior wooden reinforcements (Treierari – Iași)."

60 Minea, "From Byzantine to Brâncovenesc."

61 Minea, "Foreign and Local Entanglements."

62 See also: Constantin, "Arhitectură neoromânească," 111. "However, it could not endure for long, as it came into conflict with a series of new conditions. Modern architecture was compelled to address the major problem of achieving harmony [...] between the world of forms and new

However, the Neo-Romanian idiom—the Romanian national style—continued to be expressed even in the 1940s in residential buildings that employed traditional forms, decorative motifs and massing schemes canonised at the beginning of the century. Still, three notable aspects characterise Constantin's narrative. First, there is no doubt about the undisputed—if now forfeited—status of Mincu's alleged style, his like-minded rivals and faithful followers included: together they forged a formal language that, for a period (however brief or prolonged), was widely regarded as the Romanian national style. Second, he attempts to identify a shared element within the proto-modern search for national identity, thereby bringing closer the interpretation of otherwise non-historic Transylvanian Modern Style (Art Nouveau) architecture and a more historicist formal language of Moldavia and Wallachia. Third, he seeks to interpret International Style and Art Deco-Modernist tendencies as alternative visual idioms responding to new social demands—new types of functions for which the more constrained, small-scale Neo-Romanian style was no longer adequate. As he observes, architects working in the Romanian national style “did not resort to buildings that exceeded their scale.”⁶³ Looking at later developments, particularly the construction of Orthodox cathedrals intended as instruments of identity formation, this principle was not necessarily upheld. It is abundantly clear that this course of development did not command universal approval. The marked shift in scale between the Wallachian villa and the modernist apartment block rising to more than five storeys drew considerable criticism.⁶⁴ Yet this reaction stemmed precisely from the sustained efforts to reconcile these two divergent architectural paradigms.

Heated arguments surrounding the Romanian national style were not few in number. What was clear, however, was that despite disagreements, the orientation had to steer toward the development of a style that would render the meanings associated with buildings legible, while also making the state's identity—blending Byzantine heritage with a Western orientation—recognisable. As Florea Stănculescu put it: one cannot know in advance what will become a style, especially when occupied with solving a concrete task. And what we call a style only truly deserves that

urban, industrial, and related functions—a task that Neo-Romanian architecture was ultimately unable to bring to completion.”

63 Constantin, “Arhitectură neoromânească,” 111. A large portion of pre-1914 Neo-Romanian edifices were unexpected inflations of modest family homes that retained the proportions of the original volume while doubling or tripling their massing. Telling in this respect are a handful of residential works: the house at 8 Gina Patrichi Street (formerly Orlando), designed by Petre Antonescu, and the house at 37 Frumoasa Street, designed by Victor Ștephănescu.

64 Cantacuzino, “Câteva probleme: material și formă, tradiție și formă,” 442. “I have stressed it countless times: the means of Romanian architecture are insufficient to give rise to a monumental architecture capable of embodying the spirit of our civilization. Beyond apartment buildings and private villas, virtually nothing else is being constructed—indeed, nothing at all.”

name if it withstands the test of time.⁶⁵ In other words, the category of style is always the result of later canonisation and never of immediate, operative work. What can be sensibly and usefully drawn from tradition is applied within the modern technical environment to carry out relevant commissions to the best of one's ability, for as long as possible. Over a long-term process, a style may emerge from this practice. It does not arise from deliberately attempting to merge modern techniques with traditional forms. This is strikingly similar to how Ghika-Budești phrased it at the conclusion of the cited interview:

"It is not sufficient merely to possess innate talent in order to discover one's style. Style is gradually cultivated and is shaped far more by a profound mastery of the craft and by the modest self-abnegation of preceding generations than by the desire to be original—a preoccupation that so intensely occupies the younger generations of artists."⁶⁶

Romanian architects generally perceived traditionalist spatial organisation and the use of modern building materials as closely intertwined. This approach was championed, among others, by Florea Stănculescu,⁶⁷ who is well known in the scholarship for regarding the rationality of vernacular architecture as a fundamental parallel for modern construction.⁶⁸ Stănculescu himself emphasised that the traditionalist architect—drawing on the rational principles of vernacular building—cannot avoid employing new materials when the solution to a particular design problem requires it:

