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The last 14 years in Cluj.
Architecture and critical discourse

A critical discourse on the architecture of the last 14 years in Cluj is hard to build. I do not mean a demolishing critique: this one can occur without difficulty, in an ocean of arguments and exemplifications. However, even if very much has been built these last years, the actual “architecture” is so scarce that the professional environment in Cluj could be abolished with a stroke of pen. Which is of too little interest.

Architecture in Cluj, as rare as it might be, deserves some interest though. First, because it does exist. Secondly, because it is linked to a more general and typical condition: what it is that is happening in a medium city (not exactly a metropolis, having therefore a vulnerable character) in a moment of extensive hasty growth, demanded by the blurry, though virulent, ideals of some recently emerged forces, impatient to impose themselves. In fact, modern Cluj has never had enough time to decant its quality. In a century of breaches and radical reconsiderations, architecture was simply a matter of luck and accident, and not the outcome of a coherent and consistent professional environment. And these last years did nothing but add another layer of conquerors. The city of Cluj has not overcome the stage of primary conquest of land, of the pioneers full of life and instinct of territoriality that implant by force new genealogical trees. With every new house (and there are hundreds), every new gas station or church (and there are dozens), with every new bank (plenty as well) another young and ambitious force makes itself conspicuous in the space of the city.

However, such excesses of the recent powers in distinguishing themselves, produce, as we can see, but very little architecture. Because a power can impose through building, but architecture is the quality of the built environment and by no means the built environment itself.

The Critique

In order to identify “quality”, the critique is indispensable. This would be, in fact, its first task: to select, decant and indicate the value inside a common and vulgar built environment. In other words, to identify “architecture”. A thing that is not at all obvious. The fact that there are no preestablished formulas for defining quality in “architecture” makes instinct and common judgement be the fastest critical indicators. Follow your instinct, listen to other opinions and then choose: you have just made the first step in critique. (For example, in a first step, the architecture of the last 14 years in Cluj can be reduced to two houses, one of stone and one of brick – both presented in this review). Instinct and common judgement tend to refer almost exclusively to news though, to the common places of the near present, which is still too little for a “critical discourse”. Explaining what “architectural critique” means, François Chaslin wrote that it can be very diverse, evolving between a “journalistic critique, polemical or informative, immediate and which reacts upon the event” and “an academical” critique, historical and theoretical, with a longer-term target – a field that developed considerably since the 60s–70s. A critic can practice the entire spectrum, the “journalistic” critique and the “university” one not being exclusive categories. However, critique cannot be strictly limited to informative purposes, like journalism, Chaslin says. Even the word “critique” suggests the ambition

of judging and the capacity of taking the risk of expressing opinions. Sometimes the critique can have the most direct meaning, the fact of putting the “pen on the wound”. But it means mostly to evaluate, to situate a creation within the historical moment and among the debates that are contemporary, as well as to confront the theoretical discourse to the built reality. It provides the circulation of ideas, between the professional world and the public and inside the architects’ community as well. Therefore, it structures the inner professional debates. However, its field is permanently redrawn, especially because of “the too little determined character of its theoretical basis”.

Historical perspective and debates upon the news, confrontation with different alleged or plausible theories and the judgement of value, even asserted subjectively – these could be, roughly, the content of a critical discourse. A formula with three ingredients: informing, theory and opinion. Facts, landmarks and interpretation.

And not least, the power of the discursive language, the resources that words have in themselves. As Baudrillard puts it, in a both seducing and provocative manner, “everybody has ideas, even more than necessary. What matters is the poetical singularity of the analysis. Only this, this witz, this spirituality of the language can justify the act of writing, and not the miserable critical objectivity of ideas. One will never find a solution to the contradiction of ideas other than inside language itself, inside the energy and happiness of language”. The architecture critic ought to be a writer first of all.

The beginning: catching up with the past and naive confidence in the future

For the architecture of the last 14 years in Cluj, I think the first subject of critical debate should be the approach from a historical perspective. Because the atmosphere of this “length of time” was diverse enough and with different accents.

In my opinion, we can distinguish three “phases” – even if not in a strict chronological sense, but in a sense of dated tendencies.

