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# A magnificent journey around a building type. Review

**BRUNNER, ATTILA (2023): *Town Halls in Hungary.***

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The volume about the town halls of Hungary by Attila Brunner, architectural historian, fits perfectly into the not so new architectural portfolio of Holnap Publishing. In addition to the *Masters of Architecture* series, the publisher has also set its sights on publishing a series of niche works, scientific and educational books. By his own admission, the author intends this book to be an informative work since the limitations of its scope and the size of its subject make it impossible to give a complete presentation. However, its professionalism, language and scientific nature make it primarily a reference book. The volume provides a detailed and comprehensive picture of the development, ‘evolution’ and changes in town hall building, describing the most significant stylistic developments and providing ample pictorial material and descriptions of the most striking buildings. The design of the book is also more in the nature of a reference book: it

is in a small format, with a glued paperback binding; only the colour cover and the inside with rich and spectacular images, closely linked to the text, make it more educational. In my opinion, this is yet another – very excellent – example of the opening up of academic publications to the educational visual world of our time. The textbook character is assured by outstanding proof-readers and the fact that the book was produced with the support of the NKA.

The author, Attila Brunner, was born in 1988 and graduated at ELTE in 2014 as an art historian. His origin of Kiskunfélegyháza almost predestined him to research primarily the architectural history of the 19th-20th centuries in the Lowlands of Hungary, but as we can see in this volume, his interests are much broader than that. Despite his young age, this is not his first published work, nor, we hope, his last. The author is a staff member of the Budapest City Archives and a student at the ELTE Doctoral School of Philosophy.

The title of the book is not a captivating one but the author's precise and accurate titling gives a punctual description of the subject. The title may seem almost mundane however it raises a few questions and arouses the reader's curiosity: if it is about buildings in "Hungary", than is it about the territory of present-day Hungary? Or is the author trying to paint a more complete picture and present the town halls of historical Kingdom of Hungary? If it is the latter, the reader's eyes will light up at the sight of courage, as when faced with an extreme athlete attempting the impossible. (I'm not selling any tricks: it is indeed the latter, and the publisher does not do so, either: the blurb makes the question clear).

The book is well-structured and convenient to read and understand, even for the lay reader. Indicators guide the ones who do not wish to delve into the history of the town hall building type, or who do not wish to see the whole chronological sequence of buildings but are only interested in a single person or locality. The diversity of the images makes it impossible not to flick through the volume, even if the postage-stamp-sized photographs do not capture the true monumentality of the buildings and the meticulous, detailed, breathtaking nature of the designs. And it is as if the captions – trickily – would force the reader to read the main text for further information.

After two introductory chapters clarify the concept of the town hall and a brief historical overview, the main body of the book consists of five major chapters. The author has broken down the subject matter into its actual periods. The first covers the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the Baroque period (1750), the second 1750-1870, the third 1870-1920, the fourth 1920-1950, and the fifth, from 1950 to the present day. The author has deliberately not linked the period to a stylistic period (see the chapter on the town house), but has sought to confine the changes in the history of local government to the boundaries of the period. And within these boundaries, the study of styles and other phenomena has been given a role.

The author begins the book with the clarification of the terms "town" and "town hall". This introductory chapter provides a brief summary of the research history, in addition to the questions. It shows that town hall buildings first came into the limelight because of their quality and thus their desirability for preservation. The author also points out that Classicism was the first period in which secular buildings received this kind of attention, and that it was later scholars of this period who were the first to study building types – although often confusing different functions, e.g. the county house and the town hall. This chapter also reveals some interesting facts about the intricate way in which the Bremen administration chose the size of its town hall,

and which municipalities in Poland were allowed under which legal system to build a tower at the town hall building. In doing so, the author shows that in the past how the nature, size and appearance of a building and the law have often been so closely linked, and continues to point to this link. At the same time, it is noted that the appearance of buildings was often determined by regional fashions. At the end of the chapter, the author returns to the classification of the period, stating that the structure of the volume is determined not by styles but by buildings.

The opening sentence of the second, historical chapter is again a thesis: the city is the basic unit of civilisation (according to *Geddes, Childe, Mumford*). The question is raised whether what is legally a city is also a city geographically and economically, and some of the many types of cities are also highlighted. The first building to serve as a town hall, but not built as such, is mentioned (Cologne, 1135), as is the first one built for this purpose (Broletto, 1215), and the first stylistic features of this type of building are highlighted: the ‘tower’ town halls of 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy and the buildings of the German Lowlands of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, which, in accordance with their judicial function, had courtrooms, prison and council chambers. The building form which came to the fore during the Reformation and which was to dominate later periods is characterised by a floor plan with two courtyards, a *tympanum*-shaped central *risalite* (projecting part of the building) and a lantern-shaped bell tower behind it. The complex functions of the town halls began to be separated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the executive, legislative and judicial (i.e. magistrates’) powers being given separate buildings. We can learn that the concept of “citizens” with rights was replaced by the more complete concept of “citizen”, and the institutions built at that time also sought to reflect this way of thinking, democracy. These buildings are very often used as tourist attractions, but from the following periods, the office block townhouses of modernism and the later critical regionalism buildings are becoming phenomena. The incompleteness of the chapter is due precisely to the idea that the study of this type of building is by no means complete, because, with its changing functions, it has a future.

