

Anna Kobylińska, Maciej Falski

Institute of Western and Southern Slavic Studies

University of Warsaw

## Seismographs of culture. Prolegomena

Architecture combines the ability to design with the art of building, fusing imagination with practical knowledge conditioned by experience. As Walter Benjamin notes, it is probably the most enduring and never-ending form of art; it permeates the life of every person and teaches them to perceive in a state of distraction. Trained by the experience of architecture, involuntary perceptions turn out to be crucial at turning points in history and also protect cultural values from being pushed into the background.<sup>1</sup> In architecture, the public sphere is manifested in a unique way; it is understood as what is common and what is visible, revealed to its users. In this sense, it can be said that architecture is a social art in which, above all, is reflected what is supraindividual, resulting from the need to put the world in order and to organize it. Architecture is a denial of chaos and randomness.

Our research interest in architects stems from the conviction that their social role and cultural significance far exceed the material traces of their professional activity. By executing public and private commissions, architects have been shaping the material and symbolic world in which social and political life takes place since the dawn of time. They are endowed with a valuable competence that stems from their profession and is also of far-reaching social importance, especially in periods of rapid and profound change. The visualization of their ideas and concepts must be accompanied by concern for the possibility of maintaining the structure in its planned form and in usable condition. This “technical sense”, pragmatism understood in a specific way, compelling one to take into account the technical and material possibilities of implementing the project, as well as the user’s habitus, makes watchful guardians of form even of visionaries and fantasists, often bravely seeking new and better solutions but

---

<sup>1</sup> See Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in: idem, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), 239–240.

observing and respecting current practices of construction and urban planning. We think that when looking at architects, their biographies, i.e. their origin, educational paths, professional contacts, as well as the entire professional environment, one can better recognize the causes and course of profound social, political or even civilizational changes. At the same time, this approach reveals the actual directions of the impact of impulses and pattern-forming tendencies, which lead to the appearance of specific buildings in specific locations and affect their form.<sup>2</sup> Above all, however, we are attracted to the idea that it were architects who found ways to create a space that would respond to changing ideas and expectations, both individual and collective, by tangibly contributing to the creation of social space. They have always been a kind of seismographs.

Comparing architects to a seismographic device is anchored in the post-modern imaginarium<sup>3</sup> and has been introduced into the architectural discourse by Hans Hollein through the theme of the main exhibition he prepared for the 6th Architecture Biennale in Venice, entitled *Sensing the Future. The Architect as Seismograph*.<sup>4</sup> Such a comparison seems to us not only inspiring but also pertinent to the description of the role they played in the last few decades of the Habsburg Empire. The eminent Austrian architect, who in 1996 drew the public's attention to the exceptional sensitivity of contemporary architects to all socio-cultural movements, emphasized their ability to "sense" the future. In Hollein's point of view, we can see the fascination with microscopic sociological observation, which Georg Simmel practised under the banner of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Although Wade Graham is concerned with architects whose vision shaped cities in the 20th century on a global scale, he also believes that it is important to note that individual urban visions and objects involve specific people and real socio-cultural contexts. Individual architectural ideas arose from the need to respond to specific civilizational problems. See Wade Graham, *Dream Cities. Seven Urban Ideas that Shape the World* (New York, 2016), in particular Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> The reflection on the modern and postmodern shape of the world was accompanied by a profound change in the language of the description of human experiences and cultural phenomena. It manifests itself, among other things, in the use of terms present so far mainly in the natural and exact sciences. Geological inspirations, including the metaphor of seismic shock, occupy an important place in the deliberations and philosophical imagination of Michel Foucault, and it was his name that became strongly associated with the spatial turn that took place in the humanities (although the very concept of "spatial turn" was coined by American geographer Edward Soja). Of the works in which the metaphor of seismic shock appears in relation to the Central European area and is part of a complex semiotic junction, we would like to draw attention to Jacques Derrida's article *L'autre cap. Mémoires, réponses et responsabilités*, first published in 1990 in *Liber. Revue européenne des livres*, a newspaper published simultaneously in four languages and distributed as a supplement to other European newspapers. The density of the narratives (philosophical or artistic) using this metaphor in the 1990s is not accidental but seems to be closely linked to the reflection prompted by historical events leading to profound political and cultural changes in Europe. See Jacques Derrida, *L'autre cap* (Paris, 1991), 11–102.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://hollein.com/index.php/eng/Exhibitions/Sensing-the-Future> (accessed on 4.11.2019).

