

# SPECIFIC ARCHITECTURE ROOTED IN THE COUNTRY. SURVEY ON VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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## **Lake Balaton**

After the failed revolution in 1956 the old-new socialist government in Hungary had to stabilise its power. In the spirit of détente they intended to raise living standards, let people more privacy and at the same time open toward the West. The main target of home and international tourism development was Lake Balaton – the largest lake in Central-Europe – which was popular as a resort place already in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the history of the lake the Second World War was followed by a period of decline: the private hotels and villas were socialised, and soon the situation was characterised by a lack of maintenance and occasional unregulated developments. A radical change began when the Managing Committee of Lake Balaton (BIB) was re-established<sup>1</sup> under the supervision of the National Tourism Board in March 1957. This meant that all developments concerning the lake were concentrated and had a direct access to central financial resources. The BIB's responsibility covered everything concerning the development around the lake: from managing infrastructural, building and landscaping plans, through legislation up to the surveying the

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<sup>1</sup> The Managing Committee of Lake Balaton [*Balatoni Intéző Bizottság, BIB*] was originally founded in 1929 but was abandoned in 1949.

attendance data of resort places. The BIB involved professional associations from all the attached fields, among them also the Association of Hungarian Architects. To manage the project a chief architect was appointed, whose office, the Balaton Construction Management belonged to the Ministry of Building Affairs.<sup>2</sup> Finance, organisation and professional knowledge was concentrated, the government and the Socialist Workers Party expected quick results.

### **Survey on vernacular architecture**

The architectural preferences for the development around the Balaton had been defined already before the BIB was re-established. The architect, who later was responsible for the project at the Ministry, summarised two main tasks in his early proposal. Firstly that facilities and characteristics which make attractive the Balaton as a resort place should be preserved and developed. He listed as such the press houses, manor houses and ruins from the middle ages, all evaluated as *'prime representatives of the cultural landscape at the Balaton. It is obvious that architects' role is important in prevention, organisation and implementation'* – he emphasised. (Kislégghi Nagy, 1957: 51) A few paragraphs later he repeated the importance of the former and added vernacular architecture to the list. He mentioned only secondly that the appropriate circumstances for recreation, including summer cottages and new facilities for holiday makers and excursionists should be created.

As soon as the institution of the Balaton Construction Management was established the chief architects published their program. They summarised the main steps of implementation in eleven points. The tasks included mainly infrastructural questions, planning and design problems and the protection of natural environment. The last point referred to the monuments.

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<sup>2</sup>The chief architect was Tibor Farkas. He got this job after he had led the task force for the reconstruction of the flood damage in southern Hungary in 1956 with success. He shared the job with two chief engineers both selected from his former staff. Károly Polónyi was responsible for the south shore, István Bérczes for the north.

*Although they need much less money than the above mentioned tasks, conservation and maintenance of the architectural heritage around the Lake Balaton should be mentioned among the most needed ones. The state of our monuments is getting worse year by year, so that we may lose our most important cultural values.* (Farkas et al., 1957: 112)

The survey on the listed fields began in the summer of 1957 including the survey on the built heritage. It covered two main areas: the first project included the settlements around the lake within a 3 km distance from the water (Galambos, et al., 1958), while the second covered the northern bordering area, the so-called Balaton-highlands (VÁTI, 1958).<sup>3</sup> Due to tight deadlines the research groups spent only one or two days of fieldwork on each settlement, and made a list on the architectural values. The items were classified according to their importance as a monument or as an element of the streetscape, and were followed with a short description. The first survey covered 40, the second 38 settlements. Neither of the surveys included the full documentation of the valuable houses – the most important monuments of the region had already been documented – but the new survey was accompanied with plenty of photos. The main findings of these works were the maps, which indicated all the processed settlements and buildings, referring to their functions and building periods.

The novelty of this inventory was that it included also vernacular architecture, though it was not an accurate collection and documentation of these houses, as it was expounded also in the research report. *‘We have to make it clear, that the aim of this survey didn’t include the collection and documentation of vernacular architecture.’* (VÁTI, 1958: 3) However if we take a look at the maps the many icons referring on vernacular architecture show the rich heritage of the territory

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<sup>3</sup> Both surveys were delivered by the state design office VÁTI, *Városépítési Tervező Vállalat* [Urban Design Company] under the surveillance of the same experts in monuments preservation. Now only the second research report (VÁTI, 1957) and research material (VÁTI, 1958) are accessible in the archive of the National Office of Cultural Heritage.



