Modernism and Changing Historical Context. Case Study of the Former Electric Power Distributor Station of the Hungarian Electrical Grid

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Introduction

One of the most relevant topics of the modernist heritage is the changing valuation of the examples that have a strong relationship with the historic surroundings. These variations come not only from different evaluations of the modernist heritage but also from the ever-changing approaches to the heritage. That is why it is worth examining the modernist cases that are directly connected to the historic part of the cities.

After the huge damages caused by World War II in the heart of Buda, reconstructions were carried out under unprecedented circumstances, many becoming experimental grounds for highly competent architects from the 1950s to the 1970s. The renewal of the whole district was based on individual modernist solutions, which, together with the historic neighborhood, created a unique architectural value, and was granted the UNESCO World Heritage status in 1987. The former power distribution station of the Hungarian electrical grid was completed in 1979 and kept running until 2007. The totally enclosed industrial operation was very far from the functional pattern of the context, but the architect, Csaba Virág (1933-2015) followed the basic framework of Modernism and, at the same time, used very progressive and sensible methods in order to suit to the historic urban fabric.

Recently the government has decided to demolish the empty building in accordance with a general reconstruction plan of the Castle District; however, many organizations protested against this decision and a new plan was devised in order to save the building. My paper focuses on this special industrial building, especially on the correlation between the different approaches to the historic environment and the changing valuation of the building itself. (Fig. 1)

In 1979, an extraordinary house was commissioned in the Buda Castle area on a previously empty plot of land wasted by World War II bombings. The industrial building of the electric power distribution station was quite strange within the monumental environment. Moreover, it served not only the local historic district – which could have been seen as a necessary function –, but also the whole country as a power supply control center until 2007. From here not only were controlled all the country's power plants and the cross border in and out-flow of electricity, but also the whole Hungary's consumption was accurately tracked. The once – and in my opinion still – progressive building, highly praised both by the profession and the heritage preservation authorities, a witness of the socialist decades in Hungary that not only policy makers and the public[1] but by also a growing number of architects love to hate. Still, this little building is exceptional for its basic architectural concepts, freshness and theoretical purity. Also its clear connections to the heritage environment have not been questioned during its 40 years

1 Anna Kóródy and Zorán Vukoszávlyev, "Aspects of Social Sustainability in Cases of Building Rehabilitation in Central Europe," *Építés-Építészettudomány* 42 3-4 (2014): 287-313.



Fig. 1: Site plan of the current state of the Castle District of Buda

of existence. It has become a highly valued work of the post-war architecture in Budapest and was canonized by the profession.[2]

My assumption is that the recent situation, in which the building has been threatened to be demolished, resulted from the interference of two parallel motivations, partly similar – partly different, because of the exceptional surroundings of this industrial building. For this reason – beyond its own strangeness – it is a significant example of the present situation of buildings integrated within the historic environment on the basis of the modern architectural traditions. So, the changing value of the local context and the changing judgment of the building are two processes which have been strengthening each other and the result seems to decide the fate of the electric power distribution station.

The Buda Castle suffered significant destructions during World War II and an unexpected consequence of these was the discovery of traces of the town's medieval layer – which the post-war restorations tried to highlight.[3] In addition, the large-scale eclectic buildings of constructions commissioned by the government between the two world wars, which had been totally unmindful of the medieval and Baroque character, were partially or completely demolished – either immediately after the war or a few decades later. In these demolitions, two ideas met in a particular way: the ideological motivation of the political leadership of the era to abolish all built requisites of the pre-war political system, and the pursuit of a strong professional-minded monument preservation approach considered progressive in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The war destructions had also created an opportunity to reconsider the heritage of the Castle District, which opened the way for a special district-scale monument restoration strategy.[4] The main part of this aimed at conceiving the buildings to be erected on vacant lots that would reflect contemporary, modernist architectural approaches of the time and create bold and outstanding constructions within the historic urban fabric. The new modernist layer of the reconstruction, fully completed by the 1980s, allowed for the listing of the Buda Castle District as a World Heritage Site in 1987.[5]

A new process started during the latest decade to rebuild the constructions destroyed in World War II or demolished in the post-war years, not exclusively but primarily in the Buda Castle area. Undeniably, this political ambition meets the taste of today's public that welcomes such endeavors. Many examples demonstrate that these reconstructions are appealing not only in Hungary, but also in other European countries (e.g. the reconstructions in Cracow right after

2 Zsuzsa Lőrinczi and Mihály Vargha (eds.), *Építészeti kalauz, Budapest 20. század építészete* [*Architectural Guide, 20th Century Architecture of Budapest*] (Budapest: 6bt Kiadó, 1997), 12.

3 László Gerő, *Buda műemléki jelentőségű területe, A helyreállított Budai Vár* [*A Buda Area of Historical Importance. The Reconstructed Buda Castle*] (Budapest: Műszaki Könyvkiadó, 1980), 253-281.

4 Miklós Horler, "A modern építészet történeti együttesekben és műemlékekben" ["The Modern Architecture in Historical Contexts and Monuments"], in *A műemlék és környezete (Az Egri Nyári Egyetem előadásai)* [*The Monument and Its Environment. The lectures of the Summer University of Eger*] (Eger, 1978), 49-55.

5 "Budapest, including the Banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter and Andrássy Avenue," https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/400, last accessed Sept 24, 2019.



