

Patrimonialisation of Hungarian Art Nouveau Architecture in the Carpathian Basin through the example of Budapest, Bratislava, Tîrgu Mureş and Subotica¹

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Abstract

By representing the national independence goals, the national style, Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture bore a strong identity constructing character in the Carpathian Basin. Notwithstanding, these aspects led not only to many misunderstandings towards Art Nouveau heritage, but they also influenced its afterlife. For almost half a century, no serious attempts have been made to re-evaluate it. This paper shows an on-going PhD research, which is a comparative analysis of the “*patrimonialisation*” (heritagization) process of this national Art Nouveau architecture diachronically and synchronically in Budapest (Hungary), Bratislava (Slovakia), Subotica (Serbia) and Tîrgu Mureş (Romania). The way in which Art Nouveau architecture was understood and treated by the Hungarian, Slovak, Serbian, and Romanian society in the territorial unit of the Habsburg Monarchy and within the new borders (after World War I) will be discussed in the doctoral thesis through the example of four representative buildings. The critical analysis will enable us to reveal the changing mentality towards the style and the differences of the national monument protection procedures in each city. The aim of this research is to reconstruct the *patrimonialisation* (‘heritagization’) process of the style, the way in which it was treated and the way it has become a part of our cultural heritage.

Keywords: Hungarian Art Nouveau, national style, heritage preservation, patrimonialisation, monument protection, identity-building, Budapest, Bratislava, Subotica, Tîrgu Mureş

¹ Doctoral thesis in progress in cotutelle program between Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest (Atelier Department of European Social Sciences and Historiography) and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales of Paris (École Doctorale Territoires, Sociétés, Développement) under the supervision of Dr. Gábor Sonkoly and Éric Michaud.

I. Introduction

In recent years, we have been witnessing the blooming of Art Nouveau architectural heritage all around Europe, which could be understood as the crowning achievement of many decades' attempts and struggles dedicated to re-evaluating it. In parallel with the European tendencies, we can also note the reinterpretation and growing popularity of Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture. This is well illustrated by the fact that following the inscription of the major works by the Catalan Antonio Gaudi and the Belgian Victor Horta on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the architecture of Ödön Lechner, the most well known Hungarian Art Nouveau master, has been added to the Tentative List in 2008.² The year of 2014 was of special importance to the "Lechnerian" heritage, as UNESCO officially commemorated the 100th anniversary of the death of the architect. Furthermore, an increasing number of scientific and touristic publications, exhibitions and alternative city walks, all promote and proclaim Art Nouveau as being part of our cultural heritage. But it was not always like this.

The contemporary reception of this kind of architectural style, which evolved on the turn of the 19th and 20th century by sending new aesthetical, social and political messages was far from appreciated. Moreover, the opinions of posterity were mixed, but predominantly negative for a long time. This is due to the complexity of Art Nouveau, with it being modern, international, national, and traditional at the same time, which has been often misunderstood for over half a century. Art Nouveau in Central Europe, as well as in other parts of Europe, was disdained for a long time both for aesthetic and political reasons.³ Hence with rare exceptions, until the 1970 – 1980s, one cannot talk about sufficient monument protections, which often lead to the loss of some remarkable heritage. Due to the change in mentality towards Art Nouveau, the most significant buildings started to be protected as collective values not only on national levels, but also on a worldwide scale. Of course, one cannot talk about an exclusive success, as the practices of the monument protection at national and regional levels are different, often completely missing.

One must question for how long? – and why? – Art Nouveau has had a special cultural and historical value and how it has been preserved in Europe. This paper presents an on-going PhD research, which aims to shed light on this question in case of the Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture in territory of the Carpathian Basin.⁴ The

² UNESCO. Tentative List, *Ödön Lechner's independent pre-modern architecture*, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5366/>, accessed 10 May 2013.

³ Based on the results of a Master thesis, which was completed in TEMA Erasmus Mundus European Master Course, European Territories (Civilisation, Nation, Region, City): Identity and Development in Budapest, Prague and Paris. See. Lilla Zámbo, 'Preservation History of Art Nouveau Heritage in Hungary, Czech Lands and France', unpublished MA thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, Charles University of Prague, 2013.