The chapters of each period have a similar structure: after a historical introduction, they describe general phenomena and then start to describe the typical buildings of the period. In the book it is mentioned that the first written mention of a town hall is that of Esztergom in 1284, and that the surviving buildings rival those of Kőszeg and Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia). The book reveals that in Hungary the practice of recognising town rights (e.g. the right to hold fairs) dates back to the post-Mongol invasion – but the right was clearly derived from the king. Our most important towns were located in the Transdanubian region, in the *Felvidék* (Highlands) region and *Erdély* (Transylvania), thanks to church and royal connections, and in 15<sup>th</sup>-century trade and fairs, and the importance of settlements on the main trade routes increased. However, in numerical terms, of the 18–20,000 settlements, 30–60 were true ‘towns’, and around 800–900 had privileges. We can also learn about the concept of town in the *Tripartitum* and the history of the field towns that fell under Turkish occupation. Turning to architectural monuments, it is mainly free royal towns that held them, and the towered design was the unifying feature of the medieval period. When we look at specific buildings, we learn several interesting elements, such as the placement of the measures related to the marketplace, community function, justice near the gateway (e.g. Bratislava), or the significance of the towers and the fire tower (e.g. Sopron or the demolished Győr, which later became a symbol). Sometimes, the town hall was converted from the palace of the town magistrate or nobility (see Nagyszében, today Sibiu,

Romania). It is also revealed that it was not uncommon for inns or shops to be housed in town hall buildings (e.g. Szombathely). In the case of Bártfa (today Bartfa, Slovakia), we are given a detailed description, and in addition to the sonorous motto, we can also note the clock and the knightly statue in the gable (a German example). We also learn about the conversion of several other functional buildings into town halls.<sup>1</sup> Although the author later excuses the lack of these, information is given on several interior decorations (of course, the author fails to examine them all together in his book).

The main topics of discussion in the second period are the re-assertion of the rights of cities within the Habsburg Empire, the changing concept of citizenship that accompanied serf liberations and new nation states. There were many differences in the cities in terms of religion and even nationality (interestingly, in Kecskemét, even in the early 20th century, the custom of electing mayors in rotation between Catholic and Protestant citizens was still in place to maintain unity). The town halls of the first period can be divided into two main types: the new buildings in the main squares, often converted from preceding buildings, or the independently erected buildings around which new squares were organised. They vary widely in style. The second part of the period was mainly characterised by neoclassical buildings, such as the Kiskunság line (Kiskunfélegyháza, Kunszentmiklós, Szabadszállás), all three single-storey, centrally-located buildings with a tympanum, and several variations of this (Gyöngyös, Kiskunhalas, etc). In addition, there was also the southern provincial town-house character (often with a tower) of the more monumental buildings, e.g. Pancsova (today Pančevo, Serbia), Szabadka (today Subotica, Serbia), Zombor (today Sombor, Serbia), which perhaps had a stronger urban significance than the Kiskunság line. In later years, the Romantic style (the town halls of Makó and Versec, today Vršac, Serbia) and the historicist neo-styles also appear (numerous other examples).

Described as the heyday of town-hall architecture, the period between 1870–1920 was a time of urbanisation and modernisation. This is the period when Budapest was unified in 1873, a period when a stable and new structure was created through the reforms of the county, with mayors working towards unification. In general, the buildings of the period are characterised by the same structure and organisation of space. Often multifunctional buildings were created, e.g. in Kiskunhalas a hotel and a theatre were also housed in the town hall. We also gain an international perspective on the formal similarities of the buildings of the period, which suggests that the French and German traditions are close to our Hungarian buildings. The towns of the period were characterised by a certain competition, which was noticeable and mainly reflected in the decorations. The chapter also includes a selection of building dedication speeches, which amply illustrate the ambition of the designers to make civic strength, a connection to the landscape, modernity and national style the most important aspects of their design. The statement that the series of Art Nouveau townhouses in Hungary is unique in Europe (or perhaps Galicia has similar dimensions) may at first be met with scepticism, but by the end of the chapter I am sure that not a shred of doubt will remain. Through the diversity of form, the myriad buildings presented provide an impressive array. A few general observations are made at the beginning of the chapter, including the importance of working with local contractors, the use of symbols, e.g. a tower as an architectural element to reinforce the town hall character or a rizalite with a

