Light and Form – Modern Architecture and Photography in Hungary, 1927-1950

4th November 2005 to 3rd February 2006

Curators: Ibolya Plank, Virág Hajdú, Pál Ritoók

Press tour: Thursday 3rd November 2005, 10.30 am
Opening: Thursday 3rd November 2005, 6.30 pm

Exhibition Venue:
Wiener Städtische Allgemeine Versicherung AG
Ringturm Exhibition Centre
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Opening hours:
Monday to Friday: 9.00 am to 6.00 pm; admission free
(Closed on public holidays and also on 30th December 2005)

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ARCHITECTURE IN THE RINGTURM presents avant-garde architecture of the inter-war period and the early years after the Second World War in Hungary with original black and white photographs from the collections of the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and the Hungarian Museum of Architecture. The show is enhanced by models, original plans, furniture, specially designed objects and original publications which provide an overview of the architectural creativity in Hungary known as "White Modernism". The buildings range from homes, villas, hospitals, riding schools, churches, cinemas and coffee houses to airports and bus stops. The majority of the architectural treasures on display are to be found in Budapest.

The Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy once said: *"One might say that we see the world with completely different eyes... Objects and phenomena that we do not see with our own optical equipment – our eyes – can be revealed with the aid of a camera."*

Modern architecture in Hungary. Different terms relating to the demarcation of 20th century modernist architecture exist in parallel. In every country there are different terms for buildings which were all designed on the basis of similar principles and display related stylistic elements. Terms with overlapping and/or the same meaning are also found in specialist literature about Hungary. Here *Új Építés* ("New Building") and *Új Építészet* ("New Architecture") correspond to *Neues Bauen* ("New Building") in Germany and *Nieuwe Bouwen* ("New Building") in Holland, while the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* ("New Functionality"), which also originated in Germany, is expressed as *Új Tárgyiasság* ("New Objectivity"). The International Style of Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock is referred to as *Nemzetközi Stílus*. The terms *Racionalizmus* (based on the Italian *razionalismo*) or *Funkcionalizmus* (based on the Czech model) and *Konstruktivizmus (*Russian) are also used – in addition to the simpler practice of speaking of *Bauhaus architecture*.

Precursors of Modernism. The most important exponent of Hungarian architecture of the early 20th century was *Ödön Lechner* (1845-1914). Under his influence, in the early years of the 20th century a few Hungarian architects – *including Dénes Györgyi, Károly Kós and Lajos Kozma* – began to grapple with the *Arts and Crafts Movement* and the Finnish secession from Russia in order to create an expression of contemporary, characteristic Hungarian architecture. Even before the First World War, premodern buildings were being constructed using geometric forms, with little decoration on the facades and utilising elements of industrial architecture and high-quality materials. The forerunners of classical modernism were *Béla Lajta* (the most significant figure)*, Gyula Haász and Béla Málnai,* the *Jónás brothers, Emil Tőry and Móric Pogány.* After the war, however, there was no direct continuation of the beginnings of premodern architecture and the predominant style of the first few post-war years was Neo-Baroque, compatible with the conservative cultural policy. Yet the modern forerunners of this age were the villas of *Bertalan Árkay*, which are also outstanding examples of Hungarian Art Deco.

In 1926 economic stability was achieved, and now important projects like the hospital at Debrecen – begun before the war – and the universities of Debrecen and Szeged were completed and many schools built.

Architectural training in Hungary. Within the context of architectural training at Hungary's technical university, *Iván Kotsis and Desider Hültl* were the important people in the Modernist movement. The few remaining buildings designed by these professors are numbered among the important works of Hungarian Modernism. They include the *Roman Catholic church* by Iván Kotsis, his *summerhouses on Lake Balaton, Desider Hültl's bus garage* in Szabó József Street and his *hospital in Péterffy Sándor Street* in Budapest. Other farsighted teachers of modern architecture and design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest included *Dénes György, Gyula Kaesz, Károly Weichinger and Jenő Kismarty-Lechner.*

The spread of Modernism. The period of economic depression between 1929 and 1933 also increasingly encouraged the acceptance of modern architecture by state organisations and religious institutions. The early initiatives caused a sensation. The first churches in the Modernist style, such as the *Roman Catholic Gyárvárosi church in Győr* (Aladár Árkay, 1929), which also bore Art Deco features, did not meet with resistance. However, the first two modern churches in the capital caused heated debates – particularly the *church in Városmajor (Aladár und Bertalan Árkay*, 1931-1933) with its shocking bare concrete facade and also the rather more modest-looking *Franciscan church on Pasaréti Square* (*Gyula Rimanóczy,* 1931-34) in the Italian style.