Fig. 2: The National Electric Power Distribution Station (2018)

World War II and, more recently, in Dresden,[6] or the rebuilding of the Stadtschloss in Berlin). However, there is a significant difference: in Hungary, this process takes place without any public and professional debate. The change in attitude, meeting the public taste but driven by political goals, has gradually begun to transform the image of Buda Castle. And it also questioned the professional consensus that resulted in the architectural situation that had been brought about after long negotiations after World War II. This consensus addressed monument preservation in harmony with the additions constituting the modern heritage, finally leading to an internationally recognized outcome. So, the process started as a necessity, but was sooner or later hindered by the post-war monument-interpretations and buildings being contemporary and new at the same time like the discussed example, the former National Electric Power Distribution Station.

The other process that endangers the future of our building is independent of the historic environment. Demolitions and conversions befell in many countries and have taken place and will continue to happen in Hungary too: excellent buildings erected in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s fall victim to investor or political considerations. This phenomenon is arguably legitimized by today's public rejection of architecture in the discussed era, not only because those buildings are identified in post-socialist countries with the former repressive regime, but also because of their functional and physical decline, as well as due to their dilapidated condition caused partly by the construction quality deficiencies and partly by the lack of maintenance. The National Electric Power Distribution Station constructed in 1979,[7] lost its original function as the control unit was moved out of the Castle, thus the facility has been deserted for 12 years now. The architectural concept, which once reflected the historic environment on the glass curtain wall and abode by a purist modernist design, though with respect for the context, rather strangely, still seems to be a valid architectural attitude in that place today. At the same time, its condition has deteriorated, for many years the façade has become non-reflective, so this essential character of the house is not perceptible anymore. Therefore, the decision to demolish is motivated by the general public and political rejection, by its functional decline and by the poor aesthetics coming from its dilapidated condition. This unfortunate coincidence engenders the main causes for the present situation; however, the main concept, the flexible structure of the building, could be a good basis for its renewal with a different functional content. The technical refurbishment could not only reconstruct it to its the original condition but also exceed it, as many modernist details would make use of materials unavailable in the late 1970s. (Fig. 2)

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6 Krupali Uplekar, "Historic Preservation and its Relevance Today: An examination of Dresden's Frauenkirche in the light of the Venice Charter," in *The Venice Charter Revisited: Modernism, Conservation and Tradition in the 21st Century*, ed. Matthew Hardy (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 471-487.

7 The design process took place from 1972 to 1974, and the construction lasted from 1974 to 1979.

This article argues that two interrelated processes, i.e., the change in the monument preservation paradigm driven by both the taste of the public and the politics[8] and the change in the judgement of our outstanding modernist buildings – mutually strengthening each other – have led to today's situation, specifically to the planned demolition of the discussed building. While the two processes seem to have the same origin, in my opinion their combined result is more significant, not just a consequence of the changing valuation of modernist heritage. The reason for the decision to demolish is not only a blunt rebuff of the outstanding value of the building, but also perfectly fits into the effort to rebuild almost every former construction in the Castle District, a matter of discord between this aspect of the politics (approved by the public) and the consensus of a majority of the professionals.

National Electric Power Distribution Station in Budapest

Csaba Virág was an important architect representative of the high-tech architectural aspirations in Hungary. His architecture was already determinative and provocative at the time of the discussed building's construction; he was engrossed in high-tech,[9] reflecting the attraction well known in the former Socialist region for the structures and detailing of truly sophisticated standards typical for the Western world. The resulting natural differences between the performance of the international and Hungarian or regional eminent high-tech architects were precisely due to the contractors' background of different preparedness and work discipline levels. There were patterns and theoretical constructs where these national differences were not perceptible. For example, the principle of the duality of "served" and "servant" spaces,[10] coming from Louis Kahn, was still easily adaptable and uncompromisingly applicable in conceptual layouts. However, in terms of basic high-quality detailing, which was meant to express the poetics of technology, the regional and Hungarian construction processes regularly failed. Instead of high-tech, we can talk about "technical architecture" which lacked the "high" standard, but at the same time followed the important basic concepts like highlighting the construction, careful detailing, and emphasizing the technical elements.[11] In its forms, after the initially colorful and bold design, a kind of milder high-tech was applied in Hungary – partly in line with international developments, partly because of the given local opportunities. Charles Jenks' "silver abstraction"[12] was actually more achievable with the use of the simple structures that could offer the occasion to create unique architectural quality not because of a choice but due to their unique and innovative application. (Fig. 3)

The building of the former National Electric Power Distribution Station is perhaps the most lasting work of Csaba Virág's, an integral part in the historic urban fabric of Buda Castle. Looking back from today's viewpoint, already the placement of an industrial feature in that area would raise some questions. For instance, how could this function be fitted into that setting? The explanation is very pragmatic. The all-around cave system under the Castle Hill was considered particularly safe at the beginning of the 20th century, hence the first cables and the center of the electric power distribution station were placed in a deep underground basement on a plot in a nearby street. When the need for a new building arose, it was an essential requirement to have it on a nearby location due to the length of the cables to be routed to it. This practical aspect was, probably, further strengthened by the era's

8 Anna Kórody, "Pros and Cons. Professional and social reception of reconstructions in Hungary," *Építés – Építészettudomány* 44 3-4 (2016): 339-408.

