

# **Final report on the research project “Architecture and the second public sphere in Hungary 1974-1989”**

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## **Summary of the research subject**

My research at OSA focused on surveying Hungarian samizdat publications in order to get a picture of what had been written about architecture and urban planning in the second public sphere in Hungary. In particular, I sought to find out whether there were any issues which were not allowed to enter the discourse taking place in the official public media controlled by the state and would therefore be deemed to be discussed in illegal publications. Since Hungary represented a specific case within the Eastern bloc with respect to censorship policy, in my research proposal I assumed that samizdat served as a means of bypassing self-censorship and double speech typical for public debates during the Kádár regime rather than for thematising contested issues, as many of the outlets of official media were usually willing to provide space for serious confrontations. The research at the archives was preceded by and partly run parallel with a survey of architectural and cultural periodicals which had shown that it was possible at the time to criticize phenomena closely connected to government policies such as the construction of housing estates, the destruction of built heritage or the hardships of private builders, although the articulation and choreography of these debates was subject to various control mechanisms.

The time period of the research had been established on the basis of political history: in 1974 the leading proponents of the so called “New Economic Mechanism” were ousted from the government and thus that year marked the final end of the liberal reforms initiated in 1968, whereas 1989 saw the dissolution of the ruling party and the fall of State Socialism in Hungary. The chosen time frame might seem problematic since Hungarian samizdat only emerged in the second half of the 1970s, however, the second year of the examined period, 1975, saw the first significant criticism of architectural mass production and state-backed high modernism in the so called Tulip debate, commonly regarded as the birth of a collective oppositional tendency in

Hungarian architecture. Therefore, already the mid-1970s can be seen as a moment of restructuring of the positions within the architectural public which proved to be decisive for the upcoming years, and especially the 1980s when the activities of the so called organic school intensified. Yet my research also tries to problematize the established narrative revolving around opposition and resistance and address the question whether the debates and controversies of the period can be viewed in such antagonistic terms as it has been established since the fall of the regime. Thus, the ultimate stake of my research is to establish a more rigorous framework for identifying oppositional positions and strategies in architecture during the latter half of the Kádár regime.

### **Description of the surveyed material**

The publications surveyed at OSA consisted mainly of illegally printed and distributed Hungarian samizdat periodicals donated to the archives by former dissidents or their heirs. Besides these, the examined material included individual publications such as political pamphlets, transcripts of discussions, illegally published books and booklets etc., as well as emigrant publications, both books and periodicals, the distribution of which was illegal in Hungary. Since the research was an overall survey of the Hungarian samizdat literature available at OSA, I consulted boxes with samizdat materials from the personal papers of Gábor Demszky, János Kiss, Tibor Philipp, Géza Sáska, György Krassó, and Lajos Jakab. In addition, I consulted selected boxes of the Annotations of Intellectual Debates and Datasheets of the research documentation of Mária Heller. (Please find the list of the boxes with their respective signatures at the end of the report).

The consulted samizdat material was published between 1979-1989, and in larger part included the issues of the periodicals *Beszélő* (and its offsprings), *AB Hírmondó*, *Független Demokrata*, and *Égtájak Közt*, and a small number of issues of the illegal artistic and cultural zines *Inconnu Press* and *Pofon*. Among the individual publications I found especially interesting and useful the book *A létező kecske* (“The Existing Goat”) by Zoltán Zsille published in 1988 by the illegal publisher *Katalizátor Iroda* in Budapest and containing the sociological paper *Vasbetonvázlat* and the pamphlet by Miklós Haraszti titled *Kései bevezetés a Kádárizmusba* (“A belated introduction to the Kádár regime”) found in a collection recently donated by Béla Nóvé.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zsille’s book can be found in the samizdat collection of György Krassó: HU OSA 397-0-2:4. I am grateful to Judit Hegedűs for drawing my attention to the material donated by Béla Nóvé which does not yet have a signature.

The main topics discussed in the periodicals reflect the issues which occupied Hungarian opposition circles in the 1980s such as the revolution of 1956, recent cases of persecution, censorship policy, the Polish crisis, debates on oppositional strategy, Hungarian minorities in Romania and Czechoslovakia, the planned project of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dam and the persecution of conscientious objectors. In the eyes of the regime these were highly sensitive and strictly political issues, often with implications for international politics (concerning neighbouring countries, the Vatican, international organizations and movements). Besides these, the periodicals often featured obituaries of persons associated with the opposition and recollections of older dissidents and figures involved in the 1956 revolution. Many of these topics dominate the discourse in the Hungarian samizdat throughout the examined period and if there is anything on the arts, it is related – in accordance with Hungarian cultural traditions – to literature and literary criticism. Visual and performing arts were more prominently represented in the zines *Inconnu Press* and *Pofon* of which only a few issues are held at OSA. I found more useful articles dealing with wider phenomena such as analysing official cultural policies, the state of the economy or proposing reforms which in one way or the other touch upon issues more closely related to architecture and urban planning.

