

THESIS BOOKLET

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**Three royal centers in the Hungarian
monument preservation practice between the
two world wars: architectural restorations of
Esztergom, Székesfehérvár and Visegrád**

Doctoral (PhD) thesis booklet

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Starting point and objective of the dissertation

The focus of the dissertation is the examination of three emblematic Hungarian restorations from the interwar period. All three locations were once royal centers, and, in addition to the architectural history lessons to be drawn, these excavation and renovation projects tell a lot about the Hungarian cultural and foreign policy strategy of the 1930s and 1940s.

Hungary in the 1930s was permeated by the irredentist movement. After the Treaty of Trianon, the body responsible for the protection of Hungarian built heritage was the National Committee on Historic Monuments. The institute had to be reorganized as most of the monuments under its jurisdiction went beyond the national borders, to foreign authorities. At time of the reorganization, the Italian cultural diplomat Tibor Gerevich became the chairman of the Committee. First, this thesis paper focuses on his monument strategy and restoration concepts based on Italian principles. Second, the dissertation also tries to shed more light on the professional methods, challenges and results of the

architects who planned these restorations. With special attention on these three restorations, I examine how a more scientific approach of medieval heritage restoration has developed, as well as how the practice of contemporary additions and extensions to old buildings has appeared. The biggest task of this research is to reveal how the architects Kálmán Lux, Géza Lux, Dezső Várnai and János Schulek decided or vacillated between the historicizing or the narrative restoration plans, which dilemma is actually one of the starting points of today's monument preservation polemics.

Description and methods of the research

The period discussed in the dissertation began in 1934, when Tibor Gerevich was appointed head of the National Committee on Historic Monuments, architect Kálmán Lux was appointed to the position of chief technical advisor, and two of the excavation projects of the three examined sites also began in this year. Although the last restoration mentioned in the thesis was built after the war, in 1951, the focus is on the most intensive phases of the three renovations, which means the years from 1934 to 1938 for

the Esztergom project, from 1936 to 1938 for the Székesfehérvár project, and from 1934 to 1944 for the royal palace in Visegrád. Although the source materials were hard to access due to the relocation of the archives or the pandemic-related closure of institutions, it can be stated that a wealth of material was available. The documents and plans of the National Committee on Historic Monuments preserved in the Hungarian Museum of Architecture and Monument Protection Documentation Center provided ample information for the research. Also, the specific legacy of Lux has also been preserved together with the legacy of Dezső Kiss and Dezső Várnai belonging to the Hungarian Museum of Architecture. However, in addition to these sources, special emphasis was also placed on interviews, statements, news, informative articles published in the press of the time, since one of the main foundations of the period of monument protection in the Gerevich-era was the utilization of the advantages of the press and media.

Following the research history, the thesis introduces the reader to the cultural political situation around 1934, highlights the relationship between

monument protection and foreign policy, and explains why the restoration of the three royal centers in question was so important for the public of the time. After that, the paper discusses in detail the conditions, planning and practical aspects of the excavation and restoration projects of Esztergom, Székesfehérvár and Visegrád, and draws conclusions from the restoration history's perspective, as well as from the social and cultural political point of view.

Theses

Thesis 1

Knowing the challenges of today's monument protection in Hungary, recalling Tibor Gerevich's presidential activities is a current topic. In addition to his scientific preparation, Gerevich also built on his resilience in the marketing and political fields, with which he won the support of society and thus also of the country's leaders for the financial coverage of large investments. The attention of the public, politics, and the media are mutually influencing forces – and sufficient support and financial background is available only when the monuments can take their

rightful place in the public discourse. The propagandistic role played by the works in Esztergom, Székesfehérvár and, to some extent, in Visegrád can be clearly observed in the public mood after the Treaty of Trianon. One of the main messages of the thesis is to highlight the role these built heritages sometimes play even in certain diplomatic statements. Also, the thesis concludes that sometimes these monuments were promoted at the expense of scientific credibility for the sake of effective formulation of cultural political messages.

Thesis 2.

