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**The theater architecture of  
Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer in Hungary**  
Theses of the doctoral (PhD) dissertation

Doctoral School of History

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## **I. Antecedents and objective of the dissertation**

In the last decade one can see a significant upswing on the research of the history of Hungarian Architecture, the number of specialist literature on historicism, secession and modernist architecture in Hungary has increased. A large proportion of these sources are based on the life and work of Hungarian architects. It is understandable in the light of the fact, that the primary sources which are the foundation of the research – plans, documents, press articles from the era – have better availability, not just through personal research but also in digital form. The tools and possibilities of the researchers have expanded, at the same time though even greater critical approach has become necessary in order to search efficiently in this larger amount of information.

The dissertation is the first step of an effort that aims to include Austrian architects, Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer in the series of life and work of Hungarian architects in the era of historicism.<sup>1</sup> Although it may seem contradictory to examine the work of Austrian architects among Hungarian architects, it is important to know that their names are inevitable in theater architecture in Hungary since eleven theaters were designed by them which is a significant achievement. Between 1873 and 1919 the architect duo designed over forty theaters, primarily in the territory of the Austro-Hungarian

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<sup>1</sup> Among the building types designed by the architects, their palaces in Vienna and Budapest were researched by Enikő Tóth in her MA thesis in 2020.

Monarchy. Hungarian theaters were built in the following cities (in chronological order): Timișoara, the Volkstheater in Budapest, Szeged, Fiume (Rijeka), Bratislava, Tata, the Somossy Orpheum in Budapest (Operetta Theater), the Víg Theater in Budapest, Kecskemét, Oradea and Cluj-Napoca. Theater architecture is only one, but a very significant segment of their oeuvre. However it has not really been processed in Hungarian language, not in a monographic level that considers aspects of architectural history, architecture and social history. The purpose of the dissertation is therefore to fill the gap mentioned above, and it naturally also deals with the life and work of the two architects and the types of buildings they have designed. The main topic of the dissertation is however about the detailed construction history and description of the eleven Hungarian theaters as well as the architectural and technical solutions used by the architect duo. It also mentions their assessment in Hungary, in which the Hungarian architectural profession and the Hungarian press are also given an important emphasis. Meanwhile one can examine the demand for a permanent theater in the Hungarian cities.

My research related to the subject has started during my years at the university: my first graduate thesis (BA) has aimed to process the architectural history and description of the Víg Theater in Budapest designed by the Fellner and Helmer office. My second thesis (MA) was also completed on the topic of theater architecture: it processed the tender of the Hungarian Royal Opera House. The application material of Ferdinand Fellner was only found partially in the form of

documents unfortunately without any plans. In both cases the research related to Fellner and Helmer was based on the German monograph written by Hans-Christian Hoffmann in 1966, and on the Hungarian study written by Ferenc Merényi, Pál Rudnyánszky and László Fellner in 2004. In Budapest City Archives the plans for Víg Theatre could be accessed, and this institute was also the main base for the research related to the Opera House. The working process of these two theses shed light on the fact that the literature about Hungarian architecture briefly mentions the work of Fellner and Helmer. After my studies have started in the doctoral school, I realized that my previous research, although were thorough, yet remained superficial, and did not incorporate additional sources – some of these would have been available even then. It has also become clear that the theaters designed by Fellner and Helmer has only been processed in a few volumes or studies, therefore the materials available were fragmented to show the life and work of Fellner and Helmer in a more complete and complex way. This has confirmed the importance of the dissertation's topic as supplying this deficiency,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The latest studies and volumes related to the theaters designed by Fellner and Helmer prove the fact, that recently even more sources have become available which provides enough information for a more detailed research. In the year of submission of my thesis, 2023, two volumes have been published related to theaters in Budapest: by Péter Somfai (Somossy Orpheum) and Ákos Illyés (Víg Comedy). It is also important to mention a study volume from 2021, published in Rijeka: *Nepoznati Klimt: Ljubav, smrt, ekstaza* (ed. by Deborah Pustišek Antić). Its importance is that during the renovation works in 2020 a time capsule was found which contained original documents from 1884.

