

Architectonic fragments: Bulgaria

4th October to 9th November 2007

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Press launch: Wed 3rd October, 10:30

Opening: Wed 3rd October, 18:30

Exhibition location:

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VIENNA INSURANCE GROUP

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Opening times:

Monday to Friday: 09:00 to 18:00, free admission
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Bulgaria – which joined the European Union at the start of this year – can look back on a diverse past in terms of culture and history reaching right back to times of ancient history. This exhibition represents an arch spanning from medieval monasteries, then the awakening following independence through to the influence of Soviet-style architecture. The exhibition also includes the up-and-coming generation of Bulgarian architects who are well in tune with developments around the world, and are creating examples of truly modern architecture.

Starting from a tradition which embraces several thousand years, and following the predominance of the Osman Empire which continued for several centuries, the top echelons of the architectural community have developed a more western character with their deliberately "anonymous" architecture. Bulgaria is home to buildings from the Mycenaean age, buildings that bear witness to the Thracian, Greek and Hellenistic cultures, as well as medieval church and monastery sites which number amongst the most important of their kind in south-eastern Europe.

Truly modern western-influenced architecture may not have arrived in Bulgaria until towards the end of the 19th century, but almost 500 years prior to that Bulgarians were already living modern lives with all the attendant cultural manifestations; at that time there was no other country in Europe as modern as Bulgaria. Well-preserved groups of buildings and individual buildings based on traditional cultures of construction and living were maintained until the early part of the 20th century, and bear witness to the importance of this period.

At the start of the 20th century, following the eclectic style architecture and the subsequent deluge of forms from the *Jugendstil* movement, in many locations architects set out in pursuit of the roots of European traditions. At this point, architects including Le Corbusier and Bernard Rudowsky, to name only the most famous "discoverers" of this building tradition for modern times, started to pay more attention to Bulgaria's anonymous architecture.

There is certainly a convincing argument that until now these sources in Bulgaria's architecture have served not only as a direct inspiration, but that they are rooted deep in the consciousness of the architects, and that aspects of architecture such as ground plans, room order or the design of the external space and its incorporation with the architecture refer directly to them. Austria itself can put forward an example of an architect whose work followed these lines, namely the architect and designer **Anna Lülja Praun**, who recently died at a ripe old age.

The "fragments" alluded to in the title refer to extremely diverse tendencies and influences which have played a part in Bulgaria's architecture, and at times cause the overall picture to appear fragmented when viewed from the outside. The country's history can also be interpreted as full of change, and this equally has left its mark on the architecture. After the Osman realm, which lasted until the end of the 19th century, in the second half of the 20th century it was the former USSR which was the primary influence on Bulgaria.

1. From eclecticism to early modernism

In 1879, just one year after Russian troops freed Bulgaria from Osman rule, Sofia became the capital city of the Bulgarian state; in 1880 the city's council approved the first municipal building programme, and large-scale building projects got underway.

In 1878 Sofia was a small city with a population of some 11,000; by 1910 it had grown into a city of 100,000 inhabitants. Because it grew at such a rate, extensive planning and construction work had to be undertaken, and as Bulgaria didn't have enough university-trained architects of its own, suitably qualified professionals were brought from the Austro-Hungarian Kingdom into the newly-independent principality.

Buildings erected by Austrians in Sofia are easy to recognise even today – their formal appearance directly echoes their Viennese connection, and their presence makes itself felt strongly in Sofia's cityscape. **Adolf Vaclav Kolar** designed and built the military school, the Army Club and the War Ministry, **Victor Rumpelmayer** and **Friedrich Grünanger** collaborated in building the Royal Palace, **Friedrich Grünanger** also built the synagogue, the seminary and the theological academy, whilst **Adolf Vaclav Kolar**, **Peter Paul Brang** and **Karl Heinrich** all built a large number of residential buildings. Austrians also won a number of prizes in architectural competitions. The design competition for the municipal thermal baths was won by **Emil von Förster**. **Ferdinand Fellner & Hermann Helmer** won the competition to design the national theatre, which they duly went on to build.

At the end of the 19th century the first Bulgarians to complete architecture degrees abroad returned home. These architects were held in high esteem, and four of them had studied in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. **Jordan Milanov**, **Georgi Fingov** and **Nikola Jurukov** had studied under Karl König, Theophil Hansen and Karl Mayreder at the Institute of Technology in Vienna, while **Petko Momchilov** had studied at the German Institute of Technology in Prague. These architects started their careers by studying the historicism movement that was in vogue in their respective institutions. However, this soon began to seem unimportant in the face of principles of the *Jugendstil* movement, which had originated in Vienna and was now strongly influencing the region.

A striving for renewal coupled with general romantic tendencies led architects in their quest for new modes of stylistic expression to refer to the tradition in building and decor from the Middle Ages, which was incorporated into the aesthetic system of the *Jugendstil* movement as the **Bulgarian Revival**. This resulted in architecture with a specific national character: the central market hall (**Naum Torbov**, 1909), the public thermal baths (**Petko Momchilov**, 1910) and the seat of the Holy Synod (**Petko Momchilov & Jordan Milanov**, 1910).

From the mid 1920s the interchange between the two countries started to wane somewhat. During this period the second generation of Bulgarian architects to be influenced in their training by the Austrian schools of architecture reached creative maturity.

