



Poesy and Form

Treatise about Architecture in Connection with the Writings of István Janáky

Abstract of the thesis

Thoughts are manifestations of the spirit. The spirit can either become a word or a form. Thinking is the territory where contact is made with the „spiritual extants”, the empire where words and forms come into existence. During thinking, words give birth to concepts and, as a configuration of these ideas, become depictable as „substantialities” or „spiritual extants”. They formulate „truth” as existence without intentions. Even thoughts resulting in form struggle to depict ideas – creating a final shape in the ever-existing present – visualizing „truth” and „beauty”. According to Walter Benjamin, the visual-formal depiction of the world of ideas in such a way is actually poesy (*poesis*), i. e. „making” or „creating”, where truth is presented as beauty and beauty is authenticated by its truth.

All this would have seemed self-evidently valid back in the old days when there existed the protective umbrella of a *sensus communis* – a common perception and taste. As a result of the deterioration of this *sensus communis*, however, truth and beauty – together with the concept of goodness – became independent of each other, and the „clarity” of poesy was questioned. It also turned out what we can only

point at form, while it seems that the expressive power of words and forms is gradually lost.

The process by which general principles become uncertain and universal doctrines falter has an impact both on the artistic (creation) of form and the theory connected with it. „That is when the prestige and gravity of „critique” grows. It is not a secondary applied theory, but rather a primary possible theory: not the end of an existing theory, but rather a starting point of a theory yet to be created. It is important to be more precise because of the very possibilities of criticism. It is not that history and the explanations regarding the historicity of our existence have become questionable. The work of art has remained a historical product; a message carrying a historical fate and an artistic judgement even today. Only the interpretation of its being a historical product, a message carrying a historical fate and an artistic judgement needs to be reconsidered. New, authenticatable trains of thoughts following old schemes that have already fallen into discredit. Calling facts and coherences sensitively and theoretically precise just as calling a spade a spade. More specific and yet more lamentative phrasings free of utopia, but not faith” (György Poszler). If we consider the above in relation to domestic architecture and the architectural way of thinking in our country, the lack of critical thinking as starting points of possible theories in this area can be felt. To put it more sharply: it seems that in our country’s architecture only „tasks” still exist and there are not any „problems” to be thought about and solved, which require „spiritual functionality” (Lajos Fülep). The lack of critical thinking can be

detected in the creators' *ars poetica*, their *credo*, which are getting sporadic publicity; or in the lack of these.

A possible basis for the work of art, or its interpretability, can hardly be built upon sets of approaches woven together from ravaged beliefs, opinions based on unstated or not properly considered „emotional entities” or thoughts which grasp the surface of ever-existing actualities. Yes, this defect is also not acknowledged as a problem for the profession – just as if sporadic exceptions would prove the rule.

The reversed linear relation of „up-to-date-ness” and value can be explained only partly by the – often too fast – changes of paradigm and the versatile paradigms which exist side by side and are considered to be valid in parallel in Twentieth Century architecture. Since despite all pluralism – which does not only mean „it can be done this way and that way too” – (even) an architectural work of art is a creation of form, where there is a creator's decision behind all forms, where form plays an active role and value a creating role.

The active, value-creating role of form therefore means that the building claiming to be given the rank of a work of art as a complex formal creation „is not only a structure of meaning, but also a structure of values” – to use the phrase of Lajos Németh –, although it seems that interpretational models of the near past have put the question of artistic value between brackets despite the fact that the artistic-aesthetic meaning is always a quality of value. What makes it difficult to interpret the relation of meaning and value in architecture – regarding

both creation and interpretation – is that in the case of architectural forms, one can only talk with reserve about visual codes. Most architectural forms and elements do not possess a meaning that is also expressible in words. Their meaning is first of all contextual expressivity, i. e. it is mostly identical to their usage.

Making all this conscious and reconsidering it in a reflective way is (or can be) important during creation. It is unavoidable during (critical) interpretation, especially among the „anything goes” circumstances which suggest the relativity of values, because otherwise the creation of a(n) (architectural) form, a work of art having a „value potential” is possible only almost incidentally. The saying of Paul Valéry is true of the architectural work of art too: „From costs a lot!” In this context Lajos Németh's statement about the interpretation of a work of art can be related to architecture as well: „What can be denoted as values in a work of art is determined by the age and correlate to the specific function of, and the task undertaken by, the work of art and art as such, thus to „immanent poesy” as well. (...) This question (, however,) is not equal to the practical sociological problem: what a given age accepts or regards as a value or what new values a later approach may discover in a work of art – as a consequence of these very late experiences – or that it may even accept factors of value, which have not been recognised as values earlier. That is to say, the value potential of value factors is objective and even if value in its birth cannot be numerically measured – though there were some endeavours to do that in information aesthetics – comparison is possible, i. e. a comparison with similar

value potentials, and this offers the right to determine rank within a (given) system of relations" (Lajos Németh). Comparison and ranking can be the result of interpretation, „critique" which considers value factors. The creation of „objective value potential" – *poesis itself* – is, however, only the business of the creator and his work of art. At the same time, beside the (creator's) familiarity with visual-plastic-architectonic thinking and with critical awareness, both sides require activity-reflective, problem-sensitive, critical thinking, for which drifting with „up-to-date" information on the ever-shallower sea of actuality, producing higher and higher waves, is not enough.

In the aforementioned deficiency it is of especially great value to show up a possible form of this reflective creator behavior, which is represented in Hungary by István Janáky.

