

## S. A. Mansbach

### *Advancing a Different Modernism*

Routledge, New York and Abingdon, 2018, 82 pages, 20 illustrations, ISBN 978-1-138-57493-9

**Kázmér Kovács**

PhD, Professor, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania  
kazmerkovacs@yahoo.com

#### *Modernism or Modernisms?*

The question stays unanswered; it rather turns out to be futile. The Modern Movement appears to be not monolithic but diverse; no longer an unequivocal strive for progress but an intricate as well as congruent fabric of numerous, often divergent trends. After reading S. A. Mansbach's recent book, one remains with a sense of old questions suddenly becoming less relevant, and dwelling on many new uncertainties crowding into the modernist landscape one had considered established long time ago.

Instead of a "classical modernism" (progressive, internationalist, politically subversive), we are introduced to a truly different kind of modernism: conservative, nationalistic, and politically engaged. We are not asked to choose, but invited to integrate more than one interpretation. The book does not argue so much for abandoning our stereotypes, as it is pleading in favor of a differentiated understanding of that period in history when, during the past century, mentalities, ways of life, and arts in industrialized societies changed irreversibly.

Not unusual in recent times, such a thorough change of perspective on already catalogued subjects would take a complex range of arguments and sufficient amount of examples to achieve the strength of evidence. With spectacular virtuosity Mansbach takes instead a shortcut by picking the exemplary case of only two architects who, while contemporaries with the first and second "grand generation" of Modernists, and while being modern in most reasonable ways, do not participate in the making of the new, revolutionary paradigm of architectural and urban planning we are used to acknowledge.

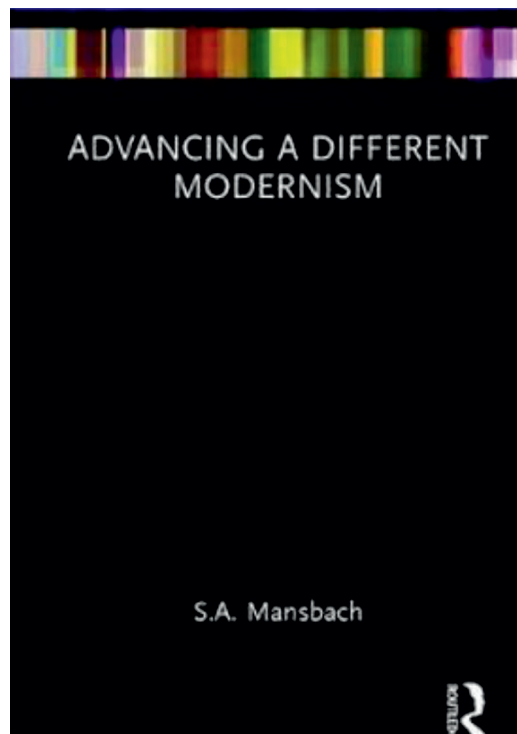
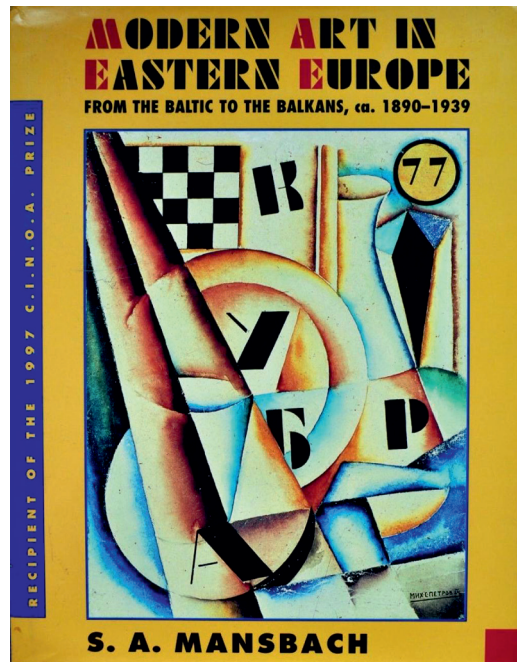
This critical move is not unexpected from Steven Mansbach, who is an undisputed authority in the field; and yet this new book could hardly be more different from his seminal work *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*.<sup>1</sup> It is so in terms of size or comprehensiveness, certainly, but most of all in its approach and method. If the new book does appear in some respects like a continuation to the other, far beyond that, with its dispassionately formulated doubts and well-tempered illuminations, *Advancing a Different Modernism* tackles the unsettling matters surrounding common preconceptions about our recent past. It also questions implicitly the position art history and its ramifications hold in contemporary thinking.

History is about times and things of the past. It is both disconcerting and ironic to repeat this truism when talking about modernism, for the Futurist Manifesto is hundred and nine years old and all the great coryphaei of all the great avant-garde movements of the twentieth century are dead. However, history is also about interpretation and this is what this book review shall emphasize.

