

Oradea - the Geometric Art Nouveau's Ultimate Outpost

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Abstract

Little if at all known among the European cultural environments, the architecture of the city of Oradea is utterly unique in the European context due to its modernist legacy. Although located in the eastern province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, its multitude of intermingling modern styles pushed the city around the year 1900 onto the canvas of the European Art Nouveau architecture. This approach is aiming at outlining a new artistic eastern border influenced by the Viennese Secession, by presenting three vanguard architects who were actively creating in Oradea, between 1905 and 1913, in close relationship with the artistic centers of Budapest and Vienna. Their refinement and conceptual purism of vision, indebted to the “Gesamtkunstwerk”, recommend the city of Oradea - which has been recently called “the Art Nouveau capital of Romania” - as a crucial point of interest on the map of the European architecture of the avant-garde.

Keywords: Oradea, László and József Vágó, Mende Valér, vanguard architecture, Viennese Modernism

Located on the western border of modern Romania, Oradea was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of the First World War. Thus, it came as no surprise for the city to be deeply imprinted by the two imperial capitals, Vienna and Budapest. While scrutinizing the city architecture developed in between the two centuries, the nineteenth and the twentieth respectively, one can easily notice the coexistence of different visions, emerging from distinct artistic stems¹. Most buildings are designed and decorated in eclectic style with aristocratic pretence, validated by the prestigious

¹ Mircea PAȘCA, *Oradea 1900, Un ghid de Arhitectură*, Oradea, Primus, 2012, p. 8-12

legendary sainted figure of King Ladislau, who founded the city of Oradea in the 11th century, as well as by the presence of a very strong ecclesiastical Baroque centre, the latter bearing the sign of European humanism, mostly derived from Vienna, Rome and Vatican.²

But European modernity takes its toll, so that, around 1900, the overwhelming presence of the eclectic style, a dated international manner based on a blending of “neo” and “revival” patterns, was strongly colliding with the spectacular emergence of the “Hungarian national style”. There were two outstanding disciples of Ödön Lechner actively creating in Oradea, namely Komor Marcell and Jakab Dezsö, who erected here the most spectacular buildings of the new Art Nouveau style (The Black Eagle Palace, The Adorjan Houses, The Stern Palace, The Jakab - Schwartz Mansion)³.

But there were not only the architects brought up in the scholastic Budapest who shaped the city on the eve of the 20th century, but also those who adopted the avant-garde ideas of the Viennese Secession. This essay is particularly considering these figures, in an attempt to emphasize their major contribution in the process of tuning the city they had been shaping to the most modern cultural paradigms of Art Nouveau. Given the architecture they created in Oradea, exhibiting paradigmatic valour and modernity instinct, they established here the last frontier of geometric architecture and Central European artistic purism. These architects were Vágó László, Vágó József and Mende Valér⁴.

It goes without saying that Oradea today grants us spectacular sophisticated geometries of secessionist Vienna, and this is due to the work of Vágó Brothers, both born in Oradea. The creations of Vágó Brothers, which came into being between 1910 and 1912, brought the city, which was situated somewhere on the border of the Habsburg Empire, in synchronicity with vanguard architecture in Vienna or Darmstadt. At the same time, their radically innovative vision defined the eastern limit of an architectural

² Liviu BORCEA, Gheorghe GORUN, (coord.): *Istoria Oraşului Oradea*, Oradea, Arca, 2007, p. 446-452

³ Mircea PAŞCA, *Arhitecţi budapeştani în Oradea anilor 1900*, Oradea, Primus, 2013, p. 195-197

⁴ Ramona NOVICOV, *1900: Arhitectură orădeană-Arhitectură europeană, Trasee avangardiste*, Oradea, Muzeul Țării Crişurilor, 2010, p. 81-85

language that came to life through distilled geometric shapes, bearing occult meanings⁵. There are three buildings that have become points of reference on the map of European avant-garde architecture: The Darvas – La Roche Mansion, The Palace Moskovits II and The Gendarmes School (at present The University of Oradea).