9 György Pálinkás, *Virág Csaba* (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 1999).

10 Kazi K. Ashraf, "Louis I. Kahn: The Making of a Room," *Journal of Architectural Education* 63 1 (2009): 141-142.

11 Mariann Simon, "A high-tech derűlátása" ["Optimism of the High-tech"], *Magyar Építőművészet* 1 (1991): 2-3.

12 Charles Jencks, *Architecture Today* (London: Academy Editions, 1988).



Fig. 3: Archive photo taken right after the end of the construction

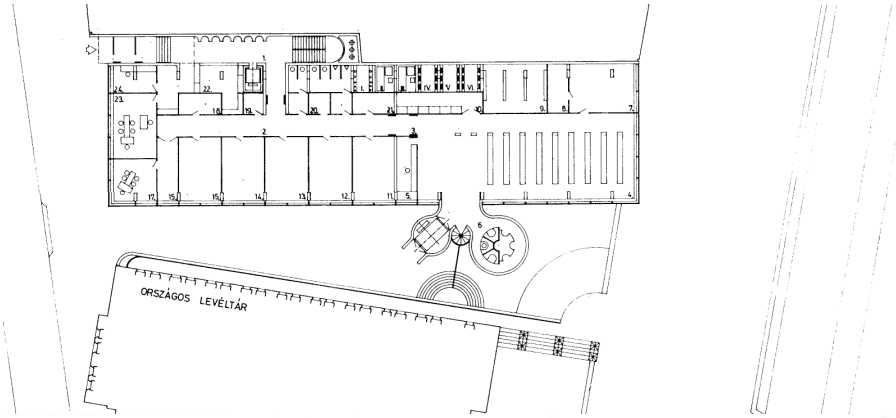
propensity to fetishize all technical facilities. Not only in the Buda Castle district, but also in the eclectic Pest townscape, large, brick-cladded transformer houses were built ignoring their surroundings.[13] However, they were constructed with an outstanding architectural quality,[14] the contextless brutality of which seems today to be much more progressive.[15] These examples, as well as the electric power distributor station, express the timeless value of the best approaches of the modernist tradition. Due to the high quality of the architectural concept and of the details, despite the obvious contrast between these buildings and their surroundings, decades after their construction the professional consensus about their value has evolved. In my opinion the judgement passed on the original provocative attitudes has turned into the recognition of architectural courage and originality.

Back to the Power Distribution Station, on the very narrow nearby piece of land two houses, were demolished due to the damage they suffered in the World War II bombings. On one side, the plot is bordered by the firewall of the low-rise historic houses of the Castle, on the other by the massive building of the National Archives designed around the beginning of the 20th century. This is quite a special context, as on the one hand the new industrial establishment had to be adapted to the one-story classicist building, and on the other to the five-story high neo-Gothic construction although a single floor building could have been more appropriate for the power distribution function.

13 Ernő Léstyán, architect of the Erőmű- és Hálózattervező Vállalat [Power Plant and Grid Planning Office] designed the transformer houses built on Csarnok tér in 1963, in Dob utca in 1965, and in Katona József utca in 1970.

14 Mariann Simon, "Variációk téglára" ["Brick Variations"], *Architectura Hungariae* 5 1 (2003).

15 "After the eighties have passed by, which tried to adapt nostalgically, we welcome these transformer stations, built on artificially created vacant lots, in the name of the new minimalism, as an avant-garde, uncompromising modern architecture." András Ferkai, Ákos Moravánszky, Béla Pazár and Vladimir Šlapeta (eds.), *Baustelle Ungarn. Neuere Ungarische Architektur* (Budapest: Akademie der Künste, 1999), 15.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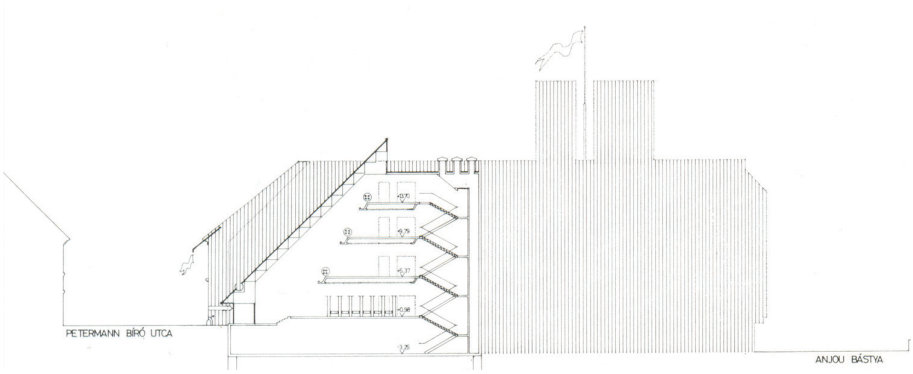
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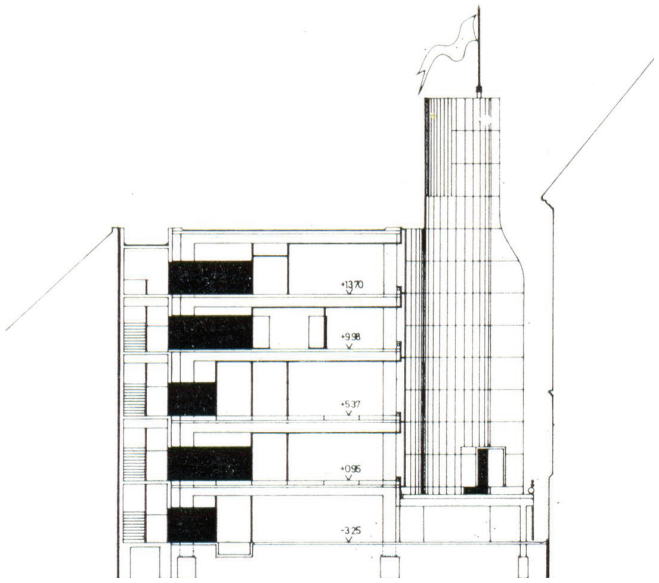
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Fig. 4: Original ground floor plan (a) Original longitudinal section through the narrow entrance zone with the staircase (b) Original cross section (c) (opposite page)
Fig. 5: Empty lecture room (above)