## **II. Methodology of the research and the review of its main sources**

My dissertation is focusing on the active period of the architect duo's office, operating in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, between 1873-1919. The dates related to the Hungarian theaters are a bit different: the planning of the Volkstheater has begun in 1872, and Fellner the younger took over the planning of the theater in Timișoara from his father in 1871. These two buildings are the independent works of Fellner the younger, the partnership with Helmer was only established in 1873. The last theater built in Hungary by them was in Cluj-Napoca, between 1904-1906.

Regarding the theaters on which my research focuses, the first task was to review the literature on both the architects and the buildings, in foreign and Hungarian language as well. After that the establishing of the main material base has begun with the identification of its primary sources. Most of these documents could be found in the archives of the cities, such as: Budapest City Archives, Hungarian National Archives, National Széchenyi Library, Ervin Szabó Library, Csongrád-Csanád County Archives and Bács-Kiskun County Archives. I also contacted archives abroad, and I had the opportunity for a personal visit to the Bratislava Archives (Archív mesta Bratislavy). I consulted via e-mail with the secretariat of the Romanian National Archives in Bihor (Arhivele Naționale ale României, Bihor), the Romanian National Archives in Timiș (Arhivele Naționale ale României, Timiș). I also contacted the colleagues of the

Rijeka City Archives (Državni Arhiv u Rijeci) and with their help I could receive the plans and documents via e-mail. Another important base were the collections of the museums, important sources could be found in the Kiscell Museum, in the Hungarian Museum of Architecture and Monument Protection Documentation Center, in the National History Theater Museum, and in the Kuny Domokos Museum in Tata. It is important to highlight the personal contacts in the cities as well, where my research took place: with their help I was able to visit the theaters, make a photo documentation and also examine the available archive photos and document collections.

By organizing the large number of sources collected, a transparent database was created, which contained documents and plans in connection with the constructions of the theaters, and it also contained press articles and correspondences. This database made it possible to process the detailed construction history and description of the theaters. The research kept in mind the historical completeness of the theaters in question, therefore in the appendix I have summarized the entire history of the theaters, supplemented with their pre- and post-life. It is important to highlight the press and its articles from the examined period, because these proved to be useful in several cases, where primary sources could not be found among the archives – the articles from *Architectural Craft – Architectural Art (Építő Ipar – Építő Művészet)*, the *Bulletin and Weekly Bulletin of the Hungarian Engineers and Architects Association (Magyar Mérnök- és Építész Egylet Közlönye and Heti Értesítője)*, *Journal of the Austrian Society*

*of Engineers and Architects (Zeitschrift des österreichischen Ingenieur- und Architekten Vereines)* and the *Architectural Reviews (Architektonische Rundschau)* proved to be especially useful. The descriptions and the work of the architects enabled a summarizing, typological examination of the theaters in the architect duo's oeuvre. An exciting aspect of the research was to study the social history of the era, the opinions and discourse about the architects became a very important part of the dissertation. A remarkably large number of Hungarian articles deal with Fellner and Helmer, and in more than one case it contains serious criticism toward them.

### **III. Theses and achievements of the dissertation**

#### ***1. The role of Fellner and Helmer in Hungarian theater architecture is decisive***

Based on the eleven examined Hungarian theater buildings, it can be stated that Fellner and Helmer, despite their judgement in Hungary, were decisive architects in Hungarian theater architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This statement is true not only in the case of their theaters, but also in relation to Hungarian historicism, and secession architecture. Their influence on neobaroque architecture is significant, as one of the first neobaroque buildings in Vienna, called Sturany-palace was designed by them – it was followed by several palaces and town-houses in their oeuvre. In addition to their theaters, Fellner and Helmer travelled to Hungary when the Károlyi-Csekonics-palace in Budapest, the Solymosy-Gyürky castle in Szőny were built