The Darvas – La Roche Villa: between “esprit de finesse” and “esprit de géométrie”

Although at the beginning of their career, the Vágó architects produced avant-garde solutions, opposing the ones favoured by the local establishment. The most representative work in Oradea and presumably the most spectacular building of the city is The Darvas - La Roche Villa, built in the period 1911-1912⁶. Regarded as a true iconic house, this is an exceptional achievement, given its modern avant-garde composition, as well as its most daring special composition, volumetric purism and refined decoration. Along with The Schiffer Mansion from Budapest (built by József Vágó in 1910), this edifice from Oradea can be ranked among the most original architectural creations of the new era. Although it has been exceptionally well preserved for an entire century, in the last two decades it has fallen into decay. The building was stripped almost entirely of its extremely valuable stained glass, and the indoor fountain, the mural painting, the original wallpaper and the environmental sculpture pieces followed suit. The courtyard that foreshadowed the concept of “cité-jardin”⁷, that was so dear to the two architects, was left derelict. However, the loftiness of architectural design is still predominant because this architectural monument preserves some defining traits, pending well deserved restorations performed by specialists.

Volumetric composition of the mansion situated at 11, Iosif Vulcan Street was conceived asymmetrically, in an avant-garde vision that bears the mark of the Viennese school of architecture (Wiener Secession). The architects of this school were cultivating a geometric avant-garde functionalist style, infused with elements of the industrial

⁵ Anne LAMBRICHS, *József Vágó, un architecte hongrois dans la tourmente européenne*, Paris, AAM, 2003, p. 79, 114-115

⁶ Mircea PAȘCA, *Arhitecții József și László Vágó la Oradea*, Oradea, Arca, 2010, p.24-32

⁷ A. LAMBRICHS, *József Vágó...*, p. 88, 269-272

architecture which was spectacularly asserting itself, in the vision of Peter Behrens⁸, especially using a glass curtained wall. They left behind historicist or eclectic decoration and maintained the luxury of sophisticated decorations, made to measure, fashioned from precious materials, in the spirit of the movement “Arts and Crafts”, as well as scholarly compositions, very bold from a spatial vision point of view. The Vágó Brothers resonated with this style in the second part of their creation (1908- 1911). Geometric vision confers an elegant austere touch, with an intelligent alternation of fullness and emptiness, of light and shadow, of opacity and transparency. The dimensional plan of the façade is strongly animated by extensive level distortions and by the contrast between rectangular and ovoid outlines. It was a period in which the organic, Lechnerian type attic is replaced by a single piece of monumental gear, inspired from the Viennese avant-garde. We come across the same formal and decorative solutions at The Petöfi Residence (1908), The Árkád Bazaar (1908-1909), at the Theatre Feld (1908), no longer existent, all of which situated in Budapest. Some other buildings belonged to the same family, The Alföldi Savings Bank from Debrecen (demolished in 1911), and The Moskovits Palace in Oradea (1910-1911), which fortunately has been preserved until today. This distinct geometrical approach makes them akin to the formal geometry solutions provided by the other prominent representative of the Oradea avant-garde architecture, Mende Valér.

The parabolic space at the main entrance is surmounted by a terrace that highlights the visual focal point and underlies the absolute uniqueness of the mansion: a dreamy Atlantean, overwhelmed by that so specific “Weltschmerz”. Very much like Dürer’s engraving “Melancholia I”, this hermaphrodite Atlantean does not bolster anything, yet he is effeminately and gracefully arching himself over a starry monumental vase-like recipient. The stars are made of Zsolnay ceramic, displaying a metallic sheen with a deep iridescent green, very characteristic for eosin, with polychromic shades that are illustrative for the Pécs workshops. The same effect is reproduced at the ceramic knobs, decorated in various geometric patterns that so gracefully bestow rhythm to the uniform neutral field of gray cement slabs made of polished mosaic grinding. This in turn is a real trademark style of Vágó architects, situated within Otto Wagner’s coordinates.