<sup>1</sup> Ákos Moravánszky's opinion is slightly different about town hall functions, see: Ákos MORAVÁNSZKY (1998): *Versengő látomások*. Vince Kiadó. Budapest. 71.

driveway reminiscent of a castle was also used on several occasions. The author has divided the buildings of this period into three waves: firstly, the early 1870s-80s, secondly, the period of 1890–1905/06, and thirdly, the interval of 1906–1914. The first period was marked by the emergence of tendering, and neo-Renaissance buildings were the main feature of this period. The second era was characterised by monumentality, with varied roof designs and neo-Baroque massing, interspersed with Art Nouveau elements after the turn of the century. The third wave, in addition to examining the connection between the tulip motif on the town hall of Szabadka and its political content, focuses on the main works of the architectural duo *Marcell Komor* and *Dezső Jakab*. The author also discusses the relative ‘failure’ of the Group ‘*Fiatalok*’ in the field of town hall architecture and presents a number of their very interesting designs which were not executed.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the main chapter, the protracted building of Budapest’s town hall is given a separate sub-chapter, and the buildings of the present districts are also mentioned in a short list. At the end of this chapter, a considerable number of village halls are also discussed.

The fourth era, called the end of the urban wave, often consisted of the realisation of pre-World War I plans, mostly in the neoclassical or baroque style, or even the nationalistic Lechner style. The emergence of the new concept of the city, in philosophical, urban planning and economic terms, was a major stimulus for architects of the period. The first town planning law was passed, and architects formulated a number of plans, often utopian, including town houses, many times based on overseas or Scandinavian models. In reality, however, often castle-like, representative buildings were built. There are examples of late Art Nouveau town halls from this period in Debrecen, Budafok and Csongrád, and another characteristic line is the series of castle-like buildings decorated with neo-Baroque massing and *Art Deco* elements (zigzag lines), such as the town halls of Komárom and Kenderes. The latter was not by chance, as Kenderes was *Miklós Horthy*’s home village, and this was the style what the governor preferred and supported.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the section, the author discusses the general phenomenon of a group of architects who were dissatisfied with the ‘modernity’ of the buildings of the period, because they were less able to reflect a Western sense of modernity, which was only present in the design competitions (with a significant Northern European influence).

The final chapter, in a historical introduction to the years of Communist dictatorship, states that local government as such has ceased, and so has construction. The concept of the council house replaced the town halls, and the architecture of the period was mainly about the erection of party-state buildings for representational purposes. A new concept of the city, new principles of urban planning emerged, and the idea of becoming a city became easier to grasp, leading to a significant increase in the number of cities, but also to some devaluation. It is mentioned that after the 1990s, many former town hall buildings were given other functions, often due to sustainability problems or being too large (e.g. library, museum), and many new towns established under Communism needed new town halls, sometimes with new functions (e.g. marriage hall, or a room for receiving clients). The architects sought a connection with the earlier meaning-bearing elements: the town hall was intended to have a prominent urban significance. They often used symbolic elements or modern solutions reminiscent of them. The last group of

<sup>2</sup> For more about the *Fiatalok* and their leader Károly Kós, see among others GERLE, JÁNOS – KOVÁCS, ATTILA –MAKOVÉCZ, IMRE (1990): *A századforduló magyar építésze*. Budapest, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó. 94–101.

<sup>3</sup> See also the opinion of Paár, Szilvia Eszter. In PAÁR, SZILVIA ESZTER (2020): *Wälder Gyula*. Budapest, Holnap Kiadó. 61.

buildings to be mentioned are the modern buildings that emphasise the office building function, such as those in Budaörs or Miskolc.

The epilogue quantifies the excitement of the book: the 320 central buildings of the 250 towns and villages visited. (I have experienced the guidebook-like density of the book myself.) The author makes a very perceptive point about the fact that there is still much to be done in the field of town and town-house research, and clarifies the need to separate the concepts of village and town-house. It was also stated that in today's Hungary there are 346 towns and a total of 3,154 municipalities, not to mention buildings that were previously located outside the borders. This underlines the magnitude of the task, and the reader is almost tempted to take part in the author's further work. (I also agree with this, because I believe that the study of these elements in conjunction with the buildings could lead to new and interesting observations.) Lastly, the author points to the phenomenon that town halls are fortunately almost universally respected and protected, both legally and intellectually.

Overall, the uniqueness of this book lies not only in its synthesis of an astonishing amount of data, but also in the fact that it has embraced the task of examining all relevant periods of history and undertaking interdisciplinary forays into other fields of study. The author's thoroughness, which I have already experienced, impressed me again, and I hope it will encourage other architectural historians to produce comparative volumes of this kind by building types.