⁴ The Carpathian Basin (or the Pannonian Basin) is a large basin situated in the southeastern part of Central Europe, which forms a topographically discrete unit set in the European landscape, surrounded by imposing geographic boundaries: the Carpathian Mountains, the Alps, the Dinarides and the Balkan mountains. The Danube and Tisa rivers divide the basin roughly in half. In terms of modern state boundaries, the basin is centred in the territory of Hungary, but it also extends to Northern Serbia,

dissertation is a comparative analysis of the *patrimonialisation* (heritagization) process of the style diachronically and synchronically in Budapest (Hungary), Bratislava (Slovakia), Subotica (Serbia) and Tîrgu Mureş (Romania) and its relation to the identity building politics in the 20th century.⁵ The main objective of the research is to reconstruct the way in which Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture was understood and treated by the Hungarian, Slovak, Serbian, and Romanian society in the territorial unit of the Habsburg Monarchy and within the new borders (after World War I). The critical analysis will enable us to reveal the changing mentality towards the style and the specificities in the national version of preservation history of Art Nouveau heritage as well as its common characteristics during the last century.

Considering the limits of this paper, first, I highlight the peculiarities of Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture; second, I present the methodology, the main research questions, the sources and the current state of my PhD research.

Central Croatia and Slavonia, western Slovakia, the Eastern Slovak Lowland (including the southwestern tip of Ukraine), western parts of Romania, and the eastern tips of Slovenia and Austria.

⁵ By the French term *patrimonialisation* (heritagization in English) I mean the socio-cultural (legal and political) processes by which heritage is constructed. See. Cristina Sánchez-Carretero: 'Significance and social value of Cultural Heritage: Analysing the fractures of Heritage', in M.A. Rogerio-Candelera et al (eds): *Science and Technology for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (London, 2013) pp. 388—389.

II.- Hidden Dimensions of the Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture

1. Art Nouveau as the *National style*

In Central Europe under the political and cultural pressure of the Habsburg Monarchy (from 1867 Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), Art Nouveau was ideally suited to the political programmes of the emerging nations and towns, which wanted to free themselves from centralized Austrian control. In parallel with European tendencies, which aimed to renew and modernize art alongside to integrate the local specificities, Art Nouveau often represented the quest for the *national style*, especially in the case of Hungary.⁶

Consequently, Art Nouveau architecture was regarded as form of struggle for national independence (that claim arose since the middle of the 19th century) and democratic reforms as it could express not only the sovereignty of nations by using the peculiar manifestations and traditions of national (regional and local) culture, but also that of modernity itself.⁷ Hence, in the territory of the Habsburg Monarchy the specified program of the Art Nouveau (*Secession*) was not only the purification of previous academic practices, but it also signified the liberation from the foreign German and Austrian influences.⁸

For this reason, by Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture, I mean that bulk of architectural works, which were designed by Hungarian architects, mainly by Ödön Lechner and his followers (like Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab) in the spirit of creating a national style, the „Hungarian language of form”, during the turn of the 19th and 20th century in the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary, that formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Meanwhile, in addition to Hungarian Art Nouveau, many other European trends were also present due to the unfolding international relations, which resulted wider dissemination of the style. The influence of the French, Belgian, French, German, Austrian and Finnish architecture are obvious and they further developed the architectural heritage of the Carpathian Basin.⁹

⁶ Katalin Keserü: “The Transformation of Architectural Thinking in Central Europe at the Turn of the 20th Century”, in K. Keserü (ed): *The Beginning of Modernism in Central European Architecture: Polish, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian Architectural Writings at the Turn of the 20th Century*, (Budapest, 2005) pp. 17—25.

⁷ The importance and use of art and architecture in nation building process has already proved by many scholars. See. Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (eds): *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

⁸ Katalin Keserü: *A századforduló* (Budapest, 2007), p. 193.