⁸ Janine FIEDLER, Peter FEIERABEND(ed.): *Bauhaus*, Postdam, h.f. Ullmann, 2013, p. 188-190; Luminița BATALI, *Introducere in istoria designului*, București, Fundația Ileana, 2010, p. 83-90

This decorative technique was widely exhibited at the Város Liget Theatre (1908), no longer existent and at the Árkád Bazaar in Budapest, interpreting in a more spectacular, one-of-a-kind vision, the solution that Otto Wagner has adopted while designing The Postal Savings House in Vienna (1903-1906). At the same time, the tectonic asymmetric links them closely to the Stoclet Palace in Brussels (1905-1911), Josef Hoffmann's major work. The alternation of volumes in the case of Darvas-Laroche Mansion is not only bold, but also exceptionally well balanced. He favors a new poetics of light, seen through the ample glazed openings. This monumental vision, which was extremely modern at that time in Europe, in which the wall-screen was playing a key role, was inspired by top industrial and architectural projects, as well as by the so-called “Glasarchitektur”⁹ (Bruno Taut). The play upon the space is sophisticated in the exterior and interior, with an emphasis on the transparency effects. A glasshouse was established upstairs, opening to the terrace and garden, decorated with spectacular stained glass and two lush interior fountains. The one from onto the west wall is still preserved today. The destruction of the second fountain, located opposite the ample glass wall that faces the garden, constitutes an irreparable loss. Ubiquitously there was evident the poetic modern conception related with the poetry of habitation in a harmonious fluid architectural space, composed of subtle proportions of light and shadow, of openness and closeness, of opaque and transparent, of organic and geometric, of nature and culture. Eclectic historicism disappeared completely, just like the “piano nobile” caesura had been refuted by functional architecture, along with other conventional imperatives. An unprecedented fluidity and freedom of movement in the epoch characterizes the architectural space, which conts as a logical and spectacular move, generated by the “Wiener Werkstate” spirit and governed by the concept of “Gesamtkunstwerk”¹⁰.

Geometry of rare beauty and elegance - clear, rigorous, full of vital energy – bestows personality to the furniture, as well as to the stained glass, hardware, stucco, wallpaper and floor. For example, the same modular pattern of small squares is present also in the case of the built-in furniture decoration in the hall of Darvas-La Roche mansion, a decoration that is almost identical to the one in Salzer bedroom, created by J. Hoffmann

⁹Ioan ANDREESCU, Vlad GAIVORONCHI, *Identitate și alteritate în spațiul urban*, Fundația Arhitect design, București, 2009, p . 110-114

¹⁰ R. NOVICOV, *1900...*, p. 52-58

in 1902. Organic forms, symbolizing cosmic transformation and perpetual universal flowering, are molded in modular geometries. We find the motif of the flower with the stem acting as the axis of the world, also the one of affronted birds that eat fruit, the chalices that become celestial bodies, or triangles and octagons, bearing mystical connotations¹¹. The human figure is also present, but with discretion, as stated in the cosmic order, whose elements are obvious everywhere and architecture just emphasizes them. Although seriously affected by destruction and contemporary interventions, Darvas-La Roche mansion completes the gallery of the most valuable Secession buildings of Central Europe that have been preserved almost entirely.

Ode to the square: Moskovits Palace II, 1910 – 1911

The House of Report erected in the years 1910 - 1911 for the benefit of Adolf Moskovits, the wealthy owner of factories and mills in Oradea, sticks to the line of pure geometry of the sort that was performed by the Vágó architects and which can also be found at the Árkád Bazaar in Budapest (1908- 1909) and the Savings Alföldi Bank of Debrecen (1911), at present demolished. A year later, the Budapest Bazaar would pave the way to the bold solution adopted at the Darvas-La Roche mansion in Oradea (1910). One can find at the Bazaar elements that were to become features of the Moskovits Palace also: elegant elongated bow windows, emerging from the pulsating curls of the façade, which unify the windows of three floors in a single plane. This effect emphasizes the vanguard approach of the wall - a screen that is warping according to the norms of a distinct individual tectonic. The decorative solution chosen in Oradea by the two architects is very interesting. The comprehensive plan with its subtle protuberances is decorated by means of a modular system whose modernity is derived from the Secession design applied in Vienna by Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos¹². Fortunately, the railing of the balconies has been preserved in its original state. The balconies of the façade, with their slight twist, mimic the basket shaped balconies of the Árkád Bazaar. Metal slats decorated with series of three spherical knobs render into visual language the elementary play “point - line - plane” celebrated especially in the

