

Functionalism in Slovakia: A Tool of Modernisation and National Revival

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"Slovaks are coming down from chalets to boulevards"

William Ritter, 1931¹

When in 1919 Bratislava became the seat of provisional government, Slovakia for the first time in history happened to have its capital on its own territory. A few years later, Bratislava was the political, economic and cultural centre of the country as well. While in the beginning of the 20th century the only guarantees of national culture were Slovak patriots, the 1920s belonged already to the modern cosmopolitans gathered in the cafés of Bratislava, where the latest trends in art and politics were discussed. Enthusiasm and confidence in their own abilities and possibilities replaced the feelings of dejection and despair, which accompanied the Slovaks in the preceding 19th century. Instead of national problems, universal values started to be reflected in the Slovak society. Modernity as the sense of living was reflected in the perspectives of artists, politicians, architects and their clients as well.

The golden age of Slovak architecture

The period between the two world wars is considered to be the most successful in terms of 20th-century architecture.² It is

connected with the constitution of the authentic, local architectural scene and the emergence of Functionalism on it. Even if Slovakia faced economic problems at that time, caused by World War I and the recession, local construction activity achieved unprecedented growth.

The processes of democratisation and liberalization influenced directly the spread of Modern Architecture in Slovakia. Nearly in each town, new schools, buildings of cultural or sports clubs as Sokol or YMCA were built. The new state-controlled insurance companies and sanatoria needed new seats as well. The ideas of a modern flat together with the consolidation of the property market stimulated the growth

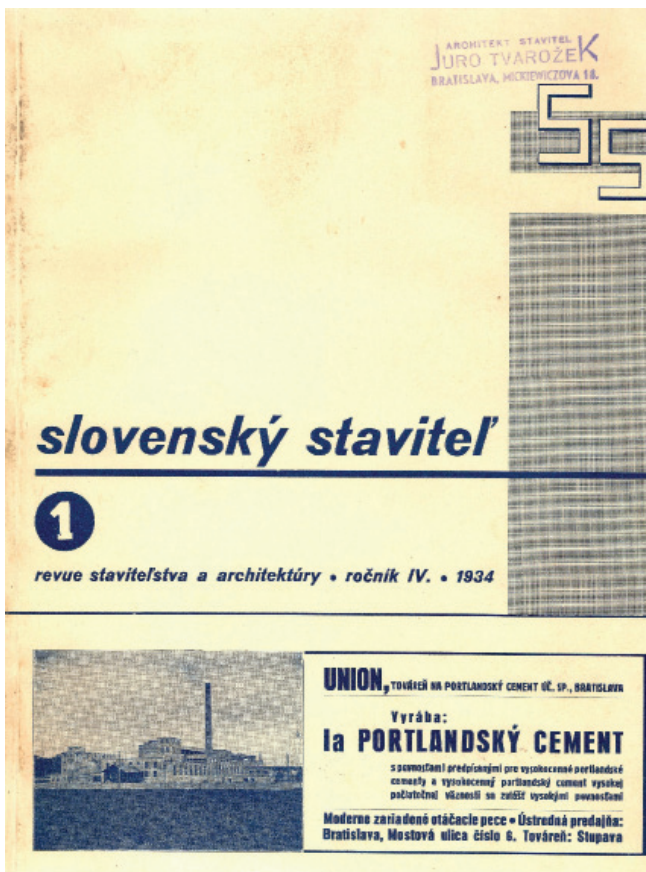
v 20. storočí. Bratislava, Slovart 2002, p. 512; Moravčíková Henrieta: *Slovakia* [in:] Sharp Dennis – Cooke Catherine (ed.): *The Modern Movement in Architecture*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers 2000, pp. 233–240.; Foltyn Ladislav: *Slowakische Architektur und die tschechische Avantgarde 1918 – 1939*. Dresden, Verlag der Kunst 1991. p. 235.