One can easily recognize the contradiction between the modernist approach of the design or its industrial function and the historic surroundings. Between the Buda Castle houses, almost all of which display a walled architecture with pierced openings, a steel frame structure with a 15 meter long span supported by huge beams because of the load-bearing soil's depth was built. Also, for technological reasons, at the side of the steel frame building two towers were erected, hiding the microwave antennas. The control room was placed on the first floor, while the offices and the telephone exchange were built on the upper floors. Even if, basically, it could have been a flat roof building, the volume was completed with a sloping roof hipped on both sides, clearly responding to the pitched roofs street view. The main entrance can be reached from a narrower wing, where, in addition to the stairs, some contemporary interpretations of the Gothic sitting-niche are placed, typical of the Buda Castle medieval gateways. Of course, instead of natural stone they are made of monolithic artificial stone. These elements, a poetical gesture of the architect, enable the building to connect with the historic fabric through this layer of details. The narrow building is covered with a low glass roof slanted in one direction, which is quite an unusual, bold shape in the Castle District; however, due to its withdrawn position, it rather works as a *caesura* between the curtain walled main block and the plastered historic adjacent building. In addition, Csaba Virág designed a large, artificial-stone-covered blade wall to conceal the connecting firewall, which became almost an independent, third element of the composition after the main and secondary bodies. Dividing the house into zones is a true modernist concept. The "liberation of the façade" also evokes the Modernism's tradition, which is demonstratively represented by the glass curtain flowing in front of the support structure. This transparent curtain wall molded the shell of the house in a way that ignored the interior spatial structure of different ceiling heights, made the interiors visible from the outside and simultaneously reflected the historic environment on the glass surface. This is another level of the architect's effort to connect to the historic surroundings through reflections. The possibility

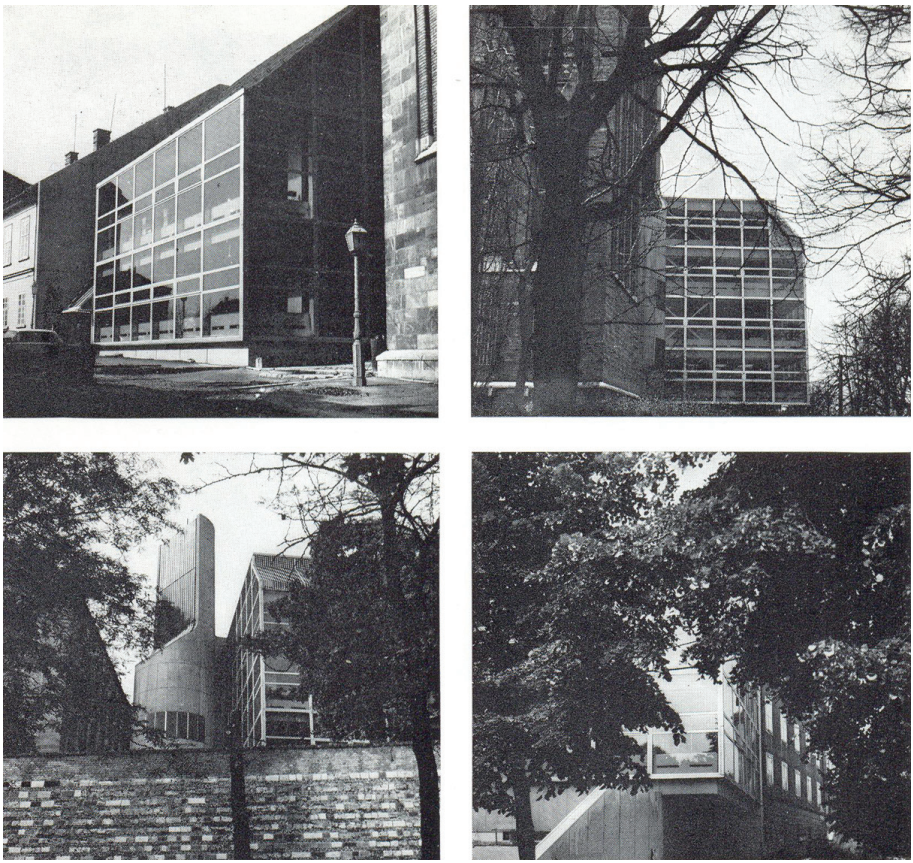

Fig. 6: Archive photos taken right after the end of the construction

of getting an glimpse of the interiors, watching the control room functioning in the house, the projection of its bustle on the façade shaped the building almost as a machine, a technology embodying object.[16] Perhaps this distinction between the interior and the outer shell is the most pronounced in the training room, its freely formed cross-section, and the curved wall cladding-suspended ceiling. This was the first intelligent office building in Hungary that represented the high-tech standard of its functionality – as achievable in the region at that time – not only in architectural terms, but also in its operation. (Fig. 5)

Csaba Virág was fundamentally attracted to the theoretical and practical issues of the relationship between historic environment and contemporary architecture. On this topic, he said:

> "I have concluded that for me the essence of such tasks is to try to envision a completely modern (up-to-date) building or building part, which, if it were taken out of its environment and suspended in a neutral space, would still meet the requirements [to be modern]. If I took it out of its environment and put it on a glass plate, I want it to be an up-to-date house, but when putting it back, it should fit exactly into its place."[17]

16 Known for his expressive, narrative and heroic works, the famous sculptor Miklós Melocco put it straight on the Power Distribution Station with a strong critical tone: "this architecture is no more than the design of a good fridge." See Pálinkás, *Virág Csaba*.

