

Strand 1: Art Nouveau Cities: between cosmopolitanism and local tradition

STEPPING EASTWARDS: HIDDEN REALMS OF ART NOUVEAU

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As an Englishman, I would like to think that everything Art Nouveau (AN) and Arts & Crafts (A&C) stemmed from the work of my hero William Morris and his associates, and that the Red House, Bexley, Kent which Philip Webb built for him in 1858 to live in when first married led to all the AN and A&C architecture which followed. Apparently, however, the building went largely unnoticed until well after Morris's firm had established itself, but then later came to symbolize the kind of honesty and truth in architecture which for many had been lacking with the insistence on classical styles and the gothic revival.

Of course, it goes without saying that there were many other influences on the architects designing in the AN and A&C styles – the work of Sir Joseph Paxton at the Crystal Palace in London in Britain and Viollet-le-Duc's work and writings, to name but two, were also seminal.

In Britain, the work of architects such as Pugin, Mackmurdo, Ashbee, Norman Shaw and Voysey, and Pugin and Ruskin's writings, all helped move architecture and design towards An and A&C. Many doubt the presence of much pure AN architecture in England, though occasional examples exist (e.g. the Royal Arcade, Norwich: George Skipper, 1899). Whereas Mackintosh's buildings in Glasgow were designed in a full-blown and original AN style that was much fêted in Europe, especially by the Austrian Secessionists, for whom the linearity and cool simplicity were very close to their own ideas.

But what went on in Brussels and Paris, in Munich and Darmstadt, in Vienna and Prague filtered through to the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Many of these countries – Hungary and Poland being two clear examples – were trying to assert their independence, and in all areas of the arts, people were producing work which was different, had national associations; for them the AN style and A&C movement offered the kind of liberty these artists were looking for. And perhaps the most obvious manifestation, visible to all and sundry, was architecture.

In Hungary, the search for a national style was approached from two related directions. Ödön Lechner went right back to the art and style of the east, to what he considered to be the roots of Magyars. His Applied Arts Museum (1891-96) is a wonderful combination of modern steel and glass, Transylvanian folk art, and the eastern yurt! Károly Kós, on the other hand, stayed with his Transylvanian roots, using traditional wooden building styles to inform his architecture, such as his own house (Varjúvár – Crow Castle, 1909: Fig 1) in the remote hills near Sztána in Transylvania in what is now Romania, but was then considered to be – and largely still is - the heartland of Hungarian traditional design, and the more accessible buildings of Budapest Zoo which he worked on with Dezső Zrumecky from 1908.

Another vital element in the Hungarian AN and A&C movement was the establishment of the Artists' Colony in Gödöllő, a village some 25 km outside Budapest. The leading lights were the painters and designers Aladár Kriesch Körösfői and Sándor Nagy, who had houses built for them by István Medgyaszay, and attracted a group of applied artists to produce a wonderful array of artifacts in the same areas as Morris & Co had done for the previous 40 years. Indeed, the ideas and processes of Morris and the A&C Guilds, such as the one set up by C.R. Ashbee, were the overt bases of many of their ideas. They aimed to do this by the study of traditional Hungarian folk design and thereby create a modern national style. One of the masterpieces of their work is the Palace of Culture in Targu Mureş/Marosvásárhely in Transylvania, where they

decorated a building designed by architects Marcel Komor and Dezső Jakab (1908-11) with frescoes, painted wall patterns and a magnificent set of stained glass windows, as well as other fittings and furnishing produced by the Gödöllő group. It is truly one of Europe's greatest AN/A&C achievements.

(Fig 2). In terms of theme, the three large stained glass windows by Ede Toroczkaí-Wigand show imagined scenes from Hungarian history, while Sándor Nagy's show three scenes each from three traditional Hungarian folk ballads, while the style and coloration remain resolutely AN.

If the Hungarians were trying to shake off the influence of Austria – and it is extremely significant how few AN buildings in Budapest show the influence of the Vienna Secession style – then the Poles were trying to remove the shadow of the German, Russian *and* Austrian forces and influences which were dominating their country. As in Hungary, artists looked to historical and folk elements for their inspiration, while incorporating international forms of AN. Different artists pulled in different directions, using a range of folk/local models for their new designs; thus one finds Huzul traditions informing buildings in the cities of Lviv and Kiviv in the (now) Ukraine, Górale/Podhale traditions in the wooden villas in the Zakopane district. Elsewhere, earlier national styles were incorporated into contemporary AN; a good example of this is the Teatr Stary (Old Theatre) in Krakow. Here the architect and theorist Tadeusz Stryeński redesigned the theatre with Franciszek Mączyński (1903-06), and façade decorations in a Polish Renaissance AN style were done by Józef Gardecki (Fig 3).

Krakow is also the home of Stanisław Wyspiański, who is undoubtedly one of the outstanding thinkers and designers of his generation. The designs for the wall decorations in the gothic Franciscan Church of his home city are beautiful, but those for the stained glass windows are remarkable and radical. In their originality and flamboyance, they are as exciting and original as anything done by Hector Guimard at

Castel Béranger (1896) in Paris, ÖdönLechner on his Post Office Savings Bank (1899) in Budapest or AntoniGaudí on Casa Batlló (1904) in Barcelona.

The window showing God in the act of the creation (1895-1902) is breathtaking in colour and form (Fig 4) and is complemented by all of his other windows showing explosions of floral and other life. Truly a magnum opus.

Romania had a different approach to incoming AN and A&C styles. As an already-established kingdom, it was not trying to dispel the loom of outside empires. One historical influence on Romanian architecture at the end of the 19th century – like Serbia and Bulgaria – were the long-standing Byzantine-Orthodox cultural elements. Another was the traditional rural style of buildings from the regions of Moldavia and Walachia. The model and starting point for much of this second style of architectural work was Ion Mincu's *Buffet la Sosea* (Boulevard Buffet) of 1892, which features elements such as coloured 'folk' ceramic decoration, porches with wooden supports, towers and a mixture of round-headed and 'oriental' arches. It was used for large-scale public buildings such as museums and schools, as well as for smaller scale villas, both in the capital Bucharest and in provincial centres.

Running alongside the national styles of AN and A&C architecture, there are also plenty of buildings which do not exhibit local styles. It is often true that the earliest examples of the AN style – usually those dating from the mid-1890s - in a given city in central and eastern Europe is done a version of the French *floréale*, with varying amounts of whirling foliage and often featuring the classic AN female head. One can also discern buildings in the Jugendstil style of Munich, the Viennese Secession or with elements taken from Horta or Van de Velde. The proliferation of journals illustrating examples of the style inevitably led to imitation, both in positive and negative terms; these models came from *The Studio* in Britain, *Art et Decoration* in France, *Deutsche Kunst und Decoration* in Germany and *Magyar Iparművészeti* in Hungary, as well as other similar publications in other countries. Besides the many exceptional buildings

being designed and decorated throughout the regions under consideration, there were also plenty of examples of cheaply-built popular housing with at best limited and at worst badly-judged elements of AN design applied to them. These often took the form of the basic five-floor block of flats which is so familiar to the city traveler in central and eastern Europe. Villas and public buildings, because of the nature of who was funding the design and construction, usually tended to be a little more considered and original.

During the talk, participants will be able to see photographs of AN/A&C buildings from Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland illustrating the range of styles discussed. Many of these buildings have never been photographed for architectural study purposes, or have only appeared in local publications with very limited distribution. It is hoped that the session will open a window on these hidden realms of Art Nouveau.

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