Figure 1. Peasant house, Mindszentkállya, Fő utca 83. (VÁTI, 1958, N° 129. 213)

in this respect. The increased importance of vernacular built heritage is mirrored also in the building regulations announced in the report, which protected the vernacular streetscapes just as strictly as the townscapes or natural green spaces. The official protection of vernacular architecture – after some rare exceptions – was realised in the Balaton regional plan first.

The report on the survey on the Balaton-highlands contained also a brief proposal on how to protect the vernacular built heritage. Beyond the standard criteria of monuments preservation the authors included a paragraph into the text with clear suggestions how to deal with new developments.

*We shouldn't exclude new building initiatives in such streets [with rich vernacular built heritage], but we have to orientate and help people with showing exemplary old buildings as models. We have to show and explain the works of good taste; this is the proper way to defend us against bad taste.*  
(VÁTI, 1957)

The report also proposed to complete the survey with the detailed documentation of the vernacular monuments of the region and to publish the material for a wider public and the profession both.

*To explore the values inherent in vernacular architecture it would be desirable to edit different kind of publications – illustrated with drawings and images – presenting the characteristic buildings of the Balaton region, for the first time. It may be either an attractive book made for the wider public or the dissemination of the plans in the form of reprints. (VÁTI, 1957)*

The authors didn't expound in detail how to use the vernacular architectural collection as a source: whether it should be a model, or an inspiration for architectural details and building materials. Its significance lied in the initiative to propose vernacular heritage as a basis for the present.<sup>4</sup> To sum up: the inclusion of a survey on built cultural heritage into a regional development plan was a new initiative especially because the vernacular architecture was integrated into the group of monuments. Both researchers and officials took important the preservation of this heritage as a cultural value, which enhances the power of the region as a touristic destination. However the use of the collected material as a source for contemporary architecture was formulated only in an unpublished research report.

### **Summer cottages**

The surveys on built heritage listed all kinds of monuments – strongholds, churches, bridges, chateaus, country and peasant houses, barns and granaries – but the majority of the items, especially in the Balaton-highlands belonged to peasant houses. This allows the assumption, that if the built heritage of

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<sup>4</sup> The first book on the Balaton-highlands vernacular architecture was edited only decades later (H. Csukás, 1986).

the region had had any impact on the new constructions it would have been appeared in summer cottages. Private weekend houses were never excluded from the development plan supported by the architects, but the opinion of the layman differed from that of the profession. *‘Why couldn’t thousands of families have a small weekend house at the Balaton? Why can’t we change the well-known slogan “stand out to sea, Hungarian” into “stand out to Balaton, Hungarian”?* - expressed a reporter the common desire. (Tatár, 1957) Architects were not so enthusiastic concerning summer cottages, the low level of these buildings, and the lack of relevant building regulations were recurrent theme of professional manifestations.<sup>5</sup>

The number of weekend house construction increased rapidly, so the Ministry of Building Affairs – together with the Association of Hungarian Architects – announced a design competition on the theme in 1958.<sup>6</sup>

*On the one hand the aim of the competition was to gain designs of modern weekend houses, that may serve as a basis for the production of prefabricated elements and houses, easy to assemble. On the other hand its aim was to supply the future builders with economical design packages representing high cultural level.* (MÉSZ, 1959: 1)

The sequence of the two types of designs – first prefabricated and second traditional – clearly expressed professional preferences. Practical considerations were emphasised also in the evaluation process, the ‘appearance of the building’ was listed only as the sixth criteria, following the requirement of practical layout, extension possibility or clear structure. The different construction types had a further impact: *‘We appreciated those buildings which expressed materiality. As a*

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<sup>5</sup> The Association of Hungarian Architects organised a voluntary architect-patron system, within which the experts helped the private builders and the municipal councils giving professional advice. The system worked actively between 1957-1958. (Bérczes et al., 1958).

<sup>6</sup> The competition was successful: 140 entries were submitted. (MÉSZ, 1959: 1).