¹¹ Ioan ANDREESCU, Vlad GAIIVORONCHI, *Identitate..*, p. 109-110

¹² *Wege der Moderne Josef Hoffmann Adolf Loos*, (exhibition catalogue, Herausgeber ed., MAK Vienne , 2014), Basel, 2014, p. 27-28, p. 207.209, *passim*

work of Otto Wagner, one that is also found in the iron work designed by Mende Valér¹³.

We will come across the same modern concept in the courtyard at the metal railing and at the flight of stairs. Formerly, in the inner courtyard there used to be an elevator, but at present only nostalgic vestiges have remained. The whole concept is eurhythmic, developed around the repetitive motif of the square. Within the architectural space, architects have been praising the square a lot, in perfect concord with the Viennese Secession philosophy. The ubiquity of rectangular shape in the ceramic decoration of the façade and the iron hardware marks the distinctive sign of this kinship. This is precisely the argument that places the Moskovits Palace among the major achievements of modern architecture in Central Europe¹⁴. The combination of the corrugated plane of the curtain-façade and the modular point-like decoration is spectacular and shows how the Vagó Brothers adapted the ornamental Viennese solutions to their non-historicist and inorganic vision with respect to monumental design.

The Gendarmerie School: the Field of Mars visited by muses

The complex of buildings that today make up the university campus of Oradea is the most extensive and complex work of Vágó József, erected in the early period of his career¹⁵. In the short interval between the years 1912 and 1913, the young architect who was 35 at the time built an urban ensemble on the fringe of the city, according to a unitary architectural agenda and displaying a very modern artistic expression, in accordance with the international trends of the avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century. Stylistically, this ensemble is also marked by the geometric vision of Viennese school of architecture. Functionally, it meets the demands of social architecture, namely a military architecture program. The ensemble is cleared of any historicist inflections, in the spirit of the fundamental principle of modern design: “Form follows function”.

¹³ R. NOVICOV, *1900...*, p. 60-65

¹⁴ Mircea PAȘCA, *Arhitecții...*, Oradea, Arca, 2010, p. 33-35

¹⁵ R. NOVICOV, *1900...*, p. 66-73

As conceived by Vágó József, the former Gendarmerie School still remains today a modern multifunctional architectural complex, equipped with all the comfort of a civilized European settlement¹⁶. In the interwar period, it preserved the same destination, and after 1963 it was progressively turned into a university campus. For the contemporary perception, the beauty, logic design, functionalism and harmony of this vast interior space will most likely remain updated. The entire space is designed like a modern ideal fortress, in which the air, light and vegetation are freely intermingling. The exceptionally bright hallways have particular artistic effect, lighted through the filter of tiered circular concentric floors (fig. 2), which absorb and scatter the light that seemingly pierces tri-axial glass screens. This type of compact volumes, with glass walls counterpointed by pillars that unify two or more floors, take over and adapt the new solutions of the industrial architecture and of the great shops that were emerging in the epoch. The principle of circularity and unity is synthetically reflected in the projection of the campus. Like in a micro-cosmos, the main buildings are ordered in relation with a unique center. In a metonymic language, matching artistically the camp architecture, it's not hard to understand the presence of the cult of royalty, namely of Kaiser Franz Josef.