sociology of the senses.<sup>5</sup> We also see in it a symptom of a deeper change in the awareness of how architecture affects the individual and society as a whole – in the same year as Hollein’s exhibition, 1996, an essay by Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses*<sup>6</sup> was published. The sensitivity allowing to record delicate movements, announcing significant changes in the Earth’s crust (here: culture), in the profession of an architect is connected with the ability to adapt the designed buildings to these “movements”. In fact, it means the possibility of influencing social reality. And both in the way of its design, understood here as an attempt to embody a certain ideal, and in the spirit of the strategy of thwarting, *preemption*, action to prevent possible, though not yet crystallized threats through the skilful management of affects.<sup>7</sup> Combining conceptual and sensual imagination with the need to express humanistic values in the technical language of the designed structures, which characterizes the professional practice of architects, predestines this professional group to play a special social role, although usually invisible at first glance, and therefore not always appreciated.

While buildings, individual architectural projects or unique designs (because sometimes architectural plans mean more than their implementation) fall within the scope of national or cultural heritage, often becoming icons of culture or sites of memory, their designers are much less frequently, actually only in very exceptional cases, present in the collective memory, becoming thus recognizable figures of cultural imagery.<sup>8</sup> The truth of this claim is revealed especially in relation to the more distant past, before the 20th-century “visual turn” drew the attention of the public also to artists using the medium of the broadly understood image, although even today, few architects function as cultural icons. That is also why the purpose of this book is to bring to light the biographies of architects as a key that opens the door to a fuller understanding of their socio-cultural position during the profound changes experienced by the modernizing Habsburg Monarchy and the active role they played in this change. Architects from different regions of the monarchy practised their profession within an

---

<sup>5</sup> Georg Simmel, ‘Soziologie der Sinne’, in: idem, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901–1908*, vol. 2, edited by Alessandro Cavalli, Volkhard Krech (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 276–292.

<sup>6</sup> In this work, now considered canonical, Pallasmaa overturns the monopoly of the sense of sight in the reception of an architectural work and draws attention to the activity of all the senses in experiencing architecture. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses* (London, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Brian Massumi, *Ontopower. War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham–London, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> See Géraldine Molina, ‘Starchitects: Walking the Line between Individuality and Conformity’, translated by Oliver Waine, *Metropolitiques*, 19 February 2015. Available online: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Starchitects-walking-the-line.html> (accessed on 5.10.2019).

imperial state, the administrative apparatus and legal system of which had to be constantly adapted to the dynamic and extremely diverse socio-cultural reality. It was made up of many ethnies, denominations, languages and even geophysical factors (always influencing the living conditions of specific communities). We believe that their biographies are – in themselves – an important carrier of meanings and knowledge about the conditions of everyday life and the mentality of people living at that time. What is more, non-transparent and non-obvious meanings have not always been revealed by the research conducted so far, which has focused either on tracking national threads, colonization and assimilation strategies, or on aesthetic issues.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the most important question we pose in this book, around which all further questions and problematic themes are organized, is: Who were the people who, as architects, created the cultural landscape of cities and villages in the Habsburg Monarchy? This question is linked to the criterion of the Slavic character, which is necessary to analyse how deeply the architects' professional careers and the reception of their legacy were entangled in the complex reality of a multinational state; this complexity is also manifested by the different identification strategies that could be adopted.<sup>10</sup> Multiethnicity became apparent especially in the urban space of the state ruled by the Habsburgs. Groups with a differently shaped and often changeable sense of identity co-existed but also competed with each other. In the Habsburg Monarchy, cities, especially the larger ones, were mostly places where Slavic character mixed with the non-Slavic one, ceasing to be the decisive distinguishing category. The observation point located in the architects' activities confirms that the urbanization of Central and Eastern Europe proceeded at different rates. Contemporary researchers write about "emerging cities"<sup>11</sup> in this region as a specific process to which Western European measures should not be applied. Rapidly growing centres of countries and provinces, such as Budapest, Lviv or Zagreb, in the second half of the 19th century were exceptions in a space where small cities with a local radius of impact were typical, such as Pressburg (today Bratislava), Osijek or Brno. The modernization climate of those times, reinforced by the political ambitions of groups that had hitherto been deprived of their own urban cultural and political centre, in which new institutions representing the interests of those groups

