

Problems of Heritage Preservation of Interwar Architecture in Kosice

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In Kosice – a town in Eastern part of Slovakia – there is the largest so-called “reserve area” in the whole country; the city centre of above 1000 buildings, 500 of which are listed as heritage). It was decided by the Government in 1983. This reserve is not limited just by the borders of the medieval town or the medieval fortification system, but it means, more or less, the area of the town in the middle of the 19th century. And in this way the architecture of Historicism around the urban area of the medieval town represents the best protection of the oldest parts of the city.

There was a great building boom in the town in the second half of the 19th century – after joining the railway line from Budapest to Silesia – and this brought to the town a number of buildings planned by architects not just of local origin, but from the capital of the Hungarian kingdom, Budapest. After 1918, a great change came: Prague became capital of the newly constituted Czechoslovakia and from that time on, more Czech architects designed for Kosice as well. As a result, an outstanding group of modern Functionalist buildings were created here, without international atmosphere but as a synthesis of various accepted and reused regional features.

And because of the „late“ declaration of the heritage reserve of Kosice (most of other town reserves in Slovakia were declared in the sixties or seventies of the 20th century – and their borders usually follow the medieval town-walls and bastions) ideas of heritage values of the interwar architecture were just up-to-

date – number of various buildings from the Functionalism - Modernism period got listed as heritage. There are residential and public houses, church and synagogues, schools, administration and industrial buildings.

An introduction to the Modern Architecture in Kosice is the tenement house for an attorney (Zahler´s house - 1913) – the primary work of Hungarian architect Lajos Kozma. This house represents a special mixture of the ornaments

1. Synagogue and Jewish school (1926-1932), architect Ludovit Oelschläger, represent a distinctive variant of Kosice´s Modernism. Photo by Tibor Uhrín





2. Czechoslovak Exhibition (1938), pavilion, now Mining Faculty of the Technical University in Kosice. Photo by Tibor Uhrin

of the Hungarian Secession coupled with the Modern-Movement-style inner layout and the use of modern materials: metal, concrete, glass-block and ceramics.

The twenties and thirties of the 20th century are the blossom-time of Ludovit Oelschlöger, a very creative architect from Kosice. His work is present in various parts of the town, even in the heart of it: synagogue and Jewish school (1926-32), cinema Slovan (1927), fire brigade barracks (1927), Trade and Industrial Chamber (1935), family houses (1936?), Summer swimming pool (1936-37). The special features of his buildings are: influence of historic patterns, accenting of interfering volumes, reshaped elements of the classical column, monumental porches and geometrical ornaments, later tending to more Functionalist solutions.

Large areas of tenement houses out of the historic centre were planned by Czech architects – the residential quarter „Little Prague“, the „Masaryk´s colony“ – architect Josef Polášek (1931-32) comfortable flats for bank-officers. The Main Post building (1926-30 – Bohumír Kozák) – was listed by DOCOMOMO as well. In 1938 the Czechoslovak Exhibition took place in Kosice – pavilions were designed both by home and Czech architects, and some of these buildings are still of good use, i.e. the present site of the Mining Faculty of the Technical University.

The two chosen case studies for presenting the problems with heritage preservation and restoration of the interwar (Functionalist) architecture are: the former neologic synagogue, nowadays used as a concert hall „House of Arts“ and the „eight-storey“ tenement house, protected as heritage buildings. These buildings represent two different approaches to their conservation: (1) the dramatic past of the former synagogue, later strongly adapted and reconstructed, with a newly built hall, now protected as a whole unit without damaging interventions (2) the present reconstruction of the „eight-storey“, surviving up to 1989 without damages and changes, losing much of its authenticity by the present rush renewal awaiting fast profits.

The House of Arts in Kosice

The former modern synagogue was after WWII adapted to a new function (not a heritage building at that time...) – this saved it from vanishing, and the present reconstruction is maintaining and restoring its heritage values. It is a paradox: the hall that was added later became part of the protected architecture, even if in the past it caused damage to various authentic elements and an irreversible change of the original function.

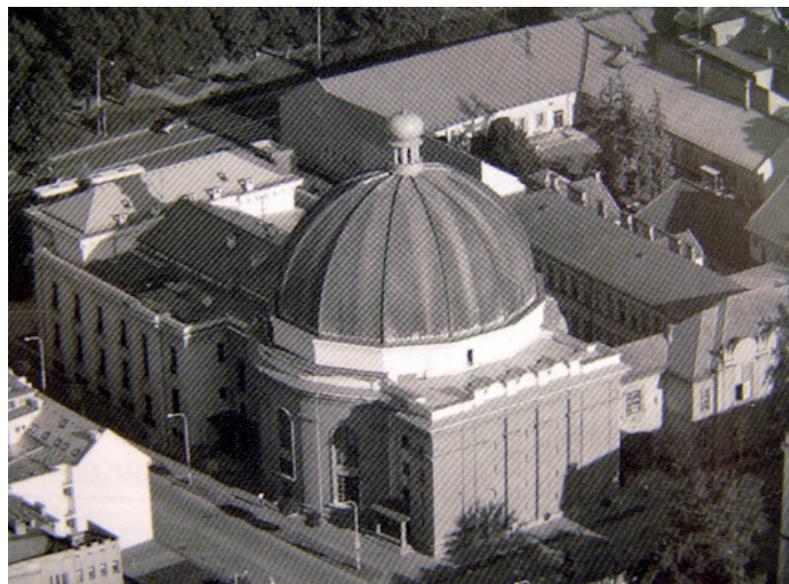
At the end of the 19th century there was