"Traditionalists must not despair; they are perhaps the most hardworking and wish to contribute something of their own. However, they should not stubbornly refuse to acknowledge new achievements. One cannot easily ignore neither the new spirit, which is modern, nor the new materials that require architects to make new adaptations."⁶⁹

Many others shared these ideas. A classic example is Petre Antonescu, one of the leading architects committed to the Romanian national style, who had already played a formative role in its development before the end of World War I.⁷⁰ In 1943,

65 For more detail see: Stănculescu, "Stil românesc și stil modern."

66 Comarnescu, "Arta românească."

67 "The problem of rural construction is just as important as that of affordable housing [in an urban context]." Stănculescu, "Construcțiuni rurale," 13.

68 Cp. Tabacu, "Architect Florea Stănculescu or on Modernism in the Romanian Interwar Architecture."

69 *Arhitectura* 1 (1935): 14. See for more: Veress, *Nemzetépítő*, 21.

70 An important illustration of this principle is provided by projects in which architects explored their own formal-language alternatives, later celebrated as genre-defining classics. Antonescu's first design for the Marmorosch-Blank Bank headquarters (1915–1923) would have produced

Antonescu not only argued that traditional stylistic elements should be preserved to convey a coherent architectural message, but he also emphasised that modern construction technologies could assist in repairing or refining certain outdated elements, giving new life even to historic monuments. More importantly, reinforced concrete and other contemporary structural systems made it possible to realise certain historical architectural forms more clearly and without superfluous ornamentation.

“One might adduce as illustrative examples several recent restorations undertaken by the Commission for Historical Monuments on ecclesiastical buildings in which it proved necessary to reconstruct entirely those sections that had fallen into ruin, and in doing so to adopt alternative constructional methods for their re-erection. To this end, a reinforced-concrete framework was incorporated into the brick fabric under reconstruction, and this structural armature was subsequently clad in new masonry executed in forms and proportions strictly conforming to those of the lost originals.”⁷¹

Among the historical forms that could be renewed and refined through reinforced concrete, the Pantokrator dome of Byzantine-rite churches is only one prominent example. Pertaining to this issue, he remarks:

“In this manner, and in light of all that we have previously set forth, we hope that we shall be able to make our churches more spacious, taller, and at the same time more resistant to the trials that those of earlier times were unable to withstand. And thus, we may dare to enlarge and modify them, should it be necessary, without estranging them from their artistic essence, but rather proceeding from those formal principles that lie at the foundation of native Christian architecture, or of the traditions from which it derives.”⁷²

One of the most rational reasons for this was provided by the earthquake centred in Vrancea County on 10 November 1940, which demolished several recently constructed and highly prestigious modern edifices in Bucharest. From that moment on,

a striking hybrid structure. See *Arhitectura* (1924): 59–61. Its massing more closely resembled the modernised Byzantine dome of the Budapest Gellért Hotel (1914–1918; architects: Artúr Sebestyén, Ármin Hegedűs, Izidor Sterk), which incorporated Art Nouveau elements, than the ultimately realised building with its flat optical roof and Mediterranean features (Figure 5). The importance here is not to speculate on hypothetical effects, but to show that an architect, working within an international constellation, actively sought avenues of formal expression before ultimately making a decision influenced by specific circumstances.

71 Antonescu, “Biserici noi [sic!] de după cutremur,” 10.

72 *Arhitectura* 3–4 (1942): 12.

the structural planning of sacred buildings received heightened attention. However, the use of new materials did not lead to the creation of entirely new liturgical spaces; rather, it facilitated the refinement and perfecting of traditional spatial structures. Preservation of tradition went hand in hand with technical requirements and possibilities in order to make something on a long term acceptable for a wider range of agents receiving it.