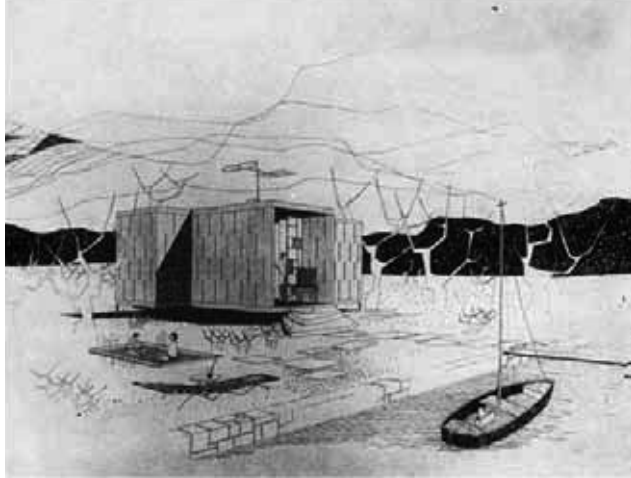


Figure 2. First prize winner entry at the weekend house competition 1958. Architects: Tamás Mandel & Tibor Tenke (Callmeyer, 1960: 25)

*result of the different building construction the duality of approaches are the most visible in this respect: romantic and unemotional constructive forms are running parallel.* (MÉSZ, 1959: 2) The entries using traditional materials were not only labelled 'romantic', but were accused with individuality, namely that their form was too special, and didn't fit into the row of existing cottages. The reviewer and the contributors to the discussion shared the opinion, that the proper handling of weekend house problem would be the use of prefabricated construction for houses settled in group-form. Though the committee issued two first prizes, one in the traditional and one in the prefabricated section, they appreciated the prefabricated solution most.

The price winning designs were presented in the leading architectural journal a year later (Callmeyer, 1960) and were made accessible for the wider public (potential builders) in the form of a brochure in 1962 (Bánszky & Egressy, 1962). The architectural journal published 10 projects, six of which with a flat roof, representing (in details even emphasising) the prefabricated line. The other



Figure 3. First prize winner entry at the weekend house competition 1958. Architect: Zoltán Farkasdy (Callmeyer, 1960: 24)

four entries stood for the traditional line. The ratio of 6:4 mirrored professional preferences, though the reviewer made it clear right in the introduction, that the majority of the entries used traditional materials. (Callmeyer, 1960: 23) The ‘traditional’ entries were very similar in form: all had a double pitch roof but without side walls, so they looked like a tent. The gables were made of stone, brick or wood, but the roofing material was reed thatch in each case. The article was accompanied with an extra drawing – a group of pitch roof cottages on the beach – an architectural dream of uniform appearance even in case of traditional weekend houses.

The 1962 brochure expressed a slightly changed interpretation of what a traditional house means at the Balaton region. It published 18 designs from the competition entries and divided them into three groups. The houses designed for prefabrication were listed within the second group, while the tent looking, reed thatch roof buildings were ranked into the third one as ‘proposals for special demands’. The most popular designs – *‘which are feasible with traditional*



*building methods, with usual building materials, accessible at any resort places and which can be realised with local building firms or masters with simple means, even with home-made methods*’ – were listed as first (Bánszky & Egressy, 1962: 17). On the basis of the six designs published under this label the expression ‘traditional building methods’ referred to the masonry, namely that the walls were made of brick or natural stone. Knowing the characteristics of the peasant houses in the region, the published summer cottages had only two elements – if at all – in common: the use of reed thatch and natural stone, both as a building material. As a conclusion, the 1958 architectural competition on weekend houses and its later publications show that the profession didn’t rely consciously on the findings of the survey made on vernacular architecture.

### **Public buildings**

The Balaton regional development project offered a long-awaited opportunity for the profession. It is not surprising that the architects concentrated not on the small summer cottages but on the large public developments.

By the end of 1957 the regional plan draft of Lake Balaton was completed. It grouped the settlements by their intended character, which defined their future development. The first group served mass tourism that is the weekend visitors; the second served hikers, while the third was devoted to international tourism. (Bérczes et al., 1958) However from the 20 investigated settlements only four belonged to the third group, all well-known resorts from the pre-war period. The architects focused on mass tourism, the main task for the upcoming years.