3. The neologic synagogue in Kosice, architect Lajos Kozma, 1927.



a large Jewish minority in the town; at the turn of the centuries three synagogues – prayer houses were used, but there was a need for a modern (neologic) one. An international competition was announced for the design – the winner was Lajos Kozma from Budapest. The building was finished in 1927 by the Building Company of Brothers Bárkány. The plan was using the shapes of the traditional Mauresque synagogue-style, but influenced by Modern Movement: round forms of alures, geometrical stucco decorations of interiors – quotation of universal classic motifs of porticus with a dome in a modern composition (the dome was not planned in the first design, but there was an effort of the Jewish community for the synagogue to reach the height of the cathedral in some way). The height of the dome is 35 m, not enough if compared with the tower of the cathedral ... There were 600 seats for men inside and 200 seats in the gallery for women. In the northern side of the synagogue a school building was completed for Torah-Talmudic studies.

The original function of the synagogue lasted till WWII, later it was seized by the state and for a short time it was used as a granary. The first plans for its rebuilding to a concert hall date from 1953 – this first monumental design was not realised: it planned a late Historicism-style colonnade (elements of Neo-Barrocque and Neo-Classicism) as two flanking wings on both sides. The final plan from 1957-58 used a more simple



4. The neologic synagogue converted to a concert hall „The House of Art” in Kosice, rebuilt from the 1958 to the middle of the sixties of the 20th century.

architectural language – geometrical classicistic shapes (architect Czihal) – by enlarging the building the original round space under the dome was respected, but the former western portico was replaced by a substantial quadrate three-storey high western „annex” – the interior of it was connected to the central space of the former synagogue.

The western façade is now shaped with a portico with cubic columns – the change of the historicistic design toward a more fashionable sober elementary conception brought a new architectural value, in spite of the radical rebuilding, accented by high quality crafts-

5. The reconstruction works on the roof of the dome in 2005. Photo by the author





6. The dome roof after reconstruction. Photo by Alena Hrabinská

elements and details. It is just a surprise that the new solution of the construction of the inner dome did not touch the well-kept original dome structure, which is now hidden by the suspended

7. The „Nine-storey“ in Kosice, 1937-1939, architect Alexander Skuteczky, historical postcard.



ceiling of the concert hall. The adaptation did not harm the dome and the roof construction of the original building. The roof covering was made from asbestos cement slates in grey and red colours, layed in a fish-bone-pattern, there were only small interventions in the lantern: the former Star of David was replaced by a sign of a harp as symbol of music.

And so the dome – its typical shape as a silhouette-dominante of the roofscape of the city centre – became an important object of the present heritage restoration. The lack of appropriate maintenance caused an urgent need of conservation. The present owner – the Town – and the user – the State Philharmonic of Kosice – began in 2003 restoration work, connected with creating new service rooms in the basement extension on the northern side of the building. This basement and semibasement will not disturb the exterior of the building, but enables better communication and usage of interior spaces.

The restoration began in May, 2003 with the careful repair of the roof covering – there were problems with removal of asbestos cement slates according to the requests of the EU: replacing the slates with Cembrit slates (the crown sheets of special size were produced for this purpose according to the original pieces), repair and conservation of the wooden roofing structure and sheet-coverings were completed in 2005. The interior of the dome was not damaged by any restoration work on the roof, the original fish-bone-pattern was renewed by the new covering. Plans for restoration and conservation work inside the building are being worked out now – they carefully maintain the original natural and artificial stone pavements and stairs, stucco decorations and exterior plasters, metal elements of staircases etc. The case of the House of Arts is an example of a well-prepared, careful and long-lasting heritage restoration.

The „Nine-storey“ in Kosice

This building is a historic high-rise in the city centre. At the time of its creation in 1939, thanks to its nine stories, it towered above the usually two-storey housing around (the highest buildings had four stories). The architect was Alexander Skuteczky (design from 1937) from Bratislava – the investor of the building was an Italian insurance company: Assicurazione Generali Triest. The requested inner space was divided into two bodies on both sides of the



8. Detail of terrazzo pavement with Valentin di Angelo's signature in the entrance hall of the „Nine-storey“. Photo by Gabriel Kladek



9. Detail of terrazzo pavement destruction in the interior of the main staircase during the reconstruction. Photo by the author

corner: the six-storey part in the street-line is accented by the nine-storey high-rise at the corner: the ground floor and the 1st floor are for commercial use (shopping and administration), the other (higher) floors are used for flats.