⁹ See. N. G. Bowe: *Art and the national dream: the search for vernacular expression in turn of the century design*, Dublin 1993; J.Y. Andrieux, F. Chevallier, A. K. Nevanlinna: *Idée nationale et architecture en Europe, 1860-1919: Finlande, Hongrie, Roumanie, Catalogne*, Paris 2006; K. Keserü: *A századforduló*, Budapest 2007; Moraványszky Á., *Építészet Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchiában 1867-1918.*, Corvina, Budapest 1988; B. Girveau: „Central Europe, Art Nouveau and nationalism”, in: K. Tahara: *Art Nouveau architecture*, London-New York 2000; A. Babics: *Parallels between Hungarian and Scottish Art Nouveau: The Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest and the Glasgow School of Art*, Final Thesis, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest 2011; Gellér K.: *A magyar szecesszió*, Budapest 2004; Gerle J., Kovács A., Makovecz I.: *A századforduló magyar építészetete*, Budapest 1990; Girveau B.: *Central Europe, Art Nouveau and nationalism*, in: K. Tahara: *Art Nouveau architecture*, London-New York 2000. pp. 318—324.

2. Methodology, research questions, sources

In order to highlight properly the change in the way of thinking about Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture and its patrimonialisation process I use the following periodization in my doctoral thesis, which is based on Stephan Tschudi-Madsen's, who used the same three time scales by examining the historiography of Art Nouveau:

- Contemporary perception of Art Nouveau and the “Prehistory” of Monument Protection (1890s-1940s)
- Evolving Monument Protection (1950s-1970s)
- New perspectives: European organizations and the World Heritage (from 1980s).¹⁰

Furthermore, to reveal the connection between Art Nouveau architecture and the given society the concept, which the French art historian, Françoise Bercé, called *contemporary life of monuments*, is worth noting. Bercé noted “the old architecture is only as much admired and protected as the present-day society recognizes its own reference point in it”.¹¹ Therefore, the contemporary life of a monument is the fructification of affections felt by a generation towards the record of the past. The want of these subconscious affections could lead to the neglect of monuments. Besides, Françoise Choay linked this phenomenon to the identity-forming function of our monuments.¹² As Choay highlighted, ‘our diverse monuments do not have value in themselves any longer but because we have built them [...] they are fragments of a generic representation of ourselves’.¹³ These concepts can be completed by the urban space theory of David Harvey, who highlighted the three basic categories of spatial experience, among them the *symbolic space* experience category, which means experiencing through the interpretation of symbolic representation.¹⁴ According to Harvey “the shaping of space which goes on in architecture and, therefore, in the city is symbolic of our culture, symbolic of the existing social order, symbolic of our aspirations, our needs, and our fears”.¹⁵ Moreover, one of the most interesting aspects in art and architecture, as he noted, is the fact that spatial form can be manipulated in different ways to yield various symbolic meanings. Based on his theories, spatial

¹⁰ S.Tchudi Madsen : „The perception of Art Nouveau: historiography”, in International Symposium of Réseau Art Nouveau Network in the framework of ‚Art Nouveau in Progress‘ project, 24-25 October 2002, Wien. pp. 9–12. Consulted on: <http://www.artnouveau-net.eu> Accessed on [20 January 2013]

¹¹ Françoise Bercé: „Műemlékek és „kortársi létük”, in P. Erdősi, G. Sonkoly (eds): *A kulturális örökség* (Budapest, 2004) p.347.

¹² Françoise Choay : *L'Allégorie du patrimoine* (Paris, 1992).

¹³ Françoise Choay cited by Kázmér Kovács. See. Kázmér Kovács : *Monument Preservation in Central Europe* (Budapest, 1999) p. 16.

¹⁴ D. Harvey : „Social Processes and Spatial Forms”, in D. Harvey: *Social Justice and the City*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973. p. 28.

¹⁵ Harvey, *Social cit.*, p. 31.

symbolism plays a significant role in affecting individual and collective human behaviour e.g. the perception and the protection of monuments.