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Alicja Rokuszewska-Pawełek, 'Miejsce biografii w socjologii interpretatywnej. Program socjologii biografistycznej Fritza Schutzego', *Ask: Research and Methods*, 1 (3) (1996), 37–52.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ivan Halász, 'Súťaž identít a koncepcií politických spoločností v dlhom 19. storočí', in: idem, *Uhorsko a podoby slovenskej identity v dlhom 19. storočí* (Bratislava, 2011), 13–38.

<sup>11</sup> Eszter Gantner, Heidi Hein-Kircher, Oliver Hochadel, 'Backward and Peripheral? Emerging Cities in Eastern Europe', *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung/Journal of East Central European Studies*, 4 (67) (2018), 475–484.

could be located, favoured, in turn, the accelerated urbanization of the smallest urban centres, such as, for example, Turčiansky Svätý Martin. On the other hand, large centres attracted the diverse population of the provinces and became the main place of concentrated and diverse symbolic investments, including architectural and urban projects with high semiotic potential.<sup>12</sup>

Using the Slavic character as an observational filter was initially treated as a tool to create a specific configuration of cases that would visualize some “biographical models” thanks to their parallel juxtaposition (i.e. a tool providing planes for this comparison). However, this approach has one more justification. After the disintegration of the monarchy, space was quickly nationalized and inscribed almost entirely into monocentric narratives – Czech, Slovak, Croatian, Serbian, Ukrainian, Romanian, German or Hungarian. From today’s perspective, it is harder to see complex processes and difficult decisions of particular people (also concerning their national self-identification or identification with a supranational community) that stood behind the implementation of both individual buildings and entire space development projects. In cities such as Prague, Brno, Bratislava, Martin, Zagreb and Novi Sad, there are obvious traces of architectural fashions which arrived from Vienna and Budapest but also Rome and Paris, for example. The role of such centres as Vienna and Munich in the training of architects and builders operating in the Slavic area was undeniable. Architects often changed their place of activity, thus building networks of relations throughout the Habsburg state, which were based on intellectual and professional affinity, with much less attention being paid to national affiliations. Architects also often crossed the borders of Austria-Hungary in search of inspiration, heading for the West but also for imperial Russia, where they gained experience of working on large urbanization and architectural projects related, for example, to the development of railway infrastructure. In addition, at that time, they usually belonged to the upper class of the new bourgeoisie, which set the tone of social and political life on the local level. Attempts are usually made to ascribe these representatives of the new elite, especially those who stand out thanks to their original or symbolic works of architecture accumulating symbolic meanings, to a particular national group, sometimes with the intention of ideological appropriation of their legacy. However, they are rarely model representatives of the so-called national elites.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Markian Prokopovych, *Habsburg Lemberg: Architecture, Public Space, and Politics in the Galician Capital, 1772–1914* (West Lafayette, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Pieter Judson has emphasized that the experience of empire and nationalism was not mutually exclusive but created the interrelated political, cultural and social reality of the Habsburg Monarchy. The conviction about the primitive and exclusive nature of national affiliation was a certain project which, thanks to the convergence of many factors, was successful