17 Csaba Virág, "Országos villamos tehereloszto, (OVT) Budapest I." ["National Electric Power Distribution Station, (OVT) Budapest I."], *Magyar Építőművészet* 6 (1979): 22-23.

This duality of fitting[18] in and abstraction characterizes the building of the National Electric Power Distribution Station. Moreover, the key to both its success at that time and its validity today can be found in this duality. The position of the building on the plot leaves a small empty area reminiscent of the atmosphere of the streets in the mediaeval part of the Castle district. The building occupied the trapezoidal shaped plot opening towards the castle wall in such a way that it allowed a passage from the National Archives building in order to connect the street and the Castle-wall promenade located one full story lower. This semi-public square is one of the strongest elements of the whole composition and reinforces the perceptible connections with the historic fabric. While the layout of the building is strictly autonomous and the two ends totally ignore the angle deviations of the connecting façades and streets, the gesture of opening this alleyway is a well-known motif transcribed from the morphology of the historic urban tissue of Buda. The context and abstraction complexity of Csaba Virág's work is easy to feel and understand even today, starting from the design, masses, usage of materials, all the way down to its details. This dual compliancy, the refined simplicity of the architectural answer given to the double viewpoint, not only highlights the building among the constructions of its time, but also makes it stand out from the architect's oeuvre. Csaba Virág drew the fundamental conclusions from the main characteristics of the medieval buildings in Buda Castle. He argues that the sincerity and structural character of the Middle Ages architecture easily meets the goals of Modernism. He identified the wall-like, flat, decoration-free, and therefore homogeneous effect of the curtain wall with the medieval walled architecture and used reflection as one of the main tools of adaptation. (Fig. 6)

In his article written in 1984, analyzing and categorizing the tendencies of contemporary Hungarian architecture, Ákos Moravánszky clearly identified Csaba Virág's Castle buildings as contextualist works trying to get integrated into and adapt to the built environment.[19] In the case of the Power Distribution Station, the arguments for this integrative attitude are undeniable: e.g. the siting, the pitched roof, the caesura in relation to the neighboring building or the reflecting façade, the sitting niches evoking the medieval castle houses or the seemingly spontaneous composition of the two poetically formed cylindrical, artificial-stone-cladded towers that hide microwave antennas. The latter gesture – beyond its usefulness (i.e. hiding the antennas) – is an almost emotional, lyrical reference to the romantic-historical character of the numerous towers of the Buda Castle. However, the timelessness of how the strictly constructed main mass and the composition of two towers are fit to their surroundings has to do with achieving this integration not by façade forms or details but by an autonomous basic gesture. If we neglect its dilapidated state, the building looks still fresh and tectonic even today.

Strengthening Effects: A Change in Monument Preservation and the Rejection of the Modern Heritage

Yet, if this is the case, how could the former National Electric Power Distribution Station be threatened by demolition? During the long lifecycle of a building, not only its material reality, but also its ideological content is changing. In our case, the change is dual, leading to two different directions, and this is the true reason for the current emergency: the historic context, the expectations and perceptions of the new constructions appearing in this context as well as the legacy of modern architecture built during the socialist period have been questioned in parallel by the public. And these two effects strengthen each other in that particular place.

Already in 1967, at a conference organized by the UNESCO in Budapest, Hungarian experts expressed their views on the principles of building in a monument-environment: the new edifice placed within a historic environment has to express the time of its construction, should not be neutral and is to be adapted to the old setting, the building line, and the pitched roofs

18 András Török, *Nagy Budapest könyv* [*Great Book of Budapest*] (Budapest: Corvina, 2000), 56.

19 Ákos Moravánszky, "Tendenciák a magyar építőművészetben" ["Trends in Hungarian Architecture"], *Magyar Építőművészet* 1 (1984): 22-33.

of the neighboring buildings.[20] From that point on, the concept of "monument-environment" was born, dealing also with the listed buildings' vicinity that needed to be protected. In parallel with the publication of the newly built Power Distribution Building, Ferenc Mendele, head of the former National Monument Preservation Inspectorate, analyzed in a long paper[21] the progressive character of the facility and its respectful thoughtfulness towards the historic environment in the context of the city-center-level monument protection of the Castle. He could rightly refer to the ICOMOS Congress held in 1972 in Budapest,[22] when the construction works on vacant plots in the aftermath of the war were praised as "Hungarian examples": they were modern architectural experiments within the historic milieu, which created new value both as buildings and in their historic context. Mendele even called the Power Distribution Station a manifesto-like work, some kind of evidence beyond itself, proving that after the houses using only traditional structures, a building with a radically modern use of materials can now also be justified within the medieval and Baroque urban fabric.