1. *Square of the Republic in Bratislava in the early 1930s.* (Bratislava City Archives, Hofer)



1. Ritter William, *O Slovákoch*, Elán 1931.

2. More about this period in Slovak architecture [in:] Moravčíková Henrieta: *Der Haupttrend – Modernisierung. Slowakische Architektur in zwanzigen und dreissigen Jahren* [in:] *Architektur Slowakei. Impulse und Reflexion*. Ed. A. Stiller, Š. Šlacha. Wien, Verlag Anton Pustet 2003. pp. 158 – 180.; Dulla Matúš – Moravčíková Henrieta: *Architektúra Slovenska*



2. Front page of architectural journal *Slovenský staviteľ*

of housing. Because of their spatial organisation, structural and formal features, these buildings became the main representatives of the ideas of new architecture in Slovakia.

Very important for the acceptance of Modern Architecture in Slovakia were the new architecture journals *Forum* and *Slovenský staviteľ* (Slovak Builder), founded in 1931.

These journals discussed the main topics of the Modern Movement, published best works of local Modern Architecture and international examples, especially those designed by Le Corbusier and by German architects.

An influential promoter of the Modern Movement in Slovakia was also the *Škola umeleckých remesiel* (The arts and crafts school) in Bratislava. Even if the school, established in 1928, was only a vocational school, it became an internationally-acknowledged partner of Bauhaus or VCHUTEMAS. The best representatives of local avant-garde and even some international stars like László Moholy-Nagy and Hannes Meyer lectured there³.

The democratic conditions, the civil character of the society together with the mixture of nationalities, religions, political and cultural orientations, determined the structured and layered character of the Modern Movement in Slovakia. At that time, there was no school in Slovakia training architects, so contemporary architects had studied in neighbouring European centres like Budapest, Vienna, Prague or Munich. At the same time, these were major centres shaping the local understanding of the Modern Movement. It is in these pluralistic conditions that conservative and pragmatic Slovak Emil Belluš, avant-garde left-oriented Jewish Fridrich

3. Das Bauhaus im Osten: *Slowakische und tschechische Avantgarde 1928 – 1939*. Exhibition catalogue. Ed. S. A. Ostfildern-Ruit. Leverkusen, Städtisches Museum, Verlag Gerd Hatje 1997. p. 339; Mojžišová Iva: *Škola umeleckých remesiel v Bratislave a Bauhaus*. ARS, 1990, pp. 43-54.

3. Slovak Artistic Club in Bratislava, 1926, architects Alois Balan and Jiri Grossmann (from *Slovak Architectural Archives, Bratislava*)



Weinwurm, and progressive, well-educated Czech Alois Balán could have become the most successful representatives of Modern Architecture in Slovakia at the same time.

The very first modern works: non-plastered brick

In Slovakia, non-plastered brick was perceived as "a bridge towards Modern Architecture." It enabled architects to give up traditional ornament, at the same time making the façades look less empty than when plastered.

The pavilion of *Umelecká beseda slovenská* (Slovak Artistic Club, 1926) on the bank of the Danube River in Bratislava is considered to be symbolically the first work of Functionalism in Slovakia. Young architects Alois Balán and Jiří Grossmann designed the pavilion in the Constructivist form of non-plastered brick with a big skylight in the main exhibition space.

The belief that non-plastered brick was the right expression of Modernism also motivated architect Klement Šilinger when he was designing the first university hall of residence in Slovakia, the *Lafranconi* Hall in Bratislava (1927). The first modern work of architect Artur Szalatnai, the spa building *Sina* (1931) in Trenčianske Teplice, was also built of non-plastered brick.

Modern villa

New ideas of Functionalism have probably had the greatest impact on housing. By introducing new spatial relations, new materials and technologies, they completely overturned the traditional values of the living environment. Modern villas became representative of the new spirit of the time and the status symbol of the social elite.

The clients' wishes and the architects' ideas probably merged most successfully in the villa of the director of prospering print works in Bratislava, Karol Jaroň (Bratislava, 1930). He invited the young, but already well-known for the Slovak Artistic Club, architect Alois Balán of Bratislava to design it. In the design for the villa, the architect tried to demonstrate the "culture of living of the time". He even succeeded in combining the rational open layout with artistically impressive figure of the cut down prism.

Ambitious lawyer and future secretary of the Slovak ministry of education Jaroslav Dvořák, and his wife – famous Slovak writer Zuzka Zguriška – dreamed of a new modern villa as well. Designed by architect Jindřich Merganc,



4. *Villa Jaron in Bratislava, 1930, architects Alois Balan and Jiri Grossmann (from Slovak Architectural Archives, Bratislava)*

the villa (Bratislava, 1934) with a grand living room with a gallery and a wonderful view of the town became a fashionable venue for Bratislava artists and politicians.