Let us not forget that we are not only in the eve of modern European architecture, but also in the last years of the Habsburg Empire. Consequently, in 1911 Vágó József conceived in Oradea the most modern military architectural program of the era. Suffice to compare the military complex created by him with the Royal School of Cadets, situated in close proximity, the latter built in 1898 by the famous architect Alpár Ignác from Budapest. The two military campuses of Oradea are within an interval of only thirteen years and a hundred meters away, but in fact there is an entire century between them, if considering the difference in vision. The detail that makes the crucial difference is to be found on the top floor of the Gendarmerie School, which was terraced. Thus, the two ample symmetrical terraces, very modern from the point of view of architectural expression, included the building in the vanguard vision of the garden-town¹⁷. One will find in the epoch several terraced roofs with austere elegance, for example the Stoclet

¹⁶ Mircea PAȘCA, *Arhitectii...*, Oradea, Arca, 2010, p. 36-49; A. LAMBRICHS, *József Vágó...*, p.118-123

¹⁷ A. LAMBRICHS, *József Vágó...*, p. 269-272

Palace in Brussels (J. Hoffmann), the Habich House in Darmstadt (J.M. Olbricht), the Oack Park Villa, Illinois (F.L. Wright), the Wagner Villa in Vienna (O. Wagner) etc.

Back to the environment of Oradea, that's to say in the fringes of the empire, one can state that the Gendarmerie School designed by Vágó József, given its utter novelty at the time, does also tell us that this city, with its eclectic architecture as dominant, mostly fancying conventional and institutionalized values of the time (for example, the highly emblematic neoclassical Theater, a Fellner & Helmer creation, was only built in 1899), was welcoming the most daring space solutions of the European avant-garde, as interpreted by a young, schooled, brave and intelligent architect. The urban design is notable for its austere elegance, specifically the high wrought iron fence similar to the one of the Stoclet Palace in Brussels and identical to the fence surrounding the Schiffer Mansion. This minimalist elegance is a characteristic feature for the entire iron hardware that makes up public venues created by the Vágó architects, regarded as an interface for the relationship between public and private spaces. We will meet the same modern vision at the ironwork fittings of the Róth House, the last work of Valér Mende in Oradea (1912-1913). Discrete, always subduing the concept of volumetric assembly, with a monumental and functionalist aspect, its decoration is seasoning monumental buildings with refinement. The organic undulations are derived from the flexibility of wrought iron. Thus, we will come across floral chalices with rosettes and knobs along the lines of organically growing trails, spirals and ovals. This beauty of the organic rhythms of growth is always caught in geometric rigor, in the calm and balance of the square, of the rhombus and of the ellipse. The ironware and stained glass windows interior remain always geometric. The discreet and refined beauty of the stained glass is augmented by the stucco decoration of the ceilings. Here we find the same appraisal of rectangular geometry. But the most richly decorated stained glass technique has been fortunately preserved in the vast arched windows on the ground floor, with the original destination as building headquarters of the Commandment. Placed eccentrically and elusively, the building lets us discover two glass "star gates", which disperse light into a range of opalescent shades of gray. The decorative rhythm, the subtle differences between the motifs, the discretion and refinement of color are exceptional. The voice of geometry is being repetitively invoked everywhere, along with the message of light, and

also the voice of archetypes that transcend ephemeral organic growth. Modular forms, with an impeccable artistic composition, reminiscent of the Vienna or Glasgow school rigor, bring back the spirit of an austere elegance that is shaped with discipline and should animate and ennoble a military school that functions under the tutelage of an Imperial authority.