In line with contemporary trends, new building assignments also included, for instance, car showrooms, garages and workshops (e.g. *Excelsior Service* by *László Lauber,* 1930 or the *FIAT service centre* by *Ervin Quittner*, 1934*)*. The *Kelenföld power station* by Virgil Bierbauer, 1927-1933, was both architecturally and technically state of the art. Buda Airport (*Virgil Bierbauer and László Králik,* 1935-1937), together with some bridges and viaducts were important public building projects of the 1930s and early 1940s.

Modern elements appeared at an early stage in commercial buildings. The Budapest *fashion house in Rákóczi Street* was re-designed in Art Deco style by *Lajos Kozma* in 1928 and further extended between 1934 and 1935. The great glass facade, edged with black and white marble, and the neon lettering made it a great public attraction.

In the 1930s Modernism also prevailed in commissions by the state and local authorities for homes, workers' settlement projects, industrial plants and public buildings.

In the building of villas and residential houses *Lajos Kozma and Farkas Molnár* are among the most-commissioned architects. Individual progressive approaches comparable to the settlement projects of the workers' federations, such as the model settlement in Napraforgó Street (1930-1931), were not followed up, and these were also unable to offer a structural solution to the need for homes.

Conservative forces in the new political situation from 1948 onwards suppressed the fruitful approaches to the built environment. Today, the period from the 1930s to '50s is enjoying a well-earned revival, particularly given the perspective of the "new Europe".

Tér és Forma. Illustration emerged as the most efficient method of spreading the ideals of architecture in the spirit of the modern age, in particular through publication in specialist journals. The legendary journal "Tér és Forma" ("Space and Form") took on a prominent role, indeed, the majority of the contemporary photographic prints in the show were published in this Hungarian journal between 1928 and 1948. The journal functioned as a medium which brought concepts of Modernist architecture to Hungary and made modern building work known in the country by showing examples of work abroad. Today, these photographs, most of which come from two public archives, form a first-class source for the documentation of Hungarian Modernist architecture.

The exhibition. Compared to architects of the preceding epoch, Modernist designers worked with an extremely limited selection of building methods. They did not build for posterity: they frequently experimented with ingenious solutions and materials which did not always turn out to be durable. Because of this, today many Modernist buildings are in a very different state as it has been necessary to adapt and/or repair what were then the latest techniques. Those buildings that have survived in their original form show greater signs of age than buildings that were built about a hundred years earlier. That is why, in presenting Modernism, this exhibition is resorting to contemporary photographs which show the buildings in an impeccable condition and thus express the ingenuity of the original architectural design and the careful way in which it was carried out. These photographs, which at that time were innovative and experimental, are of great significance as works of art.

Over 100 original photographs (black and white) from the collections of the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and the Hungarian Museum of Architecture are displayed in the exhibition. The show is enhanced by models, original plans, furniture, specially designed objects, original publications and a film.

Lenders. The Photographic Archive of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage collects and archives pictures and objects of historic value. The main part of the collection consists of some 200,000 negatives and around 150,000 prints, more than half of them dating from the 19th century, and these are an important source for anyone who wants to understand Hungarian architecture.

The Hungarian Museum of Architecture also preserves valuable pictures dating from the 19th century in its photographic collection. Bequests of technical photos from the beginning of the 20th century represent the "backbone" of the collection with people such as Tivadar Kozelka and Zoltán Seidner. This material also forms the basis of the exhibition.

Catalogue (in Hungarian and English): Ibolya Plank, Virág Hajdú, Pál Ritoók: Light and Form. Modern Architecture and Photography 1927-1950. 304 pages with numerous black and white illustrations. Budapest, 2003. Price: 25 euros.

Press releases and photographs relating to the ARCHITECTURE IN THE RINGTURM series of exhibitions can be found on http://www.wienerstaedtische.at in the "Arts & Culture" section.