Sometimes however, the clients could not stick to the idea of modernity. This would happen when the proposed solution was too radical. Architects Fridrich Weinwurm and Ignác Vécsei designed a villa (1929) for a prominent Bratislava lawyer Arpád Lengyel, which in the local conditions was a revolutionary manifestation of functionality and anti-aestheticism. The open and empty interior, together with entirely plain façades of prismatic volume, were not cosy enough for the client. He invited the famous Viennese architect Josef Hoffmann, who fitted the villa with furniture, upholstery and glass from Wiener Werkstätte. Nearly the same happened with another villa designed by Weinwurm and Vécsei – the villa of Oskar Pfeffer (Bratislava, 1936), which belonged to the best works of Functionalism in Slovakia. The Viennese architect Ernst Schwadron made it more homely with his interior design.

Modern villas, however, were not built only in Bratislava. Several outstanding single-family houses have been erected outside the capital as well. These buildings spread the new, Modernist ideas throughout the regions of Slovakia. Most interesting of them are three villas in Topločany, designed by architect Eugene Rosenberg, future founder of the famous British design office Yorke, Rosenberg & Mardall.

Social housing

Housing shortage was one of the main social problems in Europe after World War I. The interest of architects in social housing culminated in 1929, during the 2nd International Congress of Modern Architecture CIAM in Frankfurt titled "The Minimal Flat". Slovak architectural scene had reflected this problem since the very beginning. Architect Fridrich Weinwurm was the main representative of the left-oriented social movement in Slovakia. He not only designed several interesting social housing projects, but was involved in the editing of a leftist monthly *Nová Bratislava* (New Bratislava), the organising of lectures and in political activities as well.

Already in 1931, F. Weinwurm together with his colleague I. Vécsei designed a housing estate of minimal flats *Unitas* (Bratislava, 1932). The layout of the whole estate, east-west orientation of the houses, disposition of the flats and the proposed steel-tube furniture reflected the ongoing international discussion. At the time of its construction, the housing estate *Unitas* was a unique example of new architecture in local conditions. It was presented in several professional journals and books, including the

famous monograph *The Minimal Flat* edited by Karel Teige.

Unitas, together with other just finished housing estates, like municipal minimal flats by Emil Belluš (Bratislava, 1931) and minimal flats by Josef Nowotny (Bratislava, 1928), started the local discussion on housing, parallel to the international discussion on solving the problems of ideal orientation towards the cardinal points, insolation, situation of particular functions in the flat, area requirements of particular functions and their proportions. The discussion was fuelled by the increase in house building activity following the implementation in 1930 of a new law, which offered greater flexibility in the funding of housing projects.

It was again F. Weinwurm and his colleague I. Vécsei that created the most innovative housing project of that time – the housing estate *Nova Doba* (New Age, Bratislava, 1932-1942). The housing development of small flats, contracted by a cooperative of private employers and workers, consisted of six row houses organised in three units. In addition to elaborated layout, all of the flats had district heating and centrally distributed cold and hot water. The New Age housing estate was the first residential building in Slovakia constructed on a steel skeleton filled with sandwich walls.

Modern town

High building activity in the 1930s influenced urban development and the general atmosphere of several towns in Slovakia. New, modern quarters emerged and Modern Architecture made its way into the centres of

5. *Nova Doba* housing estate in Bratislava, 1932-1942, architects Fridrich Weinwurm and Ignac Vecsei (Bratislava City Archives, Hofer)



historical towns as well. This tendency was most visible in the Slovak capital – Bratislava. Leopold W. Rochowanski, the author of the famous Slovak travelogue *Columbus in der Slowakei*, wrote about Bratislava as about a town “where whole streets are often pulled down and new ones are constructed, houses that could serve their function are replaced by new buildings” and where “architects are willing only to design modern houses.”⁴ And indeed, several new streets, places and quarters have been erected in Bratislava in the years between the two world wars. This influenced the character of the city more than in any other European capital.