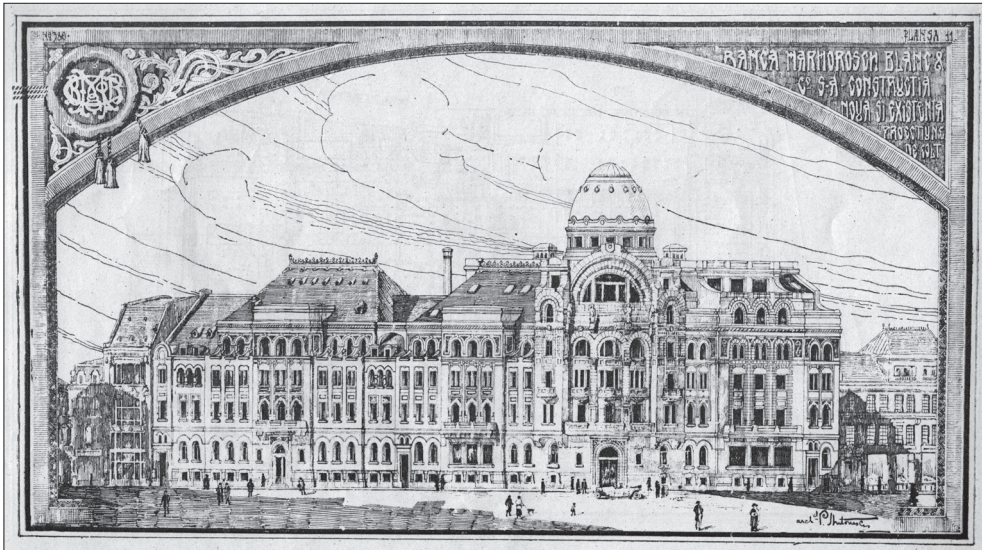


Figure 5 Unexecuted main elevation design for the headquarters of the Marmorosch-Blank Bank, probably dating from before 1920 (architect: Petre Antonescu)

Source: *Arhitectura* III (1924), 59.

The Romanian national style, rich in sources of inspiration and characterised by both volumetric articulation and decoration, entered history as perhaps the region's longest-lived stylistic phenomenon. It became widely accepted in 1906 and, after a long phase of maturation marked by uncertainties and debates, had already established a kind of consensual minimum even before World War I. It became so intertwined with the state's visual unity that it played an active role not only in the tendencies of the 1920s and in the symbolic integration of newly administered territories, but also throughout the 1930s—particularly outside the capital, Bucharest—enjoying broad popularity. While certain elements inevitably elicited both praise and—even harsh—criticism, its trajectory of success appeared entirely natural.

A striking example of this architectural duality can be seen in the Romanian pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Modernist and traditional volumetric approaches stood side by side in the works of George Matei Cantacuzino and Octav

Doicescu, without manifest or awkward conflict.⁷³ Indeed, even in their apparent contradictions, the pavilion demonstrated a form of diplomatic unity.

Consensus surrounding the national stylistic idiom is therefore not simply a political decision imposed from above by state authorities or cultural institutions. Rather, it emerges gradually despite disagreements, through sustained professional practice, the refinement of details, the development of plans, and the careful resolution of practical challenges. The communication that develops in the process of realising concrete architectural tasks—whether voluntary or necessitated by circumstance—ultimately proves more significant than any abstract principle established in advance. To be sure, when certain guiding principles are consistently applied, even alongside competing ideas, they increase the likelihood that an architectural language will remain recognisable over time. Periods of political stability, as well as opportunities to emphasise similarities among newly incorporated territories, further encourage both the consistent application and the selective reinterpretation of such principles.

The 1941 design competition for the new Orthodox cathedral in the city of Odessa,⁷⁴ which briefly came under Romanian authority, exemplified this dynamic. It demonstrated the continuity of a long and carefully refined approach to ecclesiastical architecture—one capable of thinking even in monumental forms—linking interwar Romanian sacred architecture with a sustained tradition of church design. This continuity was driven not only by a desire for renewal but also by the ambition to create the visual markers of national unity with the utmost precision. This held true even though one external reviewer of the submissions noted that the projects might have been more successful if the brief—likely influenced by heightened representational expectations—“had not requested such a large scale, unusual for civic construction.” Such criticism did not imply a dismantling of the overall framework; rather, it contributed to its refinement.⁷⁵ In this respect, their Romanian colleagues were ahead of Hungarian architects—not in continuously disputing the framework, but in adequately exploiting the possibilities it offered.⁷⁶

73 Vlad, “Some Aspects of the Historical Component of Romania’s Image.”

74 See: *Concurs pentru catedrala din Odessa* [Design Competition for the Odessa Cathedral], *Arhitectura* 3–4 (1942): 21–32.

