



Budapest: Castle Hill
after Tamás Biczó



BUDAPEST REVISITED

Visiting Budapest in May 1990, in the company of a colleague and twelve McGill University scholarship students in architecture¹, brought back memories from the time when I was a student there almost fifty years earlier. During those years (1941-1944), I was imbued with the teachings of the Modern Movement, and therefore had little interest in the Eclectic and Secessionist architecture built during the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, revisiting the city of my *alma mater* this time around, I was awed by its unique beauty, and rejoiced that the centre of Budapest had escaped 'modernization.'

The beauty of Budapest derives to a large extent from its situation on the banks of the Danube River, as well as from its varied topography, namely the hills of Buda and the plain of Pest. Reminiscent of a stage set, the most spectacular views of Buda present themselves after sunset: from the left bank, where the prominent buildings of Castle Hill and the bridges linking the two cities are illuminated; reflected sparkling lights dance on the waves of the Danube. This enchanting scenery delights pedestrians strolling along the riverside promenade, diners in the restaurants alongside the river, and the inhabitants of adjoining buildings.

This majestic and peaceful setting, however, does not reflect the tumultuous history of Hungary and its capital city, whose citizens are daily reminded of former hardship by the sound of tolling church bells. Throughout the country, at noon, bells are rung in memory of Hungary's liberation from a one and a half centuries of Ottoman oc-

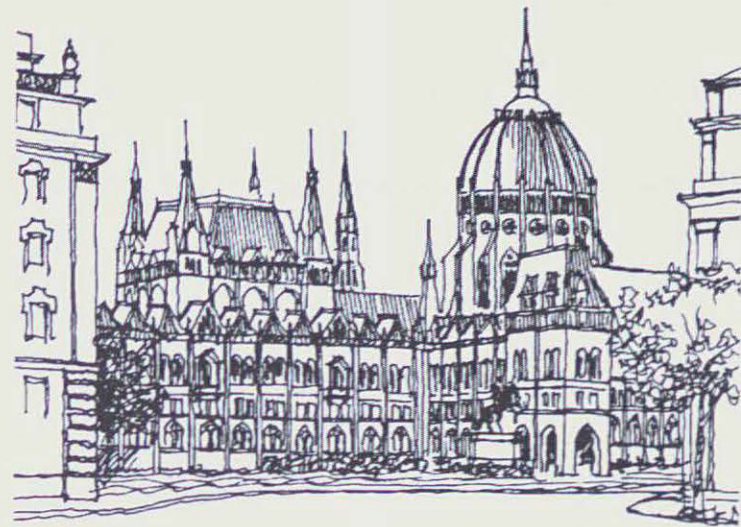
cupation which came to an end during the late 17th century. Since Hungary then came under Hapsburg rule, true liberty still had to wait until 1867, when the country, spurred on by the national uprising of 1848, regained its autonomy. At this time Budapest became the capital of the Magyars under the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary. This event marked the beginning of the city's Golden Age which lasted until the First World War.

During the second half of the 19th century, Buda, Óbuda (Old Buda) and Pest, three cities with pre-mediaeval roots, were united into a single municipal entity called 'Budapest,' an action that heralded the beginning of a phenomenal period of growth. In 1857 the population of the unified city was a mere 116,683, but in 1869 it had already reached 270,476; in 1881: 360,551; in 1896: 618,000; in 1910: 881,000. Combined with a suburban population of more than 200,000, Budapest surpassed the one million population mark, making it the sixth largest city in Europe.