In 1929, an international competition was held for the new urban plan of Bratislava. Even though there was no winning proposal in the competition, it brought several ideas, which were later implemented in the urban planning of the city. One such idea was to redevelop the area behind the old town walls, which served as a market place, in to a new main square – *Square of the Republic*. The most prestigious institutions of the republic had their seats built there. One of the first buildings constructed there was the *City Savings Bank* (J. Tvarožek, 1931), the first building in Slovakia with curtain walls. Only a few years later, the first “high-rise” building in Czechoslovakia, the twelve-storey *Manderla House* was built in the same square (Ch. Ludwig, E. Spitzer, A. Danielis, 1934).

However, the most representative was the headquarters of Farmers Credit Unions called the *Cooperative Houses* (E. Belluš, 1939). This grand edifice composed of three neighbouring buildings had a bank hall, shops, café and even a cinema in the ground floor, and offices and flats in upper floors. Modern image, extensive spatial concept and elaborated detailing were characteristic not only of the *Cooperative Houses* but of most of the modern palaces that were built in Bratislava in the 1930s as well.

Perhaps the only exception was the *House of Services Bata* (V. Karfík, 1930) built in the northern edge of the same square in Bratislava. Baťa Company was less interested in representation than in unification, standardization and industrialization. These principles determined also the architecture of the *House of Services*. Prefabricated skeleton and other structural elements used on the building were standard



6. *City Savings Bank in Bratislava, 1931, architect Juraj Tvarožek (photo Matica slovenska, Martin)*

parts of Bata Company’s building system. The industrial look of the building was the reason why Bratislava inhabitants protested against this building, but their protests were unsuccessful.

Bata Company managed to erect their buildings not only in Bratislava, but also in nearly every town in the country. It was even able to establish and build two industrial towns in Slovakia – Batovany and Batizovce. These towns, built according to the principles of ideal industrial town, were the most representative achievement of modern urban planning in Slovakia.

Health matters

In view of the new organisation of health care and social welfare in the 1920s, social and health insurance companies built a whole chain of new office buildings, hospitals, treatment centres and sanatoria. Within this development, several excellent works of Modern Architecture originated in Slovakia. One of the first and probably the best of them was the *Sanatorium Machnáč* (1932) in Trenčianske Teplice, designed by an outstanding representative of Prague avant-garde Jaromír Krejcar. When it was designed and built, the sanatorium was the largest building in the whole health sector. In terms of functionalistic principles the sanatorium

4. Rochowanski Leopold Wolfgang.: *Columbus in der Slowakei*. Bratislava, Eosverlag 1936, p. 596, here p. 91.

consisted of two wings – a two-storey part with a foyer, a restaurant and a lounge, and a five-storey residential part with a terrace on the roof. The reinforced-concrete skeleton enabled the open spatial organisation of the social part and a sophisticated arrangement of individual rooms and corridors, which translated into splendid façades of the sanatorium as well.

An obverse of the sanatorium in a way is the summer swimming pool *Zelená žaba* (Green Frog, 1937), which was built opposite the resort. It was designed by another excellent representative of Czech avant-garde Bohuslav Fuchs. While Machnáč was a clear manifestation of the Bauhaus Functionalism, the swimming pool already indicated a shift towards a more organic understanding of Modernism.

Like in Trenčianske Teplice, interesting Modern Architecture buildings were erected in other Slovak spas as well. Among them, the famous spa Piešťany faced probably the most intensive building activity of all. It was thanks to the director of the spa, who had a good understanding of modern balneology and of health resort organisation. He was the one who initiated the construction of a pedestrian overpass bridging the spa facilities on the opposite banks of the river Váh. The overpass, called the *Colonnade Bridge* (E. Belluš, 1933) became one of the most excellent works of Modern Architecture in Slovakia. In the design

of the bridge, architect Emil Belluš succeeded in combining the functional organisation and technical innovations with the understanding of the place, fine details and fashionable modern form.

Probably the last work of pre-WWII Modernism in Slovakia was connected with health matters as well. The building of the *District Social Insurance Company* (A. Balán, J. Grossmann, 1939) in Bratislava reflected the influence of the grand modern palaces in Prague. It was composed around the spacious, open, three-storey-high main hall and divided into an office part, a clinic and a hospital. The free plan of the clinic, the bow-cornered colonnade, the ribbon windows and the roof terraces used by patients were one of the most expressive manifestations of Le Corbusier's principles of Modern Architecture in Slovakia.