and also when the Rothberger Warehouse in Budapest was remodelled – on the latter one can see secession influence. Due to the growing number of orders, the office, managed by Fellner and Helmer, employed several architectural draftsmen, among whom we can find Hungarian architects such as Arthur Meinig, Aladár Árkay and Dávid Jónás. The research is complemented by a typological overview of their theaters, and it also places their Hungarian theater buildings in this oeuvre. In recent decades, although several studies have been released on the theaters designed by Fellner and Helmer, all of them have dealt only with the city theater as an independent building. They barely mention the life and work of the architects. I consider the monographic approach to be important, since only this makes possible to observe the progression of the architects – it is also important to mention that in every decade of the active working period of Fellner and Helmer, there is at least one Hungarian theater designed by them. In recent years new sources have become available for several buildings – plans, documents, press articles and archive photographs. This justifies the need for clarification and expansion of previously published studies and also the need for a properly summarized work on the theater architectural oeuvre of Fellner and Helmer, covering not only architectural but social history issues as well. It is also important to place the Viennese architects in Hungarian architecture.



## ***2. The office of Fellner and Helmer used a modular system and it helped their speed in designing and in their favorable prices***

In addition to the artistic aspects, the governance of the cities considered several additional factors, – mostly economic – when a new theater was commissioned. Fellner and Helmer developed a basic theater type that, in terms of its floor plan system, was based on three main units: the vestibule-corridors, the auditorium and the rigging-loft-stage. According to the customers' possibilities and needs, additional representative spaces, lounges and decorative pavilions could be added to the main units. The total cost was modified by the space and the capacity of the theaters, its floors, its decoration, both on the outside and in the inside – the documents revealed that Fellner and Helmer also made suggestions in different issues. This basic type used by the architects has not changed significantly throughout the decades of the operation of their architectural office, and with this solution Fellner and Helmer were able to quickly prepare not just the plans but the expected cost calculation for the theater, and the calculated price turned out to be more favorable than any other offer in most cases. In some other cases the governance of the city requested an expert opinion of the architects' office which often resulted the rejection of a previously planned contest and a commission for Fellner and Helmer. When they learnt about a planned theater, Fellner and Helmer sent their application without any official invitation, before the city could prepare the planning phase. By examining the architects' theaters in Hungary, it is possible to trace how the system of the vestibule and corridors, the accessibility of the auditorium, the levels

and their arrangement and the decoration have changed. In order to understand the importance of the Fellner and Helmer office, it needs to be emphasized that in their theaters the artistic aspects were basically subordinated to the function, and the system they were using was perfectly suited for this solution.

### ***3. Fire protection is extremely important in the theater architecture of Fellner and Helmer***

From the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the question of safety, especially in case of fire, slowly became an important factor in theaters, however, significant steps were not taken until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the 8<sup>th</sup> December, 1881, the Ringtheater in Vienna, Austria caught fire during a play. The tragedy claimed nearly 400 lives. Since it highlighted several significant problems, a committee was formed after the tragedy and its aim was to inspect the theaters in Austria. Fellner and Helmer assisted during the inspection, and in the preparation of a decree issued in 1882. It stated increased fire safety regulations, which included the placement of water tubs and shower equipment, smaller visitor capacity, more exits, widened corridors, the use of iron curtains, in structure the use of iron and steel instead of wood, and also the use of electric lightning instead of gas. On the 30<sup>th</sup> December another tragedy occurred in Chicago: the Iroquois Theater, which was declared as a completely fireproof building, caught fire during a performance. It was Hermann Helmer, who pointed out the serious safety problems in his assessment related to the tragedy. At this point, concerning fire safety precautions, a

construction of a theater arose by Fellner and Helmer, where it could be possible to test out and improve the different fire safety solutions in practice. In five experiments, presented in the Fire Model Theater, the use of iron curtain, the ventilation system above the auditorium and water tubs could be shown in the suggested correct order, but the experiments also showed the consequences of skipping any steps. Based on these experiments, the fire test regulations for theaters were created, and the results were incorporated into the basic type of theaters used by Fellner and Helmer.<sup>3</sup> The studied documents proved that they emphasized the importance of fire safety aspects in every theater, and the examined plans showed the appearance of the ventilation system above the auditorium, as well as the evolution of the corridors inside the building, which made it possible to quickly evacuate the theater in case of emergency. The examined documents were expanded by the theoretical work of Fellner and Helmer, in which one can find specific, detailed description related to fire safety precautions and its appropriate application. The importance of Fellner and Helmer appears actually in these practical issues.