75 Cegăneau, “Opinie separată” [Minority report].

76 It is not impossible to find, in the broader Hungarian context and following the post-Depression economic recovery, architects and designers eager to strike a liveable compromise between the unencumbered appeal of modern structures, the universal currency of geometric mastery, and a hint of historico-national sentiment tempering an otherwise orthogonal and non-decorative stylistic programme. The offices of Gyula Wälder (see the Holitscher tenement, 1936, and the Madách Square tenements, 1937, both in Budapest) and Dénes Györgyi (see the Hungarian Pavilion at the 1939 World’s Fair), as well as József Borsos—with his brick Gothic Hanseatic vernacularism (I wish to thank Dániel Veress for drawing my attention to this latter example)—were key players in this regard. It remains difficult, however, to read these tendencies as reflecting any broader consensus.

An intriguing question concerns the duration for which national architecture—and the identity politics that sustain it—continues to treat traditional architectural forms as assets, and at what point their ongoing preservation becomes constraining. Material and political success frequently engenders a desire to transform or reinterpret the past. A dedicated study is needed to examine how this tension manifested in architecture as a vehicle for national self-expression, and how it unfolded differently in Romania, where stronger consensus was often achieved, compared to early twentieth-century Hungary, where architectural discourse was more heterogeneous and far less unified.

Conclusions

The Hungarian case demonstrates that the problem of consensus surrounding a national architectural style was inseparable from broader political, social, and cultural tensions. Unlike in Romania, where a relatively stable minimum consensus gradually emerged around the Neo-Romanian idiom, Hungarian architectural discourse remained marked by persistent uncertainty regarding the relationship between originality, tradition, and Western reception. The repeated political ruptures of the twentieth century, together with unresolved conflicts concerning national identity and the place of minority contributions within Hungarian culture, made the establishment of a coherent stylistic framework especially difficult.

On the one hand, we can reassure that debates over Hungarian national architecture repeatedly became trapped within the opposition between ‘originality’ and ‘reception’: whether Hungarian architecture should consciously distance itself from Western historical styles in pursuit of something uniquely national, or whether its distinctiveness could emerge precisely through the creative adaptation of broader European forms. Figures such as Béla Jászky and Virgil Bierbauer attempted to overcome this dilemma by arguing that Hungarian architecture had always been simultaneously European and Hungarian. In their interpretation, national character did not arise from isolation or stylistic purity, but from the intelligent reinterpretation of inherited forms in response to local conditions and needs. The persistent lack of consensus therefore stemmed not from the absence of architectural creativity, but from the difficulty of reconciling competing understandings of national identity within a rapidly changing political and cultural environment. Hungarian architectural debates reveal that consensus in matters of national style cannot be achieved merely through theoretical declarations or ideological programs. Rather, it depends upon the gradual emergence of a shared professional framework capable of mediating between international intelligibility and local particularity.

On the other hand, the development of the Romanian national style demonstrates that architectural identity was not the product of an original or universally

valid consensus, but rather the result of a gradual process of negotiation, synthesis, and canonisation. Romanian architects combined Byzantine, Balkan, vernacular, and Western influences with modern construction technologies in order to formulate a recognisable national architectural language. Although figures such as Ion Mincu, Nicolae Ghika-Budești, Petre Antonescu, and Florea Stănculescu differed significantly in their formal approaches, they shared the broader objective of creating an architecture capable of expressing national identity while remaining compatible with modern technical and social demands. The Romanian national style therefore remained flexible rather than stylistically uniform. The debates surrounding restoration, monumentality, and the use of modern materials reveal that consensus emerged not through the absence of disagreement, but through continuous professional practice and adaptation. Reinforced concrete and industrial techniques were frequently understood not as threats to tradition, but as means of refining and preserving historical forms.

Ultimately, the Romanian case demonstrates that architectural consensus is historically constructed through sustained practice. In comparative perspective, Romanian architects achieved a more coherent and enduring national architectural framework than their Hungarian contemporaries, despite the internal contradictions and debates that accompanied its development.

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