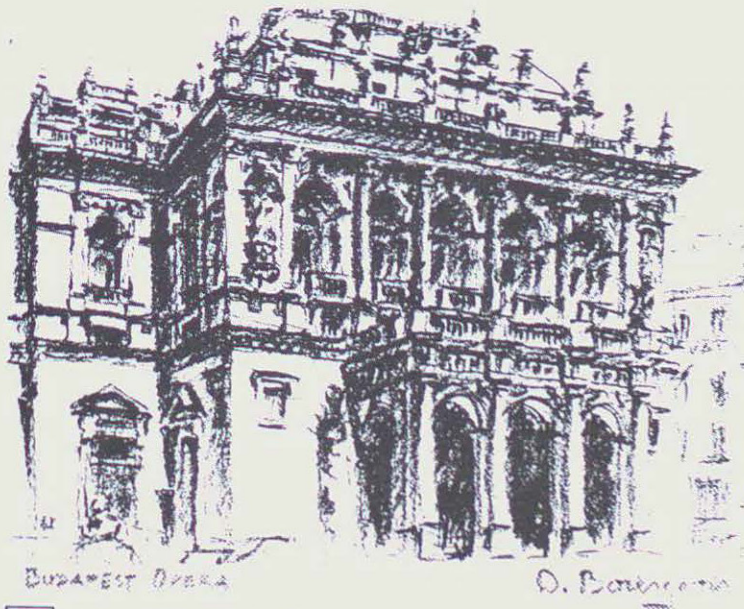
Most of the population growth occurred in Pest, on the plains of the left bank on the Danube River, rather than on the hilly right bank. Hence, both mediaeval and Baroque architecture are much in evidence on the castle hill of Buda, and in Óbuda, extensive Roman ruins still act as sentinels of antiquity. Pest, on the other hand, which developed quintessentially as a 19th century city, is devoid of any substantial mediaeval traces; instead it is a rich reliquary of Romantic, Eclectic and Secessionist architecture.

Pest was shaped by the influence of 19th century thinking in both town planning and architecture. The two semicircles of boulevards, the so-called Little and Big Ring Roads (the smaller of which replaced the mediaeval town walls and encloses the inner city), were derived from Viennese planning. The Andrassy Radial Avenue, linking the city core with the City Park, emulated Georges-Eugène Haussmann's radial boulevards of Paris, and the landscaped squares were reflections of London's urban design.

The Danube River was regulated with the building of substantial two-tiered limestone quays. Following the Parisian example, the upper level was to serve as a promenade while the lower level was designated for the loading and unloading of ships. As early as 1836, a suspension bridge designed by the British engineer William Tierney Clark spanned the river, and by the beginning of this century four additional bridges linked the twin cities Buda and Pest. One of these, the Erzsébet bridge, was a notable feat in bridge construction since it spanned the greatest distance of any bridge in Europe at that time.



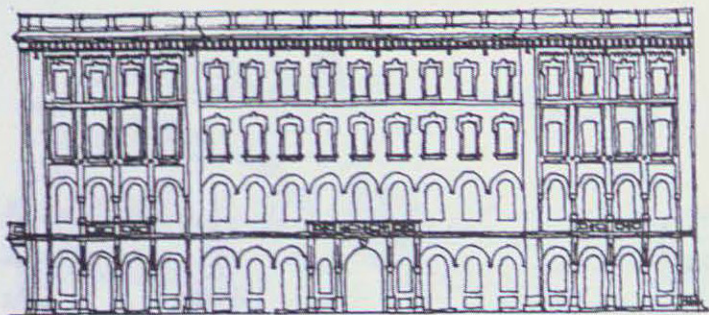
*Budapest: Parliament Building
Imre Steindl, architect*



BUDAPEST OPERA

O. Borkovits

During the second half of the 19th century, Budapest witnessed unprecedented activity in public building construction, in works such as the Parliament Building (1884-1902), the Agricultural and Justice Ministerial Building (1885-1886), the 'Kuria' or Supreme Court of Justice Building (1891-1896), the University Building and its Library (1872-1883), the Vigado Concert Hall (1859-1865), the Vigszinhaz Theatre (1896), the Royal Opera House (1873-1882), the Saint Stephen's Basilica (1845-1889), the Central Synagogue (1854-1859), the Academy of Sciences (1862-1865), the Mücsarnok Exhibition Hall (1895), the Western Railway Station (1874-1877), the Central Market Hall (1892-1896), and several hotels, including the palatial 'Hungaria,' the latter unfortunately having been destroyed during World War II. The most remarkable aspect of this era is the congruity of the Romanticism and Eclecticism of 19th century architecture on such a grand scale. The elaboration of ornamental details on the facades of these buildings created a rich iconography which entices continuous exploration made possible only at the slow urban pedestrian pace intrinsic to the last century.