#### ***4. It is important and necessary to examine both architectural and social-historical questions related to the architects***

In the dissertation, it is possible to answer not only architectural questions, but it is equally important to examine the aspects of the

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<sup>3</sup> In connection with the Fire Model Theater, a study was published in 2019 by Enikő Tóth. The title of the study is: *Theater-fire experiments at the turn of the century. The Fire Model Theater by Fellner and Helmer.*

client, the builder, the procurer and the contemporary press, The importance of this examination is emphasized by the fact that the assessment of Fellner and Helmer's theatre architecture, despite their achievements, was negative in many cases in Hungary. In order to understand the causes of this, it was essential to study the articles from different Hungarian daily newspapers and architectural journals. The research revealed that the criticism toward Fellner and Helmer was not primarily directed at the quality of the theaters designed by them, however its number increased around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In most cases, the articles, written by Hungarian architects, emphasize that basically Fellner and Helmer and their business activities are not the problem – it is mostly the attitude of their clients and with that the marginalization of Hungarian architects.<sup>4</sup> The exact meaning of this is explained in the chapter about Hungarian theater architecture: besides Antal Szkalnitzky, Miklós Ybl and Adolf Lang only a few architects had a chance to design this type of public building. In many cases, Hungarian architects could not even get the opportunity, because the competition for a theater was cancelled and Fellner and Helmer were commissioned. It is understandable that this rightfully caused revulsion among the Hungarian architects – a good example is the closed competition of the Opera House, where six architects were invited (from abroad as well), but the decision was made strictly upon professional

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<sup>4</sup> The construction works of the theaters were almost always decided by a competition – the announcement could be found in the articles, and the tenders were mostly won by Hungarian industrials and professionals.

considerations. If we examine the documents issued by the governments of the city, one can hardly find any sources about the related discourse, the economic aspects and the expertise of Fellner and Helmer usually decided the question. However it is important to emphasize the fact, that when the Volkstheater in Budapest was built, the office of the architects was still considered a beginner, so all of the commissions in Hungary contributed to their growth of experience. As the turn of the century approached, the conflict between Fellner and Helmer and the Hungarian architects was deepened even more by the news that István Tisza would commission the Viennese architects over the Hungarians for designing the Hungarian National Theater. However the resistance was so huge that he abandoned his intention in the matter. According to the recent state of my research I have not found any source which would have proved that Fellner and Helmer were active participants in the discussions related to these critical articles.

#### **IV. Publications related to the topic of the dissertation**

##### ***Studies***

*Egy meg nem valósult épület története: Ferdinand Fellner szerepe a Magyar Királyi Operaház építéstörténetében (The story of an unbuilt theater: the role of Ferdinand Fellner in the construction history of the Hungarian Royal Opera House.).* In: *Tavaszi Szél 2017 Konferenciakötet (Spring Wind Conference Volume III. 2017).* ed. by: Gábor Keresztes. Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége (National

Association of Doctoral Students). Budapest, 2017. p. 137-143.  
(published only in digital form)

([https://dosz.hu/dokumentumok/kiadvanyok/tavaszi\\_szel\\_konferencia\\_tanulmanykotet/2017/](https://dosz.hu/dokumentumok/kiadvanyok/tavaszi_szel_konferencia_tanulmanykotet/2017/));