Steven Mansbach puts forward his case studies in order to „restore to modern art its inherent complexity and multivalence, a diversity that has been long suppressed by the practice, prejudices, and programs of two generations of historians, critics and artists themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

1 S. A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). It is a monumental opus on 384 pages, with 284 illustrations, and 6 historical maps.

2 Mansbach, *Advancing a Different Modernism*, 1.



Consequently, the two main chapters of his book deal with two architects: Lluís Domènech y Montaner and Jože Plečnik. The former, the Catalan, is a public figure with a resounding political career and an architectural practice of prominence. The latter, the Slovene, is a withdrawn character, who produced one of the particularly outstanding oeuvres of his generation. In spite of obvious differences, the two have in common the odd mixture of nationalism and modernity, which Mansbach analyzes subtly and thoroughly, and which dilutes our common understanding of their epoch. Here, I shall emphasize the fact that both architects engaged their trade and art in the service of political expression in a lucid and consistent manner. The author performs a masterful combination of morphological and iconographic analysis of their oeuvre, considered in the socio-historical framework of a thoroughly changing Europe.

Domènech and Plečnik are about one generation apart, contemporaries respectively with Gaudí and Loos, both better known architectural representatives of their homelands and times. Possible associations between the members of this quadrille give further glimpses on the similarities and diversity of the matter. For instance, although Gaudí did not commit himself to public functions, choosing to stay almost a recluse in his cathedral workshop, his art is closely related to the Catalan *modernisme* championed brilliantly by Domènech.

In Austria-Hungary, the idea of modernity connotes very different things for the author of *Ornament und Verbrechen*,<sup>3</sup> and different again for the former cabinetmaker apprentice from Laibach, who would begin a successful career in Vienna before the Great War, becoming architect of the Prague Castle and the first Czechoslovak Republic, and eventually the most important Slovene architect of his generation. Yet, unexpectedly, the overall idea of Modernism is growing all the more coherent as more divergent aspects emerge.

Steven Mansbach positions his two case studies symmetrically between a lapidary introduction and an even more concise conclusion. The tone is measured and understated, only to let the message appear more obvious, convincing and powerful. The different modernisms we are acquainted with do not contradict the canonical one: by reinventing tradition instead of sweeping it off the drawing board, nationalist Domènech and ethnocentric Plečnik, with their different, local, and idiosyncratic architecture, enrich the general landscape of architectural modernism and – to a certain extent – they make it more intelligible.

At the end of his book, the author introduces an appendix: an article by Domènech. Showcase of the architect's political activism and architectural views, the text is an additional argument in favor of the case made by Mansbach. It is also the first instance of publishing in English this piece written in Catalan 140 years ago. Its title and its formulae echo similar ideas that gave birth all across Europe to national styles: "neo-Romanian," Hungarian or Czech national architecture. Very much a voice of those times, the article is animated by the same belief in the endless power of art to improve life and morals and to achieve a political ideal.

Here, the symmetry of the book is broken: there is no addendum text by Plečnik, as he was not a theorist. He sustained instead extensive epistolary relationships with family and friends.<sup>4</sup> One can nevertheless resume Plečnik's work ethic with a saying he used to tell his students: "As architects, I predict you that you shall suffer until the grave: I do not speak out of my experience, but of that of great men. Even the sculptor and the painter have it easier."<sup>5</sup> The sound of this is quite

3 Title of a lecture given by Adolf Loos in 1910.

4 One of the most interesting series of his letters, written to Alice Masaryk – daughter of the first president of the newly established Czechoslovak Republic – is unfortunately lost: it has been burnt during the Second World War. Its contents can only be imagined through Alice's letters, which survived. See, for instance: Věra Běhalová, "Alice Masaryk, Plečnik and the Castle", in *Josip Plečnik: an Architect of Prague Castle*, (Prague: Prague castle administration, 1997).

5 „Als Architekten prophezeie ich, daß ihr bis zum Grabe leiden werdet: ich spreche nicht aus eigenen Erfahrungen, sondern nur aus denen großer Männer. Auch die Bildhauer und der Maler haben es besser.“ Cf. Damjan Prelovšek, Jože Plečnik: 1872–1957: *Architectura perennis*. Salzburg, Residenz Verlag, 1992, p. 147.

different from that of the Domènech manifesto; it is resounding timelessly over centuries, indeed millennia, expressing the shared burden of all the heirs of the craft and trade of Daedalus.

In his new book the author presents us with a different artistic modernism; it is different even from his own earlier modernism, as Mansbach's understanding of this immensely complex phenomenon has gained new depths during his lasting endeavor to study and interpret it. At times the reading of his precise and sharp sentences lets a gentle personal touch show through, thus offering a different way of writing art history. While Mansbach's nuanced and expert judgment on the oeuvre of the two architects and their epoch bears on our recent past in its entirety, his book also reminds us that art has everything to do with our emotions.