2. The inter-war period

In most of Europe, the historicism movement was generally fading away as modernism poured in to replace it; this process of change took place comparatively slowly in Bulgaria. This was largely due to Bulgaria's tradition of separate national development, tied in with the historical background influencing the nature and direction of the architecture. Certain public or semi-public buildings in Sofia are good examples of modern Bulgarian architecture. The National Bank (**Ivan Vassilyov & Dimiter Tsolov**, 1934–39) may not feature the idea of flowing space from the avant-garde movement, but is nonetheless impressive with its classically calm interior and its composition developed purely from a functional perspective with no harking back to the historicism movement; the Interior Ministry (**Georgi Ovcharov**, 1936–40) has a bearing that superbly reflects the image of the Bulgarian nation of that period. The spirit of modernism is manifested more clearly in the work of **Stancho Belkovski**, whose only design criteria were those connected with rationality in technical and functional respects and whose buildings, which he designed in collaboration with **Ivan Danchov**, are therefore considered as some of the best examples in the world of the functionalism movement. The main creation of these two architects and their team is the "Bulgaria" complex of buildings, with its integrated concert hall, hotel, restaurant and café; in the summer months the windows looking out onto the street could be

lowered underground. The mechanism designed for this purpose was state-of-the-art at the time, and would still pose a tough challenge to engineers today.

The Slavyanska Beseda hotel (**A. Mikhailovky**, 1935) in the centre of Sofia continues to impress visitors, more than 70 years after it was built, with its grand sense of space and with all its facilities under a single roof, with its impressive smooth-cut stone facade, the top of its silhouette delineated by a typical 1930s flying roof.

3. The 1950s and 1960s: Notable achievements between toeing the Moscow party line and the Thaw

Towards the end of the Second World War Sofia suffered a great deal of bomb damage. Politically, the country stood on the side of Nazi Germany, and was liberated in 1944 by the Soviet Army. **Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky** arrived in Sofia as early as March 1946. She was actually en route to join up with her husband in Ankara, but stayed in Sofia for just under a year in a fruitful if short phase of her career. She founded a department dedicated to constructing kindergartens within the municipal planning office, to perform a planning and construction role that had hitherto not existed. As a result, several kindergartens were set up in Bulgaria based on her plans.

Following the war there were ten years of unremitting Soviet influence. Then, starting in the mid 1950s, the process known as destalinisation started, and Bulgarian architecture entered a ten-year phase that was probably one of the most productive phases in its entire history. A great many buildings were constructed during this period. Somewhat surprisingly, in a national-democratic system whose orientation was firmly towards Moscow it was also possible, in an arrangement that applied to Bulgaria alone, to run an independent architecture office alongside the large state-run offices. The independent office had a limited number of staff, but was permitted to take on jobs up to a certain size. Not least, this highly unusual competitive scenario gave rise to high-quality work. Another reason for the high-quality work was that the leading architectural lights from the years between the wars and their academic posts remained influential, and were able to train young architects to a high academic level or design buildings themselves.

Under the new socio-political conditions there with no private property ownership, there were no property developers in the western sense, and the state granted planning consent to itself – which did, incidentally, result in the city being developed in a professionally competent manner such as had never been seen before. This period saw some interesting edifices being put up which very much fall into the category of the out-and-out functional. Examples of such buildings in Sofia include the Hotel Rila (**Georgi Stoilov**, 1963) and the tennis hall by **Stefka Georgieva**; there's also the string of opulent hotels along the Black Sea coast, the buildings for Universiade 1961 (World University Games), including the "Sala Universiada" designed by **Alexander Barov, Ivan Ivantshev** and **Ivan Totorov**.

On the other hand, when it came to housing the might of the Party largely imposed itself on the architects. The general tone was sober, with large housing estates being built from prefabricated materials. The construction of uniform estates throughout the country got underway, thus laying the foundation stone for the now well-known problems associated with large-scale housing construction. In certain fortunate cases, however, there were also some high-quality dwellings or smallish groups of houses built with a precast concrete skeleton construction, and to this day these represent some of the best examples of living in a 'late functionalistic' tradition.

The way in which Sofia took its lead from Moscow and toed the party line came into play in the world of architecture as in so many aspects of life. Many young people travelled to Moscow for their studies, and in the final and also most fruitful phase of this relationship the Russian Centre (1973) was developed. This was similar to the so-called "America Houses" in Austria, and took the form of an architecturally interesting cultural centre built with the help of Soviet finance.

4. Reorientation in the 1990s – contemporary works

The contemporary scene is shaped by two active and contradictory generations: The older of the two – which grew up and was educated under the communist system – attempts under the current totally new set of circumstances to mirror the reflection of itself that was formed in that bygone era along with the human and social values which already feel quite outdated. There are now a few extremely successful built examples of this process, following the initial years in which everyone was struggling to reorient themselves. The next generation down, and even more so the latest generation, have been able to travel, work anywhere in the world, and make use of the wealth of modern communication tools. As a result they are totally in touch with developments around the world, and are now producing some positively refreshing work.

Several trade journals from the world of architecture, organisations like the **Union of Architects** and the **International Academy of Architecture**, and architects involved with the recently-created **VIZAR prize** are engaged in lively discussion about the aims and content of forward-looking building design without forgetting to protect the built values from the recent past; the Academy of the Sciences has been driving forward the process of compiling an inventory of such values.

CATALOGUE

Architecture in the Ringturm XV
Architectonic fragments:
Bulgaria
bilingual (German and Bulgarian)

approx. 130 pages with numerous black/white and colour plates, and an index including articles by Todor Boulev, Aneta Bulant-Kamenova, Hristo Ghenchev, Boyko Kadinov, Petar Iokimov, Georgi Stanischev, Adolph Stiller, Georgi Stoilov and Ljubinka Stoilova

Publisher: Verlag Anton Pustet, October 2007
28 euro