A tendency that naturally dominated the beginning was that of catching up. First a catching up “in style”: there are some late reflexes of postmodernism, in which survives the spirit of the 80s, but expressed with a level of quality that was impossible to reach before. Such an example is the kindergarten Bethania (arch. Sanda Mægheruøan, 1994-6 – an example presented in this review), a setting in space of a very delicate programme, realized with sensibility and balance. The works of the architect Sorin Scripcariu (for example the Villa on Rakoczi str. or Villa Matei) have also more of a classical composition (the first) and a scenographical coat, “postmodern” in spirit (the second). Also a way of catching up is the “late modernism” of the office and dwelling building in which functions ABN-Amro bank (designed by arch. Øerban ?igænaø for Interproiect, 1994 – built after his split with the office). It is an architecture that seeks the spectacular in the resources of mannerist modern language, a very frequent style among the students of “Ion Mincu” in the 80s.

Another way of catching up, in programme, can be considered the great amount of churches which exploded over the city. But in this matter I can only notice two things, both negative: first that they systematically and improperly took over places that in general should have remained free and green, therefore congesting urban spaces that were already congested. And secondly, what is remarkable is the architectural nullity of this phenomenon: excepting Makovecz’s, and those two made by Katalin Muradin, none of the dozens of churches built deserves any attention.

Another kind of catching up is that of alternative, of difference – and the most exquisite example is the reformed church designed by Imre Makovecz (responsible for the project arch. Csaba Müller, begun in 1998, still unfinished). The presence of Imre Makovecz in Cluj is twice a kind of catching up: first, his mere way of making architecture is a revival of a world that is already gone – of essentially symbolic buildings and craftsmanship. Secondly, in a sense that I am sure Makovecz would profoundly dislike, it is an opening toward the world of stars, of famous architecture, which is relevant on an international level and not only in our local urban environment. Makovecz is the only worldwide known architect that has a work in Cluj, in the whole 20th century (after Lechner in 1900, and Fellner and Helmer in 1905). Nevertheless, this example is just an isolated atypical case.

The first “stage” was also one of naive confidence in the future. There was a short moment of shy exploration, when the newly stated “powers”, the fresh new private investors, were launching the construction of modern decent buildings, trying to justify, through architecture, their “occidentalism”. I think that the prototype of this tendency could be the "TV Cable" building (arch. Gheorghe Vais 1993-5). While still piece of news, the “common judgement” was very favourable to it, and I consider it, maybe subjectively, the finest building belonging to this tendency. Today, as I see it dressed in its glass curtain wall and its grit stone veneering, it looks to me easy to date: it is the expression of optimistic enthusiasm of the beginning of the 90s, when the image of the capitalism that we were longing for was a value in itself. However, its great merit is that of a quality seldom achieved in similar cases, that of keeping a proper scale: the scale of the context, the scale of the object and the scale of the details as well. The object is simply just as big and spectacular as requested by its role and place. Why is this phase naïve? Because its architecture was conceived while expecting a kind of future that never showed up, in the end. The houses of the first period were rather small, an expression of a realistic, moderate middle-class. And this middle class existed rather in the collective wishful thinking than in reality.

The growth: the stridency of the wild power

However reality soon enough asked for its bombastic buildings and the second “phase” is mostly one of bluffing. How is it possible to be able to satisfy reality precisely by bluffing? (As Baudrillard asserted, reality “folds itself on every conceptual violence”; “reality merely asks to be confronted to hypothesis, it verifies them all” – to put it differently, do not expect “reality” to be a kind of censorship that leads the building to the most natural solutions.) Because the new powers have gone a lot further than what would have been a realistic and natural building.

Arguments in this sense are the two huge construction sites in the city centre that are abandoned in ruin: the unfinished buildings of Banca Agricola (arch. A. Spirescu) and Romtelecom (arch. T. Raiciu, Interproiect). They imposed themselves in extremely central positions in the city, places that should be too precious to be irresponsibly sacrificed for such farces.

Both exceed the scale of the context and the scale of their programme, as well. Moreover, if they were finished, they would perfectly incorporate the illusion, common among the architects–businessmen, that commercial shiny materials are enough, in order to transform construction into architecture. Even if of different values (the first has at least a

composition, though it lacks scale, while the second is clumsily disproportional and loaded with fakes), they are both economical and architectural bluffs.

