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Edit Lantos

Roman Catholic Ecclesiastical Architecture in Hungary

1945–1970.

PhD thesis - abstract

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Research aims

This thesis focuses on an architectural topic which has not been discussed in detail as yet. My research is, firstly, concerned with defining the size and character of the architectural material. Secondly, it was essential to identify the works of Bertalan Árkay, one of the remarkable creators of art history, and to include a thorough examination of László Csaba's emblematic churches. Thirdly, the research generated questions regarding the historical background, the feasibility and public awareness, and a potential future inspection of the full architectural material.

Chosen research methods

Looking for, identifying, and processing contemporary sources were indispensable to expose the topic. This involved, beside researching documents in national and church archives, a survey of contemporary church media publications. From the present, local diocesan histories, schemas, and historical summaries yielded the most, but naturally I have surveyed the relevant reports of architectural history. Researching sources and surveying architecture together indicated how fundamentally important it is to approach historical material and its critical reading without preconceived ideas.

Main research findings

The first of my six chapters describes the methodology I employed. Later, I go on to discuss the size of the architectural material and the tendencies of morphological solutions. I provide the numerical data pertaining to building conversions and new constructions, decade by decade. Uncovering the varieties of morphology and final result shows well how the ideas of designers and commissioners changed. Buildings utilizing historical morphology represent the historically important material. Traditional ground-floor plans and facades, building masses and decorations represent two different directions. One is planning in a style, i. e. aligning the church's proportions and details with a certain historical sign. The other direction indicates a simplification of historical forms, in which the pre-war renewal of ecclesiastical architecture can be detected.

Chapter two contains a brief introduction of the period's historical background. Political decisions affected commissioners and the financial and regulatory background of building works directly. This section of my thesis starts with a refutation of statements cemented in professional thinking (e.g. regulations prescribing the location, size, and look of churches, or a ban against building belltowers). Next, the more important political events and decisions are

surveyed. The number of buildings indicates the effect of political and social changes which affected building works, even though this number is sometimes surprising. Between 1950–1959, for example, we can see the number of newly built churches rise, despite central anti-religion directives. According to current research, this can be explained by the not negligible local power games and small communities promoting their own interests, in the face of central directives.

In chapter three, I survey present-day and contemporary architectural literature. Today's international work is characterized by a variety of tones and aspects of assessment. In Western-European and American literature, besides purely aesthetic approaches, we come across with architects' individual ideas, everyday architectural practice, the points of building users, and even morphological repetitions (in some cases, designs of type). I deemed it important to study which aspects of church architecture present-day designers have come across, and whether there have been any special problems of form related to the given building type. For this, I surveyed the relevant writings which appeared in architectural periodicals, as well as better known summaries of the ecclesiastical architecture of the time. Present day and contemporary sources highlight that the description and evaluation of formal aspects or special designs do not take precedence. Expectations raised by commissioners regarding the number of churches to be built, their design and liturgical adequacy, are equally important in architectural histories written after 1999, as are the financial circumstances and potentials of building works. It became evident that there are significant differences between approaches to present day and contemporary descriptions. Sources from the time the churches were built place more emphasis on historical forms, practical approach, the high-standard but cost-effective execution of buildings, the variety of building materials, and adapting to environment and local expectations.

The thesis continues with the description of Bertalan Árkay's ecclesiastical architecture. The post-1945 works of the designer of the historically significant Városmajor church have not been widely known before. Therefore, my discussion of his life's work is based on two questions. First, I had to identify Árkay's churches. Second, I had to clarify the significance these have in the history of architecture.