### **Relevant sources found**

As initially expected, the surveyed material contained only a very small number of articles specifically dealing with architecture or urbanism, and it is fair to say that although a number of prominent Hungarian dissidents were architects these subjects are virtually absent from Hungarian samizdat literature. (Apart from the zines mentioned above, the *Artpool Letters* samizdat featured a few articles on architecture but none of its issues are held at OSA). In fact, I found only two pieces dedicated to architecture, both in the samizdat collection of Lajos Jakab: an essay by Zoltán Fehérvári titled “On the magical in the Hungarian architecture of the 1970s-80s” published in the 1986 November issue of *Pofon* and the other is a picture spread showing a collaborative project by László Rajk, Gábor Bachman and Bálint Nagy along with a short description featured in the fifth issue of *Inconnu Press*, likewise from 1986.<sup>2</sup>

The long essay by György Bence titled “Censored publishing and its alternatives in Hungarian culture” on how censorship policies affected cultural production and the various arts only very briefly yet interestingly discusses the specific censorship mechanisms within Hungarian architecture, relating this to the practice of approving projects through juries dominated by the

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<sup>2</sup> Both publications are stored under signature OSA HU 426-0-4:2.

older generation which tends to select proposals conforming to its preference for a late variant of functionalism.<sup>3</sup> Thus, according to Bence, architecture is free of formal ideological concerns and instead is ruled by informal mechanisms based on aesthetic ideals.

The most interesting text found during my research is a paper written in 1978 by the sociologist Zoltán Zsille and first published and distributed in 1980 by the so called Rajk Boutique run by the architect and dissident László Rajk. In 1988 it was included in Zsille's samizdat book mentioned above along with other essays on bureaucracy, economic planning and the shadow economy.<sup>4</sup> The paper titled "A sketch in reinforced concrete: a study on the introduction of mass production in the construction industry, the disastrous effects of Soviet type housing factories, the housing estates and their actual purpose" is an example of engaged sociology combining empirical and critical methods which was the hallmark of progressive Hungarian sociology in the 1970s. Zsille conducted dozens of interviews with managers and workers of an unnamed provincial state construction company (most probably BÁÉV based in Miskolc) and framed his findings into a political economy of bureaucratic planning based on a dynamic of hierarchic power structures and the exploitation of workers. Importantly for my research, he claims that the introduction of housing factories and the building of housing estates served three main purposes: first, the creation of a new industrial sector enabling the state's stronger grip over the economy and a tighter control and exploitation of the workers; second, creating additional demand for state companies to overcome overproduction; and third, mass housing enabled the concentration of labour force and fed further industrialisation. Furthermore, Zsille provides a detailed description of the production process at the company's housing factory and explains how it is determined and distorted by the interplay of various factors, most notably bureaucratic control, wage politics and the unpredictability of demand.

My research also greatly benefited from articles with wider scope such as the one by the renowned dissident sociologist István Kemény on the second economy (the semi-legal market of goods and services complementing the "first economy" controlled by the state) published in *AB Hírmondó* and the long essay by Miklós Haraszti, mentioned above, which I found especially useful for elucidating the wider context of my research. Written in 1981, "A belated introduction to the Kádár regime" exposed the logic behind the so called liberalism of the

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<sup>3</sup> György Bence, *Cenzúrázott és alternatív közlési lehetőségek a magyar kultúrában*, *AB Hírmondó*, 1985/4, p. 17-38. OSA HU 397-0-1:3.

<sup>4</sup> Zoltán Zsille, *Vasbetonvázlat. Tanulmány az építőipar nagyüzemesítéséről, a szovjet házgárak működésének katasztrofális eredményéről, a lakótelepekről és ezek tényleges céljáról*. In *ibid.*, *A létező kecske*, Katalizátor Iroda, Budapest, 1988, p. 141-177.

regime which from the 1960s the latter used to build alliances within Hungarian society and to attract foreign investments. Haraszti characterised the regime's ideology as a kind of a "management science" aimed at coordinating the interests of the various social groups rather than following a strict doctrine and a police state strategy as some of the other countries of the Soviet bloc. This situation strongly determined the position of public intellectuals who were allowed to express oppositional voices to some degree whereas along with the rest of the society they took part in a "false compromise" with the state based on concessions, reformist politics, welfare provisions and a thriving culture of consumption. In my research, Haraszti's essay greatly contributes to the understanding of what were the limits of the government's "liberal" approach to the public sphere and what can be identified as genuine oppositional positions.