However, the building completed in 1979 was remarkable from other points of view as well. It was on the border of a period about to be replaced by the postmodern architecture that was just appearing in Hungary, and instead of recipe based theoretical constructions, new buildings with historic forms and quotations appeared, leading to radical twists within the same oeuvre. So, the balance that the architect was able to keep in his design between the innovative, up-to-date ambition of high-tech and the contextualist architectural concepts was an exceptional effort supporting the timeless value of the project through the different turns of the evaluations and interpretations during the last decades. The Power Station was appreciated differently at the time of its construction, when placing an industrial facility into the Buda Castle area did not cause any headaches to those responsible for the heritage preservation. But it was considered otherwise again, when the mainstream Hungarian architecture was shaped by regionalist aspirations refusing or, at least, downgrading the tradition nurtured by Postmodernism in the 1980s. First in 1986 and then in 2007, a highly influential architect and professor of the past decades, Péter Reimholz wrote about the dichotomy of *realistic* and *abstract* aspirations,[23] a theory borrowed from Michael Graves.[24] In his view, since the beginning of the 20th century, Hungarian architecture can be characterized by the duality of realistic architecture that responds to and represents architectural reality (tools, history) and abstract architecture (built on abstract thoughts and modernist traditions), and by their shifting or occasionally interweaving presence. I think this theoretical aspect is quite true for the former Power Distribution Station for two reasons. On the one hand, which is a rare feature and expresses the uniqueness of the building, it embodies this duality by being both high-tech and contextual. This finely adjusted balance in itself makes the facility particular among its contemporaries. On the other hand, the accelerated vacillation between abstract and realistic attitudes also influences the assessment of the building. Understandably, critical voices are getting stronger when the realistic approach becomes dominant, for example today, when political ambitions attempt to reconstruct the pre-war Buda Castle. But there is also another aspect: the legacy of the construction period. The building is undoubtedly one of the architectural products of the socialist era. We cannot

20 Gerő, *Buda műemléki jelentőségű területe*, 253-281.

21 Ferenc Mendele, "Országos villamos tehereloszto, (OVT) Budapest" ["National Power Distribution Station, (NPDS) Budapest"], *Magyar Építőművészet* 6 1979: 24-27.

22 András Román, "Az ICOMOS III. közgyűlése és kollokviuma" ["The 3rd general meeting and colloquium of the ICOMOS"], *Magyar Műemlékvédelem* (1971-1972): 385-400.

23 Péter Reimholz, "Kronologikus implantációk és didaktikus protézisek" ["Chronological Implants and Didactic Prostheses"], *Magyar Építőművészet* 5 (1986): 9, and the written version of Péter Reimholz's lecture (Nov-Dec 2007) at http://static1.architectforum.hu/files2012/n00/00/82/98/a-teljes-eloadas-fotokkal.pdf, last accessed Sept 24, 2019.

24 Around 1970, Graves wrote this in the catalogue of the exhibition organized by Juhanni Palassmaa. With Reimholz's words from the 2007 lecture: "One standpoint believes in the language of abstraction and in the future of Modernism, but according to the other view, architectural abstraction does not provide any opportunity for wider cultural communication, therefore expects the phraseology of architecture to be realistic."

overlook the fact that buildings of that era are identified with the repressive regime itself and all the negative correlative memories. In order to convince the public of the importance and value of a high-quality edifice representing that specific period (like the former Power Distribution Station) this aspect needs also be confronted. However, in contrast to other cases, when the news about the demolition plan came up, the professional organizations took a stand and firmly demanded the protection of the building. The decade-and-a-half long (and still ongoing) process of re-discovery of the post-war architectural values – both internationally and in the Hungarian professional discourse – can play a relevant role in the debate.

The former Power Distribution Station was used according to its original role until 2007, since then being empty. The loss of functionality inevitably raised the issue of the building's future, in which the deteriorating technical condition have also played a relevant part. The once see-through curtain wall is no longer transparent and the building – without its necessary modernization – does not meet today's requirements. For this reason, a radical renewal would be essential in order to allow the facility to be reused.

In 2014, the Government of Hungary adopted the National Hauszmann Plan. The goal of the program, still in progress, is the reconstruction and restoration of buildings destroyed or demolished during World War II. From this political program's point of view, which is essentially connected to public expectations, elements that had been found worthless for partly political, partly professional reasons in the years and decades following World War II are suddenly considered valuable. And vice versa: at the same time, the reconstructions and new buildings originating in the modern architectural and heritage preservation principles, as well as the consensus between politics and the profession in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, are all questioned.

Rebuilding the former public buildings of the Castle District is problematic in different ways. First of all, obliterating the border of monument authenticity can demolish the real values of cultural heritage. Secondly, the contemporary requirements hardly allow the designers to use the same materials and technologies used when the construction was originally built. That is why we cannot speak about a copy, but only a reinterpreted 1:1 scale model. And thirdly, I think that decisions threatening to erase different layers of the past, the memory of spaces, cities, buildings and details are dangerous.[25] We can see that based on public expectations the decision makers are trying to rebuild edifices – something that was absolutely unimaginable earlier because of the consensus between the profession and the politics concerning authenticity. And, in parallel, the once progressive buildings' value of the 1960s and 1970s has become questionable.

This is the double turn that made the future of the former Power Distribution Station – a modernist building within historic surroundings – uncertain. In 2015, a decision was made to move the neighboring Hungarian National Archives in it, but in 2016 a Government Decision ruled in favor of its dismantling. Perhaps the ensuing wave of protests contributed to the passing of a new Government Decision that designated the building as the office building of the Ministry of the Interior that was to be moved to the Buda Castle. Eventually, this plan was not implemented either. The building still stands abandoned and, at the beginning of 2019, the idea of demolishing it was raised again.