Sticking together with the pure commercial buildings there is the Greek-Catholic Cathedral (arch. M. Amiroaie and arch. A. Buzuloiu) – about which anyone who has seen the model or the computer simulation (I did, and found them terrifying) might only say it is better that there is no money. Unfortunately, another important place in the city was destroyed, and yet in a monstrous way.

A big bluff, even if in the suburbs, is also the university campus. Just like private offices or the Church, the University has embarked on huge investments and doubtful projects, completely unjustified by economical power and real needs. Not to talk about the idea itself, about the concept of “campus”, about the principle of getting the students out from the city center, which brings extra quality neither to the city nor to the students.

There are also winning forces in this “phase”. For instance, the BRD building (arch. A. Spirescu) is one of the clearest expression of simple and determined strength imposed in the city. It is a very “American” building, first because of its postmodern “double coding” (it is both a symbolic “golden ingot” and an office tower with the motto “Less is more” - the architect asserts). Then, by its lack of scale: it is a kind of downtown skyscraper, lacking precisely its downtown.

Another shrill success is the proliferation of the gas-stations, one of the most amazing phenomena of these years. Two steps away from residential buildings, schools or churches, the gas stations creep in the city like malignant cells in an organism without immunity. I haven't counted them (though I believe the exercise is worth to be done), but they are so many, that the city of Cluj could ask itself, like a negative character of a fairytale: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, which city has more gas stations per inhabitant of them all!?”

The severe aggressions upon the historical city center belong to the same winning tendency: the Orthodox Church on Eroilor Street (arch. R. Spânu) for which two classified monuments have been demolished or the over-building inside the blocks of the intra-muros reservation (an example also on Eroilor Street, arch. I. Vitoc). Or the repeated aggression upon the also classified ensemble of university clinics – among these, the most scandalous, the loathsome crush of Emergency Hospital (successive to another big bluff, the Emergency Hospital nearby the “Colina” Motel, left as a ruin-building site, and public money thrown away by the window).

This new “Emergency Hospital” has a typical story for what the relation between power and building means: the launch of a visibly corrupted auction - so that nobody respectable would participate, then the designation of an obscure winner who offers an awkward project, but with no personal terms, and then, the approval of the project by pressures in the name of the public benefit. The quality of architecture has never existed as a theme along the entire business, and the destruction of the ensemble, classified as a monument, was considered an acceptable sacrifice by the Commission of Monuments itself (where, as for a democratic organism, the law of majority works in such a convenient way...). And let's not forget what has made our city famous: so many “monuments”, whose only feature and message is nationalism. All these match so perfectly with the principle of implantation of a barbarous conqueror, that it wouldn't deserve other comments.

Unfortunately, they have been stronger in their battle with the city and finally defeated their places.

As a final point, there are winning powers inside the profession's field itself. Mostly the

same persons and offices take hold of the most important commands in the city, though they have never proved themselves to be able to produce any quality at all. There are some private offices that have successfully acquired the art of good management already (and let's not forget what an efficient management means: to obtain the most possible by offering the least). The art of management in troublous times is one thing, the art of architecture is something completely different.

Then, there are persons well-placed in administration - county hall, town hall or councils. Of course, you cannot make a statement of corruption without the available juridical proofs, but you can state, for instance, that the architectural nullity of the County Library is a proof in itself that the important commissions with public money are not assigned through a correct system of competitions, meant to decant the architectural quality, and though the benefit of the city, but they are taken hold of those architects who are in a position of power inside the system which administrates, on our money, this very benefit of the city. And the result is just a particular track followed by some money, but not the creation of architecture, anyway.

Otherwise, I want to emphasize, this "phase" is almost only about self-imposed power through mere buildings, and not at all about architecture.

The Continuous Present: the Cruising Speed

The third "phase" is that in which a natural future for architecture in Cluj is to be perceived. Let's say, the phase in which the professional environment is from now on a constant sailing, towards a normal architectural reflection, reaching the cruising speed – even if it flies yet among the clouds. At least, the radar of a professional environment in Cluj seems to function. The certain sign of normality is that natural architecture occurs, as it is, for example, the champion in this moment: Nædæøan House (arch. Miklós Péterffy, 2000-2). Nevertheless, the natural is still an exception. About the Nædæøan House a Dutch professor noticed that "it seems to come from another world, it can be noticed that it's not from here". How perverted must our current way of building be, if a simple and natural house, made of our local stone of Viøtea, seems from an exterior point of view to be "not from here"! Another outside look, a teacher from France noticed yet that this house has something rare even in the good western examples: the fact that no detail is detoured, that it has "no skid of taste". If such a wonder was possible, the merit is certainly of the owner, too, a designer himself and an active participant in detailing the house. On the other side, it is also a minimalistic house, in the spirit of Zumthor (whom the architect Péterffy admires openly) and makes it an example perfectly matching with the spirit of contemporary western architecture, a little breeze of an universal spirit, felt in our city.