Considering Bercé's, Choay's and Harvey's concepts, in the first period of my analysis (from the 1890s to the first realization of the monument protection) I examine the symbolic qualities of Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture through the example of four case studies for revealing those identity-constructing elements, which became reference points concerning its protection during the second and third phases. The most expressive way for this analysis is to choose relevant public buildings or buildings, which are functioning as public spaces from each city, since they represent the public sentiment of their own age.¹⁶ Through their history from the constructions till the preservation processes we are able to reconstruct the change in public sentiment towards each of the buildings and towards the style in general. Thus, the primary sources of my research are the following buildings, which were typically created in the spirit of the Hungarian national style and which can be found today in Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia and Romania:

- Budapest: *Museum of Applied Arts* (1892) by Ödön Lechner
- Bratislava: *Church of St. Elizabeth of the Árpád dynasty, "Blue Church"* (1909 – 1911) by Ödön Lechner
- Subotica: *Synagogue* (1900 – 1902) by Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab
- Tîrgu Mureş: *Cultural Palace* (1911 – 1913) by Marcell Komor, Dezső Jakab.

In the second part of my analysis, I focus primarily on the following questions: how did the different national (Hungarian, Romanian, Serbian and Slovak) contexts and identity-building practices influence the perception and the protection of the style throughout the 20th century in the Carpathian Basin? Whether the representation of Art Nouveau architecture as the Hungarian national style contributed or hindered the preservation of the buildings of Ödön Lechner, Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab in Budapest, Bratislava, Subotica and Tîrgu Mureş?

According to my hypothesis, Art Nouveau architecture (due to its complex nature) had more remarkable identity-building power than the previous historical styles. In Central Europe and especially in the case of the Carpathian Basin, it played an obvious role in the national, but also in the regional and local identity-building processes, which influenced its perception and protection, sometimes in a negative way. In my opinion, the reception and the recognition of Art Nouveau are always linked to

¹⁶ K. Keserü: „Nemzeti gondolat a 19. század magyar építészetében. Az egyetemestől a regionális stílusig”, in K. Keserü: *Magyar művészet az osztrák önkényuralom és a dualizmus időszakában*, Budapest, Szababölcsész, 2006.

the identity-building factors of the style, and also the identity-construction politics of the given era in Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia and Romania. For this reason, one can also draw conclusions from the status of the Art Nouveau architectural heritage to the state of the identity-construction.

3. Cultural Palace of Tîrgu Mureş (1911 – 1913) and its modern, national, regional and local characteristics

The last part of this paper intends to present the current state of my research, which has been focusing on the Cultural Palace of Tîrgu Mureş, designed by Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab, from the region called Transylvania of Romania and its different identity-building factors.

As it was emphasized earlier, Art Nouveau could adapt apart from the international principles to the local traditions of each culture.¹⁷ Indeed, Hungarian Art Nouveau intertwined with international, European innovations and national elements, which mainly emerged in the ornamentation and the specific design of the buildings. In the case of Ödön Lechner, the national character was derived from Hungarian folk art tradition and many times from Eastern and Asian art. These elements were often supplemented by local traditions and characteristics. The idea of creating a Hungarian national style and the „Lechnerian“ design based on folk ornaments inspired many of his contemporaries such as Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab who dedicated their work to spreading Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture throughout the territory of the Carpathian Basin.¹⁸

In general, one can state that the identity-building characters of Art Nouveau were both connected to its spatial condition and its inspirations, which are worth considering in some depth.

Art Nouveau was an international and principally urban (cosmopolitan) phenomenon, but it also had its local variants in each country.¹⁹ The spatial condition of the style indicated not only its international, but also its modern identity-forming aspect. Considering the classical conceptual works to the modern urban domain provided by Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and Marshall Berman, Gábor Gyáni argues that the primary scene of modernity was the nineteenth century European city: “modernity is primarily articulated in space, more precisely, in the city’s space and it is embodied by and experienced in the city”.²⁰ Moreover Gyáni stresses the importance of modernity as historical phenomenon since it was among the first tangible developments, which was able to create identity.²¹ Gyáni’s claim that the modernity has an identity-forming character should be considered in our case, despite the fact that later the word was monopolized by the twentieth century and its new styles. In fact, due to 50 years of

¹⁷ Jeremy Howard : *Art Nouveau, International and national styles in Europe* (Manchester-NewYork, 1996) p. 7.