Budapest: Apartment Building
Hugo Mátyás, architect

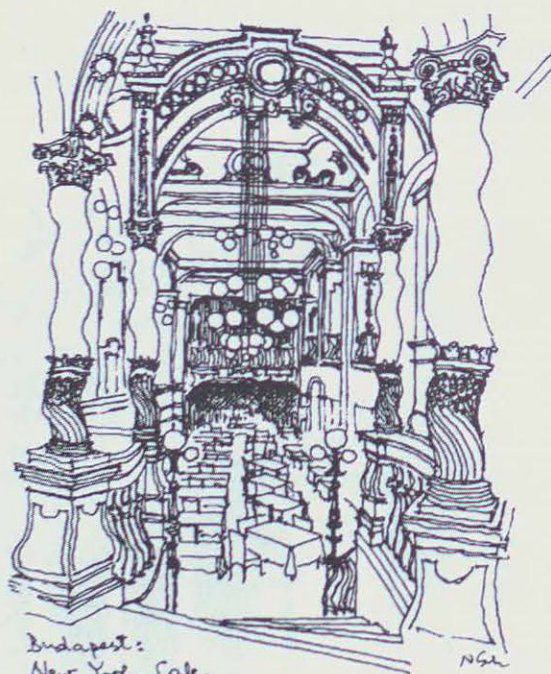
In response to the unprecedented population growth of the 19th century, the apartment house emerged as the most dominant building type in the Budapest cityscape. Like their Parisian antecedents, the attached rows of apartment houses framed the streets, and on wide thoroughfares the ornate facades of these multi-storeyed palatial residences vied for presence with those of public buildings. The planning of apartment houses also betrayed Parisian influences. Along major streets the ground floors of apartment buildings were allocated for commercial use, and the main entrance to each building led through a spacious *porte cochère* which opened upon a courtyard, frequently adorned by a fountain or sculpture. The main stairhall, often featuring a curved staircase, a 'dancing stair,' opened from the *porte cochère* and gave access to the more desirable front apartment suites, while secondary staircases leading to rear apartment dwellings were located in the courtyard.

Usually occupied by the landlord, the most prestigious dwelling unit, with a suite of large reception rooms facing the street, was located on the *piano nobile*. Its status was accentuated on the building's facade by decorative sculptures, pilasters and consoles as well as balconies and balconets with ornamental railings. In contrast to the *piano nobile* apartment, the upper-storey dwellings were less sumptuous, and the gallery-access rear dwellings facing the courtyard were small, ill-ventilated and lacking in privacy. As in Paris, the great variety of dwelling accommodation within a single building resulted in tenants of varying incomes, representing a cross-section of the city's population. This social feature, in conjunction with the mixture of commercial and residential land-use, generated patterns of pedestrian urban traffic which greatly enriched the vitality of street life.

A milestone in the history of Hungary was the celebration in 1896 of the 1000th anniversary of Magyar settlement in Europe. This was a momentous occasion for national assertion in peacetime, and coincided with a period of relative prosperity enjoyed by Budapest's bourgeoisie. The oldest underground metro line in Europe (apart from that of London) was built for this occasion and was located in line with the radial Andrassy Avenue which connected Vörösmarty Square

of the inner city with the City Park and Heroes' Square with its Millenary Monument. The centre of Heroes' Square is occupied by statues of the conquering Magyar chiefs; the backdrop is formed by a semicircular colonnade, between the columns of which stand statues of heroic kings, princes, and army commanders. Both the Art Gallery and the Museum of Fine Arts face this square.

Indeed, many buildings, public and private, were completed in time for the millennium celebrations. One such building, the New York Palota (1891-1895), a building of mixed commercial and residential usage having the famous New York Café at sidewalk level, epitomized in its architecture the ebullience of that age. The opulence of the cafe's interior, with its spiral marble columns, bronze statues, crystal chandeliers (now missing), mirrored walls, and frescoed ceilings, bordered on decadence. The New York Café became one of the most celebrated coffeehouses and the meeting place not only of the landed gentry and well-to-do bourgeoisie, but also of the avant-garde artists and writers of the *fin-de-siècle*.