Tothfalusi House (arch. R. Coheci, 2000-1) is the house of a banker and as follows, small skids were probably simply unavoidable. Especially the monumental character and a little hint of preciousness are part of the expressions never forgotten by a rich client. But it is certainly an accomplishment. With the pine tree in the front of the house, surrounded by green, and with wonderful studied brick details, it seems to come out of the honest purity of scandinavic modernism.

A more eclectic example, but with a remarkable urban presence, is the commercial building on Babeø Street (arch. A Borda and O.Nemeø, 1998-2002). The quality of its urban integration is more obvious now that it stands face to face to the new building of

UMF (the most recent offender of clinics ensemble), built without the least concern for its own site.

A healthy sign is also the appearance of a decent commercial architecture. The Transylvania Bank Building (started by arch. S.Scripcariu and M.Codoreanu in 1997, finished by A.Spirescu, in 2002) has a well balanced simplicity, though it has the absence of scale which already seems to be the signature of the architect Spirescu, an architect specialized in office buildings, a supporter of big gestures, a little out of context. Another example, where the tendency to affirmation of the commercial role is well held, is the Compexit Building on Calea Turzii (arch. S.Scripcariu).

But perhaps the most encouraging thing is that there are, from the new generation formed by the Architectural School of Cluj after 1990 (in my opinion, of a low quality, and probably, because of that disappointingly open to prostitution), potential true architects. The extension of the Regional Meteorological Center (arch. Voicu Bozac, 2000) is one of the most achieving recent works. The houses on Fagului Street (arch. Oliver Nemeø, 1994-2000) are also remarkable for their inner-space quality and for their refined processing of modern language. Otherwise, the neo-modernism seems to be, for the moment, the preference of this new generation (“logiA” Review has already presented projects of two other graduate students, Gabriela Roman-Lovász and Remus Marusciac). Finally, the current number of our review presents another work of a young graduate – the extension of UDMR Headquarter (arch. Zoltán Szöke).

Conclusion

I only have made here a quick review of several works which deserve a further detailed criticism. Because the final argument for the quality of an architecture is always the detail. The details kill, in the same way as the details prove the divinity of creation (as Mies asserted and demonstrated it). Matei Călinescu said that any critical analyze we make, we should study the work in the profoundness of the smallest detail, this being “absolutely essential in any work of creation. The empty theory, pure abstraction, is nothing. The theory can become an optical instrument for noticing some details and for integrating them in larger structures. But if the theory is not an optical instrument, then it is nothing, it is idle talk, something very nebulous, which can impress some naive persons, especially by its nebulosity. I think that what a theory needs in order to be good is precisely this value of optical instrument, which allows the observation of some particular things which cannot be noticed at first sight.”

So the criticism is a sort of “theoretical microscope” able to make us see the details better and to understand the object in its depths. Such an instrument brings us closer to the object, but at the same time, it keeps us at distance, allowing a cold and thus more correct insight. The detail and the distance can protect us from the two dangers, which frequently hunt the critics: ecstatic and catastrophic views. The extremes, I mean. Because there is no city condemned to an eternal architectural nullity, and in any case, not Cluj, in the same way as there is no guaranteed professional perfection. As Gertrude Stein said “every masterpiece came to the world with a measure of ugliness in it” and “our task as critics is to face it and to recover its ugliness”. Not only the ingredients, but also the dosing counts – in architecture and criticism alike.

Many buildings were raised in the last 14 years in Cluj, as signs of particular powers which intend to affirm themselves in the space of the city. How many of them will

withstand as signs? How many of nowadays powers (investors and architects) will succeed to impose themselves in time? Because this would actually mean for a power to impose itself: to build architecture that counts.

For now, the town is an expanding universe. But power and quality are still living on different planets.

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