¹⁸ Várallyay Réka: *Komor Marcell, Jakab Dezső* (Budapest, 2010).

¹⁹ Paul Greenhalgh: “Art Nouveau: The first International Modern Style.” Advanced keynote speech at coupDefouet International Congress, Barcelona, November 19, 2012. Accessed March 10, 2013. http://www.artnouveau.eu/en/congress_videos.php#news_37.

²⁰ Gábor Gyáni: ‘Térbeli fordulat és a várostörténet’, *Korunk*, 18: 7 (2007) 6–7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

hostile criticism and great uninterest, Art Nouveau was able only to enter the academic discourse, art, and architecture faculties as the first modern initiative in recent years.²²

Therefore, the modern international practice based, but locally unique works of the Art Nouveau had started to appear in Tîrgu Mureş from the beginning of the 1890s. Tîrgu Mureş is the seat of Mureş County in the historical region called Transylvania, which has been forming part of Romania since 1920.²³ The city is considered as the center of the Transylvanian Art Nouveau.²⁴ The buildings are all in a different state, but there are still more than one hundred public and residential Art Nouveau monuments, that were erected under the aegis of the enlightened, cosmopolitan and open-minded mayor Dr. György Bernády, who wanted to develop the town into a modern city.

After the great success of the Town Hall (1905 – 1906), which was also built in Hungarian Art Nouveau style, the architect duo Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab was entrusted with the design and construction of the Palace of Culture. The building was intended to be the sanctuary of culture and art for Transylvania with its modern and well-equipped concert hall (with a 4463-pipe organ), just as with its different cultural institutions.

The other identity-building characters of Art Nouveau were connected to the major inspirations of the style. Paul Greenhalgh emphasizes three core sources that the essence of Art Nouveau emerged from: History, Nature and Symbolism.²⁵ Furthermore, Greenhalgh identifies two ways of ‘using’ history. The first was more related to the own historical memory of the people, since Art Nouveau designers were seeking after the ancient (often forgotten) history and tradition of their culture. On one hand, this could mean the search for the national origins and myths, on the other hand, the quest for certain regional or local traditions. Indeed, apart from the national past, the regional and local history played a major role in the design of the Palace of Culture.²⁶

The decoration and the design of the impressive spaces, like the historical themed paintings by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch, the huge mosaic picture entitled "Veneration of Hungaria" on the facade, the decorative painting in the lobby by Elek Falus, the stained glass windows depicting hun and Transylvanian (Szekler) ballads and legends by Sándor Nagy, Miksa Róth and Ede Toroczkai Wigand, are all representing special elements and figures from the national, regional and local history.²⁷

To conclude, the Palace of Culture is at the same time the masterpiece of Lechnerian Art Nouveau style, the embodiment of the Hungarian aspirations of the artist colony of Gödöllő, the milestone of the "Transylvanian Art Nouveau" and the representation of the *Transylvanian spirit*.

²² Paul Greenhalgh: "Art Nouveau: The first International Modern Style." Advanced keynote speech at coupDefouet International Congress, Barcelona, November 19, 2012. Accessed March 10, 2013. http://www.artnouveau.eu/en/congress_videos.php#news_37.

²³ Following defeat in World War I, in 1920, the Treaty of Trianon established a new border between Romania and Hungary, leaving the whole of Transylvania within the Romanian state.

²⁴ Keresztes Gyula: *Marosvásárhely szecessziós épületei* (Marosvásárhely 2000).

²⁵ The Proceedings of Paul Greenhalgh, *Inventing the Ideal City, the Narratives and Symbolism of Art Nouveau*, <http://www.artnouveau-net.eu/portals/0/data/COLLOQUIA/colloquium-proceedings>, accessed March 10, 2013.