*We intend to concentrate the available financial forces on certain points, primary on the supply of weekend visitors, providing them with large and well equipped beaches, catering facilities, shelters and with camping places. We intend to solve the mass accommodation for the increasing number of tourists by different quality camp sites and motels. In the centres of the main resort places we intend to meet functional and aesthetic demands. We plan to design*

*our buildings with contemporary lightweight construction in accordance with their temporary and leisure nature.* (Bérczes et al., 1958: 140)

The realised architectural developments followed the objectives set out above: investments concentrated on beach facilities serving weekend tourism. Architects developed a construction system – simple shelters – adaptable to many different uses, such as buffet, dressing room, store, camp central building etc. The supporting structure consisted of reinforced concrete pillars and beams, which were prefabricated in a workshop during the winter. The basic elements of the structure were one type of pillar and one type of beam, which could be duplicated in various ways. The outer walls were made of rubble, and for the partitions brick or wooden panels were used. The combination of prefabrication and on-site manual work made possible that the completion of the facilities needed only a truck-crane and did not require specialists, but local masters. Simplicity inherent in the construction was interpreted by the designers as an architectural approach relevant to the Hungarian conditions. *‘Simplicity that is equally present in structure and architecture - we think so – means a big step towards the new practice which stands for a contemporary, unsophisticated, architectural approach against the fashionable modernity. It is an emerging practice also here in Hungary being in tune with home realities.’* (Polónyi & Klimov, 1959: 434)

The combination of prefabrication and on-site manual work featured not only the seasonal buildings, but it characterised a number of other buildings built around the lake – restaurants, buffets, shops etc. – during this period. The architects preferred reinforced concrete or steel for construction, but applied also traditional materials, mainly ashlar, sometimes as load bearing walls, sometimes only as cladding for their buildings. The natural stone – grey or red basalt – was a traditional building material on the northern shore of the lake, where it was mined from the mountains of the Balaton-Highlands. It never characterised the vernacular architecture of the plain southern shore, however it was applied all around the lake in the first period of the Balaton-development.



Figure 4. Dressing room on Keszthely beach. (IPARTERV photo archive, N° 3810)

The impressive presence of local natural stone in the architecture might be interpreted as a conscious strive to be in tune with the environment or as a reference to existing vernacular architecture. However in contemporary building reviews we hardly find such intentions. The only exception was a small wine pub, which was not only built from traditional materials, but the architect recognized the intention to fit.

*We applied fully local building materials, from reed thatch up to the dark grey basalt. The exceptions are the glass wall of the entrance and the hyperbolic paraboloid frame of the shading canvas above the terrace. The interior is bare brick, resembling the atmosphere of wine cellars. It has an empty roof showing the reed thatch. ... The building tries to become part of the surrounding green, landscaped, mountainous environment. (Callmeyer, 1958: 55)*

In all other cases the explanation of architectural form – if at all mentioned – referred to simplicity to be in tune with the natural environment.

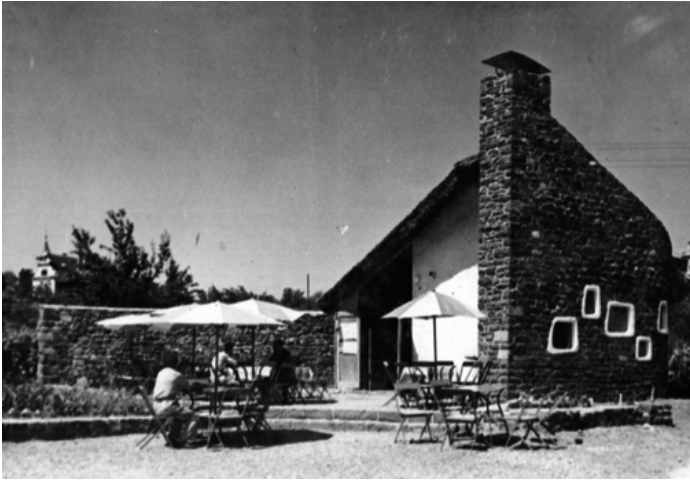


Figure 5. Wine pub in Badacsony. Architect: Ferenc Callmeyer. (IPARTERV photo archive, N° 3773)

### **Why vernacular architecture?**

We may conclude that the survey on vernacular architecture of the Balaton region – the first such action considering its project-related nature – didn't have any direct impact on contemporary architecture. However the situation is more complex. More than two decades later the architects who were active in the 1960s recalled this time when *'it was in the air to create a special Hungarian architecture.'* (Zalaváry, 1988: 46) An architect - who explained the longitudinal form of his restaurant that to be in tune with the landscape – evoked his intentions differently later.