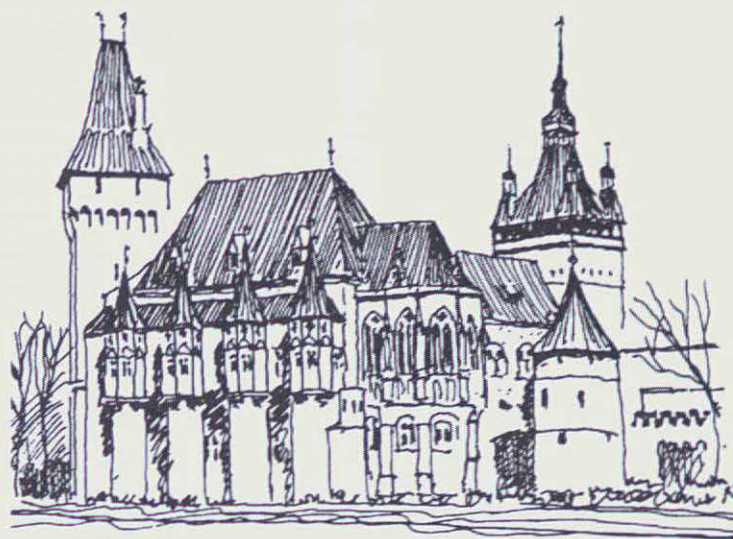


Budapest:
New York Cafe
Alajos Hauszmann, architect

As in Paris and Vienna, coffeehouses were numerous in Budapest, and citizens spent many hours daily in them reading, writing, talking, politicking, gossiping, playing chess, and, of course, drinking coffee. Since at the turn-of-the-century, apartments of the less well-to-do were usually drab and often crowded, spacious and well-lit coffeehouses with large windows opening upon the busy sidewalk offered their users a second, more elegant, home. Typically furnished with marble top tables, Thonet bentwood chairs, coat trees, and offering to their patrons a large selection of newspapers and magazines in bamboo holders, the coffeehouses were open from morning to past midnight and commonly served as informal clubs for their *habitués*. Throughout the day and evening various groups of literati, artists, academics, bureaucrats, and businessmen would coordinate their visits to the coffeehouse to meet friends and socialize. To be accepted as a member of a particular group was a sign of friendship, but 'loners' were also respected as *habitués*. After World War II, improved housing, changing life styles, television, high rents of shop-front space, and small espresso bars contributed to the decline in popularity of many coffeehouses in Budapest, as elsewhere in Europe.

The millennium was not only the impetus toward a fervour of building activities that shaped and beautified the city of Budapest, but it also stirred reflection upon the nation's cultural past. While Hungary's architectural links with the Western World were all too evident in its urban areas, the language of the inhabitants was unrelated in character, and so were the old Magyar traditions which still survived in rural areas. Predictably, a nation celebrating its millennium would also commemorate its origins and distant past. The millennial exhibition emphasized vernacular architecture by presenting a reconstruction of a village complete with church, meeting hall, store, school, and twelve indigenous houses, each furnished with household items representative of distinct geographic regions of Hungary. The various minorities then living in Hungary were also represented in the twelve prototypical village houses.

In contrast to the vernacular tradition, an unusual structure was also erected on the exhibition grounds that displayed in one building complex the principal Western architectural styles that had influenced Hungary's builders since the founding of the nation. Its designer, Ignác Alpár, succeeded in intertwining parts of existing Hungarian heritage buildings of the Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque



Budapest: Vajdahunyad Castle
Ignác Alpár, architect

periods into a coherent whole, a romantic castle-like structure built on an island in a man-made lake. This temporary exhibition structure greatly fascinated the public, so much so, that by popular demand it later had to be rebuilt in solid masonry. Located in the City Park and called Vajdahunyad Castle, this building serves today as an agricultural museum, but it also has become an unintended reliquary, since five mediaeval monuments which inspired its architecture, including the Transylvanian castle that lent its name, no longer stand on Hungarian territory.