In 2016, the decision to bring down the former Power Distribution Station generated an unusually unified wave of protests. The claims made in order to highlight the value of the building and to protect it were subsequent to the decision of the government, so the politics generated very loud declarations from professional experts whose arguments were given a wide publicity. In July 2016, the Association of Hungarian Architects (MÉSZ)[26] took a stand

25 Nino Sulfaro, "Reconstruction and Conservation in the Post-Truth Era. Historical Lies, Authenticity, Material Evidence," *ICOMOS University Forum*, 2018, 1-11.

26 "A MÉSZ állásfoglalása Virág Csaba épületének sorsáról" ["The MÉSZ's resolution on the future of Csaba Virág's building"] (July 11, 2016), http://epiteszforum.hu/a-mesz-allasfoglalasa-virag-csaba-epuletenek-sorsaro, last accessed Sept 24, 2019.



against the intention to re-establish the share and scale of the medieval and Baroque urban fabrics within the castle walls, as they were in the interwar period, and at the same time to protect the constructions of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s – thus, specifically, the Power Distribution Station. A particularly remarkable element of their statement is the recognition of the building's contradictory judgement:

> "It is indisputable that the building is divisive, many non-professionals and some architects of our country do not understand what is good about it, what is beautiful about it, where is the architectural feat? That's why we want a public discussion and exchange of ideas between professionals and people who are open to the values of architecture, in order to get closer to each other through value-based debates, while seeking mutual understanding."

The Hungarian National Committee of the international organization ICOMOS also spoke in favor of the Station,[27] and compared the significance of the building – of course on a different scale – to the Pompidou Centre in Paris designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers. Moreover, their discourse, went beyond the protection of the value of the Power Distribution Station: "The modern building was able to restore the scale and order of historic buildings." The statement, saying that the modern construction on the vacant lot does not simply fit in and is harmoniously adapted to the historic environment, but restores and fixes it, is a new, stronger claim from monument protection representatives than ever before. It seems quite clear that these arguments are valid. Our building is not only an outstanding modernist example but also the solution to repair the absence of, and the tension between the scale of these very complex historical surroundings. Other civic organizations[28] and non-architect journalists[29] also joined the protest. A question arises: what could be the secret of

27 "Az ICOMOS állásfoglalása Virág Csaba épületéről" ["ICOMOS resolution on Csaba Virág's building"] (July 20, 2016), http://epiteszforum.hu/az-icomos-allasfoglalasa-virag-csaba-epuleterol, last accessed Sept 24, 2019.

28 Resolution of the Budapest Világörökségéért Alapítvány [Budapest World Heritage Foundation]: "Állásfoglalás az Országos Villamos Tehereloszto épületének tervezett bontása ellen" ["Statement against the planned demolition of the National Power Distribution Building"] (Aug 1, 2016), http://epiteszforum.hu/allasfoglalas-az-orszagos-villamos-tehereloszto-epuletenek-tervezett-bontasa-ellen, last accessed Sept 24, 2019.

29 Villő Jánossy, "Nagyot veszíthet a Várnegyed, ha kihúzzák az egyik fogát" ["The Castle Quarter can lose a lot if one of its teeth was pulled out"] (Aug 22, 2016), http://index.hu/urbanista/2016/08/22/nagyot_veszithet_a_varnegyed_ha_kihuzzak_az_egyik_fogat/, last accessed Sept 24, 2019; "Miért védjük meg a MAVIR-t?" ["Why protect the National Power Distribution Station?"] (Nov 15, 2016), Fővárosi Blog, https://fovarosi.blog.hu/2016/11/15/miert_ne_bontsuk_le_a_mavir-t, last accessed Sept 24, 2019.



Fig. 7, 8: The current state of the building with the cube and the towers

that building, that is far stronger than that of many buildings from that era, while its current condition does not provide the untrained public with a pleasant sight? This might be an exceptional situation, in which can also be traced the importance of modernist buildings erected on vacant plots in the Buda Castle after World War II and the inherent value of the former Power Distribution Station, which may be considered the zenith of Csaba Virág's high-tech oeuvre. The political program of the Castle reconstruction has questioned all these values of different characters and, maybe, that is why the overall protest was so clear and definite.

Hopefully, there will be a reassuring change in the future of the building and it will be saved from demolition. Although it is not listed, it does represent a theoretical problem. The best examples of the socialist era have just begun to be evaluated and listed, but the tendency of the monument preservation in Hungary seems to make it hard to believe in the protection of our building in the near future due to the lack of significant institutional background. Nonetheless, the theoretical issue of its preservation and renovation is very similar to that of modern monuments. Modern Movement, and modern buildings erected on the basis of its traditions, have a relationship to time fundamentally different from that of previous ages. On the one hand, these relatively young buildings were not specifically built for eternity, since the need and character of the constant renewal is encoded in the spirit of the modern.[30] On the other hand, they are made of less durable materials, therefore getting older sooner,[31] thus many aspects of the dilemma of the renovation arise much sooner. This is especially true in the post-socialist region, where the technological possibilities of the construction industry have predetermined the rapid deterioration of the usually experimental solutions.