*Van-e Budapestnek szüksége egy újabb színházra? A Vígszínház építésének értékelése a korabeli közvélemény szemével (Does Budapest need another theater? Evaluation of the construction of the Víg Theater through the eyes of contemporary public opinion).* In: *Színház és Néző tanulmánykötet (Theater and Spectator)*. ed. by.: Boglárka Burkus, Máté Tinkó. Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Irodalomtudományi Osztály (National Association of Doctoral Students, Department of Literature). Budapest. 2019. p. 92-109;

*Mulatóból színház – A Somossy-féle mulató története (Theater from an Orpheum – The story of the Somossy Orpheum).* In: *Opus Mixtum VI.: A CentrArt Egyesület Évkönyve 2020 (Yearbook of the CentrArt Association, 2020.)*. ed. by.: Emese M. Isó; Kristóf Kelecsényi; Ágnes Sebestyén Anna; Gabriella Juhász. CentrArt Egyesület (CentrArt Association). Budapest. 2020. p. 203-214.

([https://www.centrart.hu/kiadvanyaink/opus\\_mixtum/opus-mixtum-vi-2020/](https://www.centrart.hu/kiadvanyaink/opus_mixtum/opus-mixtum-vi-2020/));

*The Financial and Social Support of the Hungarian Theatres in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.* In: *Artistic Patronage in Central Europe: From Private Foundations to State Art*. ed. by: Dr. habil. Jakub, Adamski. Warsaw. 2021. p. 293-310;

*Behind the facade: the change of theatres in Budapest.* In: *Folytonosság és megszakítottság a magyar kultúrában: a doktoriskolák VI. nemzetközi magyarságtudományi konferenciája (Continuity and discontinuity in Hungarian culture: VI. International Conference on Hungarian Studies of Doctoral Schools.* ed. by.: Sándor Bene, István Dobos. Nemzetközi Magyarságtudományi Társaság (International Society of Hungarian Studies). Budapest. 2022. p. 623-633.

### ***Conference presentations***

2017. március 31. - április 2. Tavaszi Szél Konferencia, Miskolc (31<sup>th</sup> March - 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2017. Spring Wind Conference, Miskolc) *Egy meg nem valósult épület története – Ferdinand Fellner szerepe a Magyar Királyi Operaház építéstörténetében (The story of an unbuilt theater: the role of Ferdinand Fellner in the construction history of the Hungarian Royal Opera House.);*

2017. október 27-29. – Fiatal Művészettörténészek VI. Konferenciája, Esztergom (27-29<sup>th</sup> October, 2017. – VI. Conference of Young Art Historians, Esztergom); *Mulatóból színház – A budapesti Somossy Orfeum története (Theater from an Orpheum – The story of the Somossy Orpheum);*

2018. március 9. – Színház és Néző – Színháztudományi Konferencia, Budapest (9<sup>th</sup> March, 2018. Theater and Spectator – Theater Studies Conference, Budapest). „*Van-e Budapestnek szüksége egy újabb színházra?*” („*Does Budapest need another theater?*”);

2019. szeptember 5-6. – Folytonosság és megszakítottság a magyar kultúrában. A doktoriskolák VI. nemzetközi magyarságtudományi konferenciája. Bécs, Ausztria (5-6<sup>th</sup> September, 2019. Continuity and discontinuity in Hungarian culture: VI. International Conference on Hungarian Studies of Doctoral Schools, Vienna, Austria); *Behind the facade. The changing of the theatres in Budapest*;

19-21<sup>th</sup> September, 2019. – Artistic Patronage in Central Europe: From Private Foundations to State Art. Warsaw, Poland. *The Financial and Social Support of the Hungarian Theatres in the 19th Century*;

2019. október 25-27. – Fialat Művészettörténészek VII. Konferenciája, Nagyvárad, Románia (October 25-27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. VII. Conference of Young Art Historians, Oradea, Romania); *Nagyvárad kőszínháza (The theater of Oradea)*.

### ***Budapest 100 (2016)***

Vígszínház (Víg Theater): <https://budapest100.hu/house/szent-istvan-korut-14/> (megtekintve 2023. 05. 12.)