István Janáky has been publishing shorter or longer texts on or related to architecture for about four decades. With some sort of ironic self-depreciation he calls his articles, essays, studies simply "scripts".

Janáky cannot be defined a theorist in a modern sense, still in his poetic texts some tendency of theorizing is traceable. This theorizing vein recognizable in a lingual context means – using Vilém Flusser's words – "contemplating the ideas", while in the concept modernity theory is "elaborating new ideas".

In Janáky's texts working of the lingual context is very important. Language sets notions in motion turning them to words – words that have the proper meaning only in the very place where they are heard.

The characteristics of Janáky's writings being reminiscent of classical texts and theory need of course a detailed interpretation, because it helps us to read the texts properly so that one can unravel the matter woven in the fabric of the text.

As a result of interpreting the more important Janáky writings we should share in the thoughts of the author, and grow with the help of the ideas behind the words.

The texts represent an important and unique segment of the contemporary thinking of architecture in Hungary. The topic of each text is architecture as a creative activity, and different aspects of it – forming the environment, semantics in architecture, world of objects – as seen from the modeling point of view.

Janáky is a practicing architect – not a theorist or historian -, but he is a "thinking architect" at the same time. His texts philosophical in tone are set on the border of theory and practice of architecture creating connection between two worlds that are dependent on each other, still often drift far apart. Converging these fields could be helped by the theory-orientated interpretation of the texts. On the one hand the value of the Janáky-texts in the contemporary architectural thinking could be estimated – making the reception of these writings easier. On the other hand an absorbed general thinking about architecture could be stimulated which can enrich the interpretation of the art theoretical aspects of architecture.

Dissertation as genre emphasizes the approach of this study that is theory in this work does not mean the creation of new ideas, but – using Vilém Flusser’s words again – it is contemplating the ideas just like in the old treatises. This time it is about certain ideas in architecture, so – unlike the old treatises – not intended to be exhaustive.

Today it is not possible anymore to map the geography of the continent of architecture in its wholeness, as it was intended with more or less success earlier – in the 19th century for the last time. It is impossible, but not necessarily because certain regions of architecture are too variable, and not only because some regions are derelict. It is impossible simply because the picture of the whole continent shows less of the entity, then visiting and coming to know certain places. In the Hungarian architectural thinking the writings of István Janáky – from the middle of the 1960’s – are the sum of representing certain places.

Each texts holds the intellectual imprint of an era, but beyond that they can estimated as significant outputs of thinking about architecture in general. The second half of this dissertation is the introduction and explanation of the writings, while the first half intends to find points of reference and draw a horizon of interpretation.

September, 2010.

András Szalai

Abstract of the Masterpiece

The masterpiece is the sum of those architectural principles and methods of built environment analysis, which I have always had in mind as a practicing architect.

The entity of these analysis methods and principles is that with the help of these, revealing the context of place, environment and architectural heritage, it becomes possible to create new buildings cherishing the heritage value, and create a basis to maintain the environment.

The beginning of this was a decade of activity as region commissioner architect and scientific assistant in the Open-air Ethnographical Museum (Skanzen) in Szentendre. My work there was focused on value protection – reconstruction and restoration of rural buildings.

While dismantling and rebuilding rural buildings surveyed and researched by archeological means I could learn different aspects of heritage protection in practice. Consequently I became acquainted with the actual (and constantly diminishing in number) rural built heritage in Hungary.

The experience led to the recognition that ethnography and rural architectural research is focused on archaic, rare, unique objects of scientific importance – both in research and preservation. (Similar to history of architecture that is concentrating on architecturally

important, valuable, unique, typical examples, though the majority of our built environment does not consist of ethnographic curiosities or monuments of national importance.)

This revelation turned my attention to structural questions of built environment, as well as these structural questions – settlement structure, disposition of buildings, etc. – and architectural design practice – including several competition entries – led the attention to the aspects of architectural value preservation.

The preservation aspect and the importance of tradition appeared in several prize winning competition entries. One example was a competition in Csongrád (1990), where the task was the rehabilitation of and addition to a protected quarter, and another a competition in Békéscsaba (1991) aiming at the development of the city center.

Later this value protection aspect based on architectural tradition was enforced in several environmental analysis works of different scale: character plans of Szentendre (1992), heritage protection impact analysis of Magyarlukafa (2000-2003) and of Kőszeg (2003-2005).

Value protection analysis of traditional built environments became part of the education at Budapest University of Technology and Economics Department for History of Architecture and of Monuments, in international workshops like the settlement structure and heritage protection analysis of Abaliget, Boda and Kővágószőlős (2005-2006) among others.

In design practice, in heritage protection research, or while preparing impact analysis studies on built heritage it became clear that enforcing the upper categories is not sufficient in itself to maintain the “corpus loci” – for the “genius loci”, the spirit of the place can only be evoked by the body of the place – as whole and original, however relative the notions “whole” and “original” are.

Value considerations can be, and have to be drawn up regarding not only buildings, but built environment in a more complex dimension as well. As for rural built heritage for example, the following values have to be considered for protection:

different aspects of correlation between landscape and settlement – from geographical-economical considerations to socio-cultural relations

values of settlement structure – from the aspects of usage of space to morphological considerations

disposition and building mass – from functional and space-usage aspects to possibilities given by building materials and structures

elements of streetscape and architectural details – in a close connection with the upper considerations

All these upper elements should be embedded in a complex regional protection system.

September 2010,

András Szalai