This raises a number of questions about the renovation and renewal of these buildings, including the Power Distribution Station. The Power Distribution Station is not a listed building, but the theoretical issues of its renovation are very similar. That is why, however the importance of the building is more local than international, it is a very important witness of an era and, in addition, because of its design approach it can express the timeless value of

30 András Ferkai, "A Modern Mozgalom épületeinek műemlékvédelme" ["Protection of Modern Movement Buildings"], *arc' 5* (Gyorsjelentés Kiadó Kft., 2000), 23.

31 "The unpredictable changes of modern times, the rapid development of technology, the greater mobility, but also the need for austerity led them to plan their homes for a shorter lifetime." See Ferkai, "A Modern Mozgalom épületeinek műemlékvédelme," 23.

modernist architecture. Physical, aesthetical and functional obsolescence[32] is also a very sensitive occurrence of the post-war heritage. In our example, thanks to the context-sensitive design and the very flexible spatial structure, we can only see the consequences of the physical obsolescence, and that is the easiest solvable problem of all, by renovating and renewing the details of the socialist 1970s. (Fig. 7, 8)

Conclusion

What is going on in the Buda Castle right now, i.e. the reconstruction of the pre-World War II architecture and, in parallel, the depreciation and rejection of socialist architecture, is of course not exclusively a Hungarian occurrence. Although reconstruction of historic city centers or of some of their iconic buildings that were victims of World War II is a well-known phenomenon in Warsaw (right after World War II) or in Dresden and Frankfurt (in the last decade), the best example of the interaction between the two processes is a building in Berlin. Although under completely different circumstances and at a different level of public involvement, something similar to the Buda Castle "story" happened when the war-torn Schloss building was demolished in 1950 and the Palast der Republik[33] was later built partly on its grounds. The Palast accommodated the former parliament of the GDR and was demolished between 2006 and 2008, for the former Schloss to be reconstructed as the Humboldt Forum (almost completed).[34] The former GDR Parliament was, of course, a symbolic building, the identification of which with the socialist era was a more understandable, natural reaction; and maybe it was only a pretext to say that the building was standing in the way of the reconstruction ambitions to rebuild the Schloss building.[35]

Preserving buildings as monuments from the modernist era or from the last decades became the topic of an important debate at the end of the last century[36] and this has been going on ever since.[37] The fundamental questions originate not only from the short time since the birth of the examples, but from one of the main principles of Modernism, which was the belief in continuous progress. That is why architects did not foresee a long lifetime for their buildings and flexibility or adaptability were more important desiderata of their efforts than designing the whole edifice and its details for eternity.

We talked about a dual phenomenon with partially shared roots but, when discussing the fate of the former Power Distribution Station, there are, in fact, four different aspects, effects and motivations that can be distinguished in this corner of the Buda Castle.

First, nostalgia for the past and search for political legitimacy is manifested in the rebuilding of once existing buildings. This unfolding has fundamentally questioned the consensus between politics and the profession about an approach towards the preservation of progressive monuments (incorporating modernist architectural principles) prevailing after World War II in

32 Daniel M. Abramson, *Obsolescence. An Architectural History* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2016).

33 It was built in 1973-1976, a few years before the construction of the Power Distribution Station and was demolished in 2006-2008. Architects: Heinz Graffunder and Wolf-Rüdiger Eisentraut.

34 Dominik Bartmanski and Martin Fuller, "Reconstructing Berlin. Materiality and meaning in the symbolic politics of urban space," *City. analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 22 2 (2018): 202-219.

35 Khadija Carroll La, "The Very Mark of Repression: The Demolition Theatre of the Palast der Republik and the New Schloss Berlin," *Architectural Design. Special Issue: Post Traumatic Urbanism* 80 5 (2010): 116-123.

36 András Ferkai, "Recording and Preserving the Modern Heritage in Hungary," in *Modern Movement Heritage – A Challenge to Manage*, ed. Allen Cunningham (London: Spon and Thomson Professional, 1998), 44-49.

37 "Approaches to the Conservation of the Twentieth-Century Cultural Heritage. Madrid-New Delhi Document", ICOMOS, 2017, http://www.icomos-isc20c.org/pdf/madrid-new-delhi-document-2017.pdf, last accessed Sept 24, 2019.

Hungary. This testifies to the two parallel phenomena that we can identify in the Buda Castle case: the longing for the period between the two World Wars and the rejection of the partly abandoned heritage of the 1960s and 1970s.

Secondly, today the legacy of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s architecture rooted in the modernist tradition is questioned worldwide both by the public and the politics; hence emblematic buildings, the renovation cycle of which is just about to end, become victims of demolitions in increasing numbers. The main reason for this is on obsolescence (of the spatial structure, the materials and the details). However, the spatial structure of the Power Distribution Station is suitable for the integration of a plausible new function, but this seems not to be enough to compensate the negative public perception that has been amplified by its abandonment and the quaint details of its façade.

Thirdly, in the post-socialist countries, this rejection is also rooted in the interpretation of buildings identified with many negative memories linked to the time of their construction and the repressive regimes. It is a phenomenon particular to these countries, where the ideological-political meaning can easily distort the judgment of a building from that era.

All these reasons can only partially be counterbalanced by rediscovering modernist architecture and the resulting architectural heritage as bearing international and Hungarian monumental value, a trend which is primarily felt within the professional circles.

The 40-year-old Electric Power Distribution Station of outstanding architectural quality and timeless design is at the intersection of these interacting processes, therefore, it goes well beyond its own significance as an example of how the values of an era are judged, but also as a representative example of resolutions and argumentations for the built heritage of that particular period.

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