The national consciousness nurtured by the millennial celebrations also found expression in the search for a new architectural style that would reflect the national character of Magyars. This gave rise to a Secessionist movement, whose leader, Ödön Lechner, turned to Hungarian rural folk art motifs for architectural inspiration (Bela Bartok and Zoltán Kodály pursued similar aims in music). Lechner's individualistic style also reflects Sassanian and Moghul architectural influences, acquired during his studies of the Asiatic past of the Magyars. His most renowned buildings in Budapest are the Post Office Savings Bank, the Geological Institute and the Museum of Applied Arts. A younger generation of architects (Károly Kós, Dezső Zrimeszky, Dénes Györgye, and Ede Toroczka Wigand among them) followed in the footsteps of Lechner. Their work was also inspired by traditional Hungarian architecture, especially that of Transylvania, as can be witnessed in the buildings of the Wekerle Settlement (1908-1913), a garden city in Kispest, and several buildings of the zoological and botanical gardens of the City Park (1908-1912).

Revisiting Budapest now, I became appreciative of the attention that the so-called Eclectic architects of the last century gave to the embellishment of their buildings facing public places: streets, boulevards, squares, and parks. This civic gesture brought about an urban design with many alluring streetscapes and an architectural vocabulary that was both rich and eclectic (a selection of what appears to be best of various styles) that could be enjoyed by the public at large. Eclectic design was also used in the interiors of these buildings, and in those turn-of-the-century structures designated for public use, such as operas, theatres, museums, cafés, and baths, which were conceived and built as people's palaces. While the abundance of hot mineral springs in Budapest had already been exploited by Romans and Turks, it was only during the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century that large baths were built as public institutions. The Széchenyi Medicinal Baths and the Gellért Medicinal Baths are but two examples of hedonistic opulence in public bathing establishments.

The inner city escaped the urban renewal interventions that radically altered so many city centres of the occidental world during the post-war period, with the result that Budapest emerged as one of the most well-preserved 19th century European cities. Both the scars left by World War II and the 1956 uprising, and the general lack of upkeep during the past five decades are still all too evident along side-streets of the inner city. Fortunately, the downtown area was spared the sterile large-scale construction projects built in many other cities during the last half-century. One hopes that the citizens of Pest will have the wisdom to recognize the unique character of their city, and resist the temptations of projects for urban renewal and high-rise buildings in their inner city.

The fortuitous preservation of Budapest's streets, squares and buildings enables visitors of this turn-of-the-century city to frequent places like the confectioner's shop Gerbeaud on Vörösmarty Square at forenoon, to lunch at the New York coffeehouse, and be enthralled by a performance at the Opera House in the evening, all three being establishments whose halls still echo the *belle époque* of the Hungarian capital.



*Budapest's Aviary of the Zoological garden
Károly Kós and Dezső Zrumeczky, architects*

All illustrations are by the author, with the exception of the Budapest Opera drawing on page 5, by Dominic Bourgeois.

Notes:

¹The colleague who accompanied Professor Schoenauer on this tour was Professor Pieter Sijpkes. The 1990 Wilfred Truman Shaver Scholarship students were: Manon Asselin Scriver, Patrick Bernier, Dominic Bourgeois, Paola Deghenghi, Kelly Lee Gilbride, Matthew Colemar Lella, Bernard Olivier, Richard Adam Piccolo, Thomas Pushpathadam, Nicolas Leo Stephane Ryan, Mary Lou Smith, and Vickie Vinaric. Professors Schoenauer and Sijpkes have since led another Shaver trip which visited the city of Budapest. The students on the 1993 trip were: Jennifer Beardsley, Jean Chen, Nooruddeen Esmail, Michael Gross, Richard Klopp, Ian Kubanek, Frédéric Lacombe, Marie-Claude Lesauteur, James McLaughlin, Richard Miller, and Guy Trudel.

Norbert Schoenauer is Emeritus Professor of Architecture at the School of Architecture of McGill University. He is the author of Six Thousand Years of Housing, which documents vernacular housing among various cultures.