### **Results of the research**

Based on the research at OSA and other sources available elsewhere (such as the samizdat articles of László Rajk and the book "Do It Yourself: Hungary's Hidden Economy" by János Kenedi), I could identify the need for self-building (building private housing by individuals) and the monopoly of the state on building materials as the subjects most often discussed in illegal publications with regards to architecture. The main motif of the related texts is the opposition between and preference of spontaneity and informality against planning and excessive bureaucracy. Dissident architects László Rajk and Bálint Nagy promoted self-building through articles and lectures and called on architects to take part in the building process. Also, the theme of informal housing strategies and self-building is strongly present in the period's sociographical literature such as the research done by György Berkovits, a sociologist facing professional sidelining during the 1980s. The issue was closely interrelated with the inability of the state to provide sufficient quantity of housing and therefore was strongly neuralgic to the regime as it pointed to a deficiency in keeping up with the promise of the "false compromise", the provision of welfare amenities in exchange of the regime's acceptance. The subject offers good opportunity for comparing the dissident's discourse with the official discourse on private housing and the state of the construction industry in the journals *Építőipar* and *Magyar Építőművészet*. It is important to note that the related policy context went through significant changes during the examined period as from the late 1970s onwards the state gradually adopted a strategy of supporting private building and thus implicitly admitting that it cannot carry on with its large scale housing construction programme.

The lack of relevant material on architecture and urban planning in the samizdat literature available at OSA also prompted me to find an explanation for this absence. Certainly, an important role in this respect had been played by the zine *Bercsényi 28-30* edited by architecture students of the Budapest University of Technology. Started in 1963, by the end of the 1970s it had become the most important forum of radical architecture and architectural theory in Hungary, as well as a crucial publication for contemporary visual arts and performance art. Architects mentioned above such as László Rajk, Bálint Nagy or Gábor Bachman, frequently published their projects there and it also presented cutting edge architecture from abroad. It was printed and distributed legally but had a small circulation and its reach was mainly limited to the younger generations and chiefly to Budapest. In addition there were other periodicals which published articles on subjects related to architecture and provided space for critical voices: between 1979-1982 the cultural monthly *Mozgó Világ* published a number of articles offering alternative approaches to architecture and in 1983, the year the oppositional attitude of the former was curtailed by the government, the foremost architecture journal of the country, *Magyar Építőművészet*, was taken over by a new editorial team who in a short time gave it a highly critical profile. Another essential aspect partly explaining the absence of samizdat writings on architecture was the importance of private gatherings for intellectual debates during the examined period. Besides public venues such as the *Bercsényi Klub* or the *Fiatal Művészek Klubja* (“Club of Young Artists”) frequented by the younger generations there were also private apartments (such as the flat of Péter Janesch or the house of Bálint Nagy) which often hosted gatherings involving oppositional figures.

As stated in my proposal, I would like to publish the results of my research in an English-language paper and a longer article in Hungarian, both to be completed by autumn. It is important to stress that my research would not have been possible without consulting the collections held at OSA as it is the main repository of samizdat publications in Hungary. I had a very positive experience while doing the research at the archives and I greatly benefited from the discussions with the archivists and researchers working at OSA. I am also very grateful to Katalin Gádoros, Nóra Ungár and Bianka Horváth for introducing me to their colleagues and providing me with all the information pertaining to my research stay.

**Archival boxes consulted during my research:**

HU OSA 302-1-2: 1, 4, 5 – Gábor Demszky Personal Papers / Hungarian Samizdat Periodicals

HU OSA 302-1-5: 13 – Gábor Demszky Personal Papers / Manuscripts

HU OSA 362-0-2: 1, 4, 5, 6 – Tibor Philipp Collection / Samizdat Materials and Other Alternative Publications

HU OSA 426-0-4: 1, 2 – Lajos Jakab Samizdat Collection / Samizdat Journals and Periodicals, Posters, Artifacts

HU OSA 397-0-1: 3, 4 – György Krassó Collection of Hungarian Samizdat / Periodicals

HU OSA 397-0-2: 4 – György Krassó Collection of Hungarian Samizdat / Books and other publications

HU OSA 383-0-2: 5, 6 – Géza Sáska Collection of Hungarian Samizdat

HU OSA 355-0-1: 4, 5, 6 – János Kis Collection of Hungarian Samizdat and Documents of the Democratic Opposition / Samizdat Periodicals

HU OSA 335-0-1: 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 – Mária Heller Research Documentation / Annotations of Intellectual Debates and Datasheets of Researchers