The year 1939, when the building of the social insurance company was erected, is considered to be the last year of avant-garde in Slovakia. In March 1939, the nationalist Slovak state was established and Czech countries became part of the German empire. This influenced general conditions in the country and architecture as well. Many of Czech architects were forced to leave Slovakia, while Jewish architects were barred from the profession. Several architects fell in the war. The political and cultural orientation of the new state was

7. Footbridge in Piešťany, engineer Emil Belus (photo: National Museum in Bratislava)





8. Sanatorium Machnac in Trenčianske Teplice, 1932, architect Jaromír Krejcar (from Slovak Architectural Archives, Bratislava)

clearly pro-Italian and pro-German, and Slovak architecture became more conservative and traditional.

Even if modern avant-garde was once again reflected in the works of the prewar generation after World War II, it never reached the cogency and stylistic purity of the past period.

Architecture of Functionalism and its protection

The end of the 20th century without any doubts created more favourable conditions for research into Modern Architecture than the years before. Historical remoteness, post-modern experience and, of course, deepened knowledge about its particular manifestations allow to observe Modernism without the enthusiastic engagement of its creators or the scepticism of its critics. Scholars started to pay more critical attention to the functionalistic architecture in Slovakia and to deal with its cultural values in the early 1990s. Numerous monographs and articles were published, which intensively reflected the existence and acceptance of Modernism in the architecture of Slovakia. Already in 1994, the first list of the most important works of Modernism in Slovakia, the so-called Top Register, was published by the Slovak DOCOMOMO working

party, established in 1990⁵. It included 29 works of architecture, which shortly after were listed by the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic as well. Since then Slovak DOCOMOMO have continued to elaborate the national register and the archive of works as well. Today the national register includes 49 works of Modern Movement architecture and is still growing⁶. After 2004 and the DOCOMOMO International Conference on late Modernism in New York, Slovak scholars started to focus more on research of the works of late Modernism.

Even if the national register is well elaborated and its archives provide all basic information on the registered works, the everyday practice of their protection and renewal is not very successful. The very first examples of the renewal of works of Functionalist architecture dated from the turn of 1980s and 1990s. Most of them, for instance the *Propeller station* (E. Belluš, 1930, redesign J. Bahna, 1988) or the *Slovak Rowing Club* (E. Belluš, 1931, redesign J. Fecanin, H. Kupec, Š. Polakovič, 1993) both

5. *Top register – Slovakia*. Ed. K. Kubičková, Bratislava, SAS 1994, ISBN 80-88757-03-7. In 1995 published as a special issue of the scientific journal *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*.

6. DOCOMOMO National Register. Ed: H. Moravčíková, M. Dulla and others. *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*, 40, 2006, No. 3 – 4, pp. I – XXXIV.

in Bratislava, are characterised by poor interest in keeping original elements and materials and great quest for their postmodern interpretation. The same way of work prevailed even in the beginning of 21st century, as one can see on the reconstruction of the *City Savings Bank* (J. Tvarožek, 1931, redesign J. Bahna, 2001) in Bratislava.

Until today, the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic has listed 225 works of Modern Architecture, most of them dating from the first half of the 20th century. Unfortunately, the capacities and professional experiences of the Monuments Board are not sufficient to monitor and regulate all building activities on listed works of Modern Architecture. The result is undesirable rebuilding, destroying of important values, unprofessional maintenance or even decline for lack of maintenance. Only very few of the listed Modern Architecture works have been restored in a way that is at least acceptable.

The *Sanatorium Machnáč* in Trenčianske Teplice, perhaps the best work of Functionalism in Slovakia, very well illustrates the present situation. The regulations of the restoration process, made by the Monuments Board, are so strict, that the owner of the building is not able to meet them. The result – the building has been out of use for five years and has been declining gradually.

In this context it is necessary to remark, that social acceptance and use are just as indispensable for monuments of Modern Architecture as they are for any other monuments. Only then can the preservation of their values be guaranteed. In the light of these very experiences the need for careful investigation and documentation of works of Modern Architecture comes to the fore. The results of such research - inventories of elements, collections of drawings and photographs – might often be in the future the only evidence of the existence of this extraordinary architecture.

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