²⁶ János Gerle : *Lechner Ödön* (Budapest, 2003), Petr Wittlich : *Prague: fin de siècle* (Cologne, 1999) 13. Petr Wittlich : „ Art Nouveau in Czechoslovakia”, in H-D. Dyroff (ed): *Art Nouveau/Jugendstil Architecture in Europe* (Bonn, 1988) p. 38.

²⁷ Oniga Erika (ed): *A marosvásárhelyi Kultúrpalota 1908-1913* (Marosvásárhely 2013).

However, these aspects led to many misunderstandings and animosities towards the building, (even in the academic discourses on this style). The short-lived style reached its pinnacle of popularity at the turn of the century, soon, however, Art Nouveau started to be criticized by the contemporaries of this period. Aesthetical, political and economic reasons generated the critiques, which were mainly produced by conservative, academic circles: “for a long time the style was remained the main example of bad taste [...] for almost half century, no serious attempts have been made to re-evaluate it.”²⁸ After World War I, it was not just the political situation that had changed, but the architectural thinking of this period was reformulated as well.

In general, in the new political systems and the changed ideological circumstances of Central Europe the endless variants of Art Nouveau were misunderstood and attacked for its foreign (Hungarian), cosmopolite, liberal elements and often for its Jewish associations (many promoters and artists were of Jewish origin).²⁹ The connection between Art Nouveau architecture, the Monarchy and the Hungarian epoch disastrously contributed to the perception of the style in the following decades. Due to its modern and urban character, it was often associated with the bourgeoisie lifestyle too, and would later return as a swearword in the posterity’s discourse (firstly in the new Modernist canon of the 1920s).³⁰ To conclude, several critics were against the new style, because they associated it with certain values, social classes, or groups. Furthermore, the modern, national and independent aspects of Art Nouveau in general in the Carpathian Basin were often misunderstood, hidden or totally forgotten for a long time.

Due to several political and ideological changes of the last century in Romania and in the territory of the Carpathian Basin, certain decorative elements of the Palace of Culture were systematically removed. For example, the relief, which was representing the coronation of Franz Joseph as King of Hungary, has been stored in the basement of the Palace of Culture for decades to protect them from potential damage. However, the perception of the building has completely changed in the last few decades and its preservation became not only a common aim on local (on the level of the different ethnic groups of the city), but also on national and international levels. For this reason, the Palace of Culture has been considered both as international (European), national, regional and local heritage.

III. Conclusion

This paper does not intend to draw any conclusion yet as the PhD research has been in processing. Although, at this stage of my research it is possible to summarize that apart from the common modern and international concept, Art Nouveau had its own variants, shapes and responses from city to city with seemingly many contradictory internal

²⁸ Moravánszky, *Competing*, 105.

²⁹ Rudolf Klein argued that Art Nouveau (combined with orientalism) architecture provided a good tool for Jewish people in the process of cultural assimilation. See. Rudolf Klein : „A szecesszió: un gou't juif?: A szecessziós építészet és a zsidóság kapcsolata a Monarchiában”, in: *Múlt és jövő* 19: 4 (2008) pp. 5—33.

³⁰ Frank Russel (ed.): *Art nouveau Architecture* (London, 1979) p. 17.

elements, which were perceived differently by diverse political regimes and societies of the last century. Art Nouveau is composed of elements that at the same time can be considered modern, traditional, international, national, but also regional and local. The complex nature of Art Nouveau appears in the different operations of its protection. As it has been emphasized that the patrimonialisation history of Art Nouveau heritage has been marked by an essential identity building process, and its preservation transfers our self-images from us.³¹

For this reason, I would like to believe that my research can contribute to the better understanding of our unique architectural heritage.

³¹ Sonkoly, Gábor : “The social history of cultural heritage protection in Hungary”, in J. Purchla (ed): *Protecting and Safeguarding Cultural Heritage. The Systems of management of the cultural heritage in the Visegrad centres*, (Cracow, 2010) pp.11—30.