This research attributes 15 fully built churches, one started but later demolished church, and numerous heritage-status or technical renovations to Árkay. His work, considering the churches' rank, can be divided into two groups. The churches of Gerjen, Hort, and Taksony all belong to the more grandiose buildings, with regard to their sizes and elaborateness. Although their reception in professional literature is varied, I found they fit into the pre-war renewal in ecclesiastical architecture: Gerjen és Hort through employing historical forms, and

Taksony with the church's authentic. Further examples indicate that after 1945, the movement merging modern and historical forms continued after 1945. Árkay's post-war works are related to this movement. Finally, I focus on Árkay's relationship with historicism, and the repetition of characteristic forms on the buildings. For the former, international examples prove the general tendency to upkeep traditional, historical structures of bulk and details. For the latter, likewise, international examples show the everyday architectural practice of repeating a design in part or in whole over and over again. Discussing this in terms of their place in the history of architecture is today part of professional discourse.

Chapter five discusses two modern churches designed by László Csaba: their evaluation in art history, the history of their erection and reception. My research uncovered the circumstances in which the churches of Cserépváralja and Hollóháza were designed and built. I have found hitherto unknown plans which show that in both places, the congregations' original ideas were for traditionally structured churches, with steeples over the frontal façade. At Cserépváralja, the costs of building, the restrictions of space, and a change of designer overwrote the original plan. At Hollóháza, Iparterv took over the construction work. Csaba's plans of the church at Cserépváralja indicate those elements of his building conception which he insisted on despite restrictions imposed on the ground plan. These elements are: emphatic use of rubble-concrete-glass, elevated ceiling above the altar and light effects illuminating that. An interview with the designer and Csaba's later writings prove that while planning a church, he was thinking in terms of the complete structure of special effects and side details, consciously composing single formal elements into one meaningful whole.

For Hollóháza, my research uncovered the exact time of planning and the circumstances of building works. Issues affecting planning are discussed separately. While at Cserépváralja, existing rubble and a ground space the size of a schoolroom determined planning between 1959–1960, at Hollóháza, Iparterv brought in the most up to date building technology and materials. At Cserépváralja, László Csaba fills the building materials, at Hollóháza, the front and inner shape of the church with biblical meaning. In my thesis, I point out contemporary and equally important international parallels for the asymmetrical bulk and special lighting of the church at Cserépváralja, and for the triangular or tent-like symbolic formal design of the church at Hollóháza. At the end of my chapter on the designer, I summarize the history of both churches' reception.

Lesser known buildings which gave answers to the formal problems of ecclesiastical architecture of the time and maintain their significance in an international context are discussed in a separate chapter. The church of Rakamaz (1949–1960) was designed by János Zsanda, that of Dunaharaszti (1958 and early 1961) by András Laczkovics, that of Kaskantyú

(1963) by Attila Kováts, and that of Hévíz-Fürdőtelep (1964–1969) by Ferenc Vándor. These buildings and plans are excellent examples for the regular cubic building trend of the time. The church of Szúcs (1967–1968), with its cylinder-shaped bulk and staged inner structure is one of its kind, and encourages an active liturgical participation in line with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. György Engelberth designed the church of Bodroghalom in 1962. Due to difficulty obtaining a building permission, the church was not consecrated until 1964. It is another example of the triangular symbolism shown at Hollóháza. The tent-shaped design had another variation at the time, one where the side walls do not run to the ground, however, the line of the roof are maintained by supports so that triangle-shapes are created in the sides and the back walls.

Main results of the thesis

The thesis focuses on uncovering the period's architectural material based on elementary research, the examination of material and ideological circumstances affecting the building works, and a closer knowledge of architects' means of information. The architectural material thus revealed means further potential research and approach. On a theoretical level, contemporary professional literature already open the way to put Hungarian church architecture into an international context.

I am the first to publish the list of post-1945 buildings designed by Bertalan Árkay, and the database of Roman Catholic church architecture in 1945-1970.

Publications related to the thesis topic

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Lantos Edit: 1958 és a templomépítés divatja. In: Ö. Kovács József–Kunt Gergely szerk.: *A politikai diktatúra társadalmiasítása: Nyelv, erőszak, kollaboráció, ellenállás, alkalmazkodás.* Miskolc, 2009. 30–43.

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