The different inner function is presented in the exterior by two-storey travertine wainscot contrasting with the smooth plaster surface of the floors with flats. The framing of doors and windows in the ground floor is made of metal, but the flats have wooden frames. The facades of the flats have continuous recessed balconies (loggia) and from the sixth floor of the „tower“ there is an entrance to the terrace on the roof of the lower part, originally accessible to everybody living in the house. The floors with flats have two staircases and elevators – one on each side.

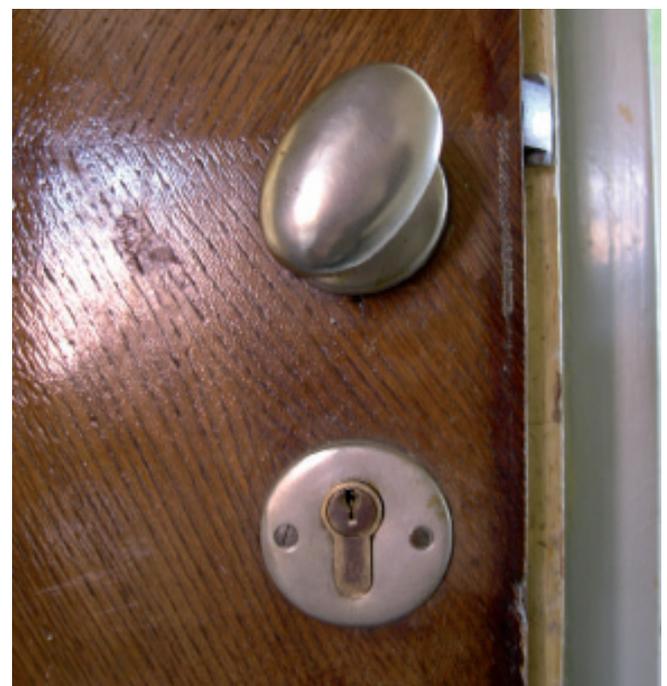
A number of original authentic details have survived in the interior – in flats, staircases and entrance halls as well. There are admirable details of artificial stone, produced by a well-known craftsman in Kosice – Angelo di Valentin (of Italian origin). A lot of veneered interior flat-doors have remained in the house, combined with authentic details: doorhandles, eyelets, special metallic handrails and travertine sheeting of breasts in the staircases.

This interwar building belonged to the most up-to-date architecture of the town for a long time after WWII. It was a miracle too, that the original housing function was still kept during all changes of the communist period. After 1989, there were more changes in the private ownership of the building – one of the owners tried to change the function to pure administration, but he failed in a short time. The present owner, an Italian private developer, has got some earlier experience of heritage building restoration - another older house in Kosice - so

he was quite skilled in “dealing” with the heritage board.

The restoration began at the turn of 2003/2004 and lasted up to 2005. A disadvantage was, that some parts of the realisation works were done earlier, as the different levels of designs were prepared and approved by the authorities – one of the floors was “restored” by the owner to his own taste before the design was made. At the beginning, the owner presented his investment programme: to restore the tenement and administration usage with the aim of raising the quality of the flats by modernisation – but the real (not presented) programme was to raise the price of one square metre to the highest possible level, by using new materials as much as possible. This was combined with the typical feature of this owner: continual failing to keep within the approved restoration project. The results were: irreversible changes in the inner layout (flat arrangement) - by demolishing and

10. Detail of original door with a Functionalistic knob. Photo by the author





11. The „Nine-storey“ after reconstruction – present state.
Photo by the author

changing of the original corridor connecting the two main staircases. The process of this type of “restoration” illustrates the nonsense of modernisation, during which recent quality handicraft is replaced by what is fashionable today (e.g. terrazzo pavements or artificial stone elements, “repairing” veneered interior doors by giving them a coat of paint in various colours, replacing well-kept stone-sheeting with new travertine instead of cleaning and conserving the original one. The owner planned to replace all

the windows too, but some of them, with original lever construction, survived in the lower floors.

After restoration the building seems to be well-kept, maintained as a whole unit, without principal changes, and in spite of the number of removed or destroyed details it still represents a historical tenement house with flats in higher floors and with commerce and administration in the ground floor and 1st floor. But the truth is that most flats are still empty and there are more and more firms and companies stepping quietly into the house and occupying some flats for administrative purposes, too.

Conclusion

These facts demonstrate that there are two problems with the restoration of Functionalist architecture:

1. Present construction companies are not able to use traditional handicraft technologies, required for restoration work or for reconstruction of missing parts of authentic details – the quality of **architectural detail** is one of the most important elements of interior decoration in the building of Functionalism or Modern Movement – and it is the most endangered element at the same time.

2. Lack of interest or effort to preserve the **original function** of interwar architecture – it is quite certain that a change in the function (from flats to administration or any other) will cause irreversible interventions, destroying the original substance.

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