“Some rusty bars” or the vanguard urban design in Oradea

The Vágó architects projected their vision not only onto the architecture of Oradea, but also on its urban furniture. Still completely neglected up to the day, with its ironware savagely corroded, with its concrete pillars damaged or collapsed into the waters of Crisul Repede River, the concrete and metal parapet created by Vágó László between 1910 and 1911 constitutes a unique assemble of urban furniture on the left bank of the river (fig.3). This work ranks Oradea on the line of the most modern European style of the early twentieth century¹⁸. We emphasize the fact that the parapet is a remarkable embodiment of the objects created in the famous “Wiener Werkstatte” in the field of urban design. In fact, the assemble - which has been not long ago described in the press as “more than half a century old rusty metal bars” and threatened to be dismantled - is really one of the most valuable and elegant examples of European urban furniture, with a venerable age of a century, but looking more modern than any other of Oradea contemporary urban design elements. Impeccably smart, conceived *avant la lettre* according to the principle of “less is more”, the parapet on the banks of Crisul Repede River was designed in 1910 and built in 1911. From the perspective of European avant-garde, the modernity of the parapet has particular refinement, distinction and harmonious proportions, qualities that enroll it in the illustrious family of elite artifacts. The design of the metal parapet of Oradea was anticipating the generation of so-called “rationalist architects” that were active after the First World War, pro constructivist and anti-decorative. Its design was the perfect artistic expression of the new industrial era. Today it is obvious how its geometry, devoid of any ornament, leads unequivocally to the typology of modular of serial industrial motives.

¹⁸ R. NOVICOV, *1900...*, p. 74-75, M. PAȘCA, *Arhitecti...*, p 51, p. 200; Zoltan, PETER.I., *Trei secole de Arhitectură orădeană*, Oradea, Muzeul Țării Crișurilor, 2003, p. 72

Mende Valér - the fascination of the new industrial era

The Róth House, finished in 1912, was the last building designed by the young architect Valér Mende in Oradea. Although he was only 26 years old, this work is of particular importance not only for the architecture of Oradea. It establishes a fundamental shift in architectural vision, namely it adopts a mostly purged formal language, openly inspired from the vision of the Viennese avant-garde school and by Berlin functionalism¹⁹. The three axes of the façade are perfectly identical, as they are the product of a serial type spatial vision, emphasized by the symmetry of the composition.

Mende recedes from the influences of medieval vernacular or peasant architecture and shifts towards the modern architecture of elegant forms that bear no historicist or rhetorical accents. Architecture becomes again playing upon shapes²⁰, with all allusive, nostalgic and romantic elements left behind. The decoration is minimal and it is rather pointing to the forms, instead of bestowing them symbolic meanings. As in the cases of Olbrich or Josef Hoffmann, the crowning of the building becomes very important, even if it has no functional role - or precisely because of this. The rigor and plasticity of this architecture, unique in Oradea and in architecture of Mende, can be related to both the Viennese Modernism and to the Art School in Glasgow, finished in 1909. The three-axis modular building, the fluid passage with metal guardrail of the first floor, the protuberated balconies and the three brick pilasters are expressions of modernist aesthetics (fig.4), thus closer to the impersonal world of the industrial age than to the romantic or nostalgic myths of the “Arts and Crafts” kind.

The architectural vision of Valér Mende was unique: the building units of the edifice are modular and serial, as well as the ceramic decoration. Semicircular balconies seem to unfold from the vertical plan, merely suggesting the existence of the third dimension. The decoration is minimal, bearing just a slight accent. The iron wrought stairwell is

¹⁹ R. NOVICOV, *1900...*, p. 40-43; M.PAȘCA, *Arhitecți budapeșteni în Oradea anilor 1900*, Oradea, Primus, 2013, p. 41

²⁰ Stanford, ANDERSON, *Peter Behrens and a New Architecture for the Twentieth Century*, The MIT Press. , (2000). p. 252

also simplified and its linear decorative motifs are pointed. The patio is very narrow but supply articulated like a warped anti-gravitational space.

Zero meridian of the 1900 Zeitgeist

The Roche - Darvas Mansion, along with the Moskovits II House and the current building of the University, could enroll Oradea in the prestigious list of European avant-garde architecture. If you were to name a tutelary spirit of architectural environment that they created in Oradea, a guard angel of the city, then this would definitely be the gracious solitary Atlantean, with no match whatsoever in the entire European Art Nouveau, who is melancholically embracing a starry sky, thus for a while preventing it from reflowing into itself (fig.1). A distinct figurehead of the Darvas - La Roche Mansion, the Atlantean constitutes the modern hieroglyph of the modern city of Oradea, and due to its esoteric significance he establishes a subtle zero meridian of the 1900 Zeitgeist at the eastern borders of Central Europe.

English version Nicolaie Ardelean