Both the Royal Palace in Esztergom and the Medieval Ruin Garden in Székesfehérvár are mentioned in the literature as mature, pioneering examples of restoration and extension of the 1930s and the Athens Charter. The paper sheds light on the wide-ranging collective thinking that preceded these selected practices, and explains that, in fact, there was never one but several restoration approaches within a single project. In the case of

Esztergom, for example, the theoretical reconstruction drawings are present throughout the whole process – even though in the end the solutions saw there 90 years ago could be considered a modern, contemporary addition. As for the ruins of the basilica in Székesfehérvár, we refer to the investment of this period as the one that did not complete the ruins in the historicizing spirit. Today the project is mentioned as a museum with one of the most scientific designs but built for a wide audience with educational purpose. Despite this, also a mausoleum was erected next to the lapidarium of scientific function, formed in a pathetic tone, not completely avoiding the use of imitative artistic forms. Additions based on these contrasts and neutralism avoiding historicization, at one point started to shift towards less confrontational additions, for example the Vízibástya (=Water Bastion) in Visegrád or the Budapesti-kapu (= Gate of Budapest).

Thesis 3

As he was key figure in the three restorations, getting to know the work of Kálmán Lux is important from the thesis paper's point of view. We are talking about an architect who is sometimes called one of the most modern, pioneering architects of monument preservation for his palace building reconstructions in Esztergom. At other times, he is mocked as the 'acanthus maharaja' because of his historicizing new buildings created between the two world wars. An architect who is judged such controversially is worthy of examination. His oeuvre includes neo-Renaissance and neo-Baroque buildings, and designs born in the spirit of the Roman school, but the palette of his restorations is also colorful. In the 1930s, Lux espoused modern restoration principles, but we also know his renovation plans with artistic forms from the 1940s. Of course, it could be a very obvious hypothesis that he created along a modern approach only as long as he was working under the direction of Tibor Gerevich, so all his progressive works were

done on the instructions of his supervisor. The thesis shades this picture by the fact that Lux had already published about modern monument preservation principles long before Gerevich.

Another aspect of his oeuvre, which is a question of research already started by the author – in this paper it also can be stated as a thesis – that an arc can be traced in the career of Kálmán Lux, at the end of which, as a synthesis, he turned more towards critical restoration. We are talking about an oeuvre spanning decades, during which a person is continuously learning, getting educated, and developing his opinion. Besides, war and making a living can also bring turning points and contradictions in a life line. In later decades, Lux himself recognized what worked well and what did not prove itself in his constructions. He also saw how the medieval surfaces reacted to the additions of reinforced concrete, and how the public itself accepted these solutions. In addition, another thesis is that Lux was in a controlling role, under whose supervision his son Géza Lux and Dezső Várnai

could work with independent inventions and an individual drive, so their common thinking, opposing or compromise-worthy ideas matured together over time. However, it can be stated about Kálmán Lux that he was a monument specialist architect who firmly rejected reconstructions that overrode stylistic clarity and scientific approaches to the building. He primarily wanted to know and understand medieval architecture, he conducted excavations and experimented with new possibilities for renovations while respecting the original building, even leading to completely opposite results.

Thesis 4

The restorations of medieval buildings in the 1930s, during the presidential period of Tibor Gerevich, are considered one of the most progressive eras of Hungarian monument protection today. Similarly, several forums find it desirable even to bring back his methods. Many people forget that this was an era that spanned only a decade, punctuated by an

event that forever changed our approach to monument restoration today: the devastation of World War II. The heritages of Esztergom, Székesfehérvár and Visegrád are built memories that have reached their speculation-rising ruined silhouettes after slow destruction. Although the distinction had been made before, the war highlighted even more obviously that the restoration of yesterday's memories and those destroyed hundreds of years ago falls into a separate category. The other turning point was that the values of monuments representing national identity were given an increasingly prominent position, a phenomenon that had already intensified in Hungary after the Treaty of Trianon. However, after the devastation of World War II, the past of specific nations 'vanished', so the question of a reconstruction was no longer the subject of theoretical debates or discussions on originality. After the war, reconstructions in style could be seen even in Italy, however, due to the communist architectural doctrines, this method was pushed into

the background in Hungary. Rather, the international modern constructions, i.e. precisely the approach appearing in the reinforced concrete additions in Esztergom, could survive for a while longer. (Just like in the case of the palace chapel restoration in Buda.) After the communist period, today national values are emphasized again, we are currently strengthening our identity with restorations that are not neutral in history but recall our origins. It can therefore be seen that it is a narrative spanning several decades, in which the renovation of the palace in Esztergom and the transformation of its practice towards the less neutral Lux addition in Visegrád is part of an evident process, i.e. not a solution that can be fully ascertained as a doctrine for the future. However, it is worth learning from this project's merits, as its own designers did later on.

My publications on the subject

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