*I felt that the simple forms and proportions created by light and shadow are those elements which make peasant architecture so attractive and worthy of follow-up. So I used these ancient and cheap means already at that time, and I know it for sure by now, that it can't be a bad job done with these means, resisting to time.* (Callmeyer, 1988: 30)

The architect of the seasonal shelters recalled the period also as that was affected by vernacular architecture. *'The composition and construction of the buildings were always very simple, applying commonly used materials in the spirit of vernacular architecture.'* (Polonyi, 1992: 28) Well, Polónyi stressed his intention to evoke 'the spirit of vernacular architecture' differently in Hungary and abroad. He presented the seasonal buildings at the last CIAM conference in Otterlo in 1959, and there he referred to the affect of the local spirit of peasant houses (Polonyi, 1961), but he never expressed the same in Hungary in the 1960s.

The interpretations changing in time can't be explained simply with cheated memory, because 'the spirit of vernacular architecture' was in the air indeed. In 1957 not only the Balaton development gained new impetus, but the monument preservation agency was also reorganised, with a particular emphasis on vernacular architecture. Within the Association of Hungarian Architects the two working groups – one on the Balaton and another on vernacular architecture – were formed parallel, too.<sup>7</sup> Practicing architects were involved not only into the 1957 survey on the Balaton-region, but they were active in several further surveys on vernacular architecture.<sup>8</sup> The Balaton development and the reinvention of vernacular architecture were connected also by persons. The 1957 survey on the Balaton-region had many antecedents, made mainly within the frame of the former organization of BIB, active especially in the 1930s. The last book on their findings was written and edited by Kálmán Tóth (Tóth, 1936) who played an active role also later. He was the representative of the Association of Hungarian Architects in the Managing Committee of Lake Balaton, (MÉSZ, 1957b) and he also took part in the design of some new buildings as an architect of the state design office IPARTERV.

Vernacular architecture as a plausible reference point for creating a nation-

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<sup>7</sup> The Balaton working group was formed on April 16. 1957, while the vernacular architecture group on April 23. (MÉSZ, 1957a and MÉSZ 1957b)

<sup>8</sup> According to the documents practicing architects participated in surveys in 1958, 1960 and in 1964. (MÉSZ, 1958 & MÉSZ, 1960 & IPARTERV, 1964)

bound architecture re-emerged in the theoretical debates around 1960, too. The posts focused on the relationship between modern architecture and tradition. The opinions were different, but if the contributors accepted the importance of tradition at all, they interpreted it as vernacular architecture. In terms of tourism vernacular heritage was also determining. When searching for the main features of Hungarian architecture as a tourist attraction the author (responsible for the Balaton project at the Ministry of Building Affairs) summarised them as follows.

*We think of the thousands of peasant houses with porch, or the hundreds of small medieval village churches, when searching for the specific examples of our architecture. ... Maybe they don't belong to the high architecture but they are still valuable, mature structures. ... It is not applied art, neither sculpture, but a clear and specific architecture rooted in the country.* (Kisléghi Nagy, 1961: 179)

Despite the fact, that the spirit of vernacular architecture was present in Hungary after 1957 it didn't have an overall effect on contemporary works. Even those architects, who used some elements of the vernacular (or regional) architecture in their design denied or didn't mention it. After the forced historicism of the so-called socialist realism intermezzo during the 1950s Hungarian architects returned to modern architecture with enthusiasm. They wanted to make up for what they have missed. 1960 onwards politics also changed the development concept of the lake for fully equipped large hotels settled along high density resort places. This new image of the Balaton – the Hungarian Riviera – was attractive for architects, too as a new technical challenge to build higher and larger complexes. They also adapted themselves to the changing situation, namely that politics – due to the lack of financial background for building summer cottages in group-form – accepted the growing private weekend house constructions. The Association of Hungarian Architects which sent volunteers to help the builders to increase the quality in 1957, by 1960 accepted the

proposal of the chief architect that only a given circle of architects should have a permission to design around the Balaton. (MÉSZ, 1960)

Leading architects dismissed the idea of the 'specific architecture rooted in the country', but it soon re-emerged in the romantic form of the 'tcharda', the Hungarian inn – a false tradition for consumption.

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