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NEW EUROPE

In the contemporary discussions on the construction of modern national identities in Central and Eastern Europe it is often emphasised that they came into being as a result of the glorification of the past or the traditionalism of folk culture, viewed in a romantic way as a residuum of national traditions. Hence they were retrospective by nature and expressed a fundamental contradiction between national rebirth and the values of modernity. Thus, when another attempt was made after 1988 to modernise the region, it was considered impossible for its people to elaborate their own strategies for reform, so a remedy to the

problems should be to embrace the patterns copied from the Western countries.

In the context of such claims studies on the regional history of modernisation acquire a new significance as they enable scholars to question the above theses. The period when Central and Eastern Europe recovered its subjectivity is of particular interest – for the first time since the end of the 18th century, let us add, i.e. since the time when the era of modernity is widely believed to have begun. The caesura is the end of World War I and the appearance of new states in the region, the majority of which were formed for the

first time in the history of the Old Continent: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Estonia and Finland, and those which had recently acquired new borders: Poland, Lithuania and Hungary. Also Romania may be included in the group as it enlarged its territory at the time, but it should be emphasised that it had already regained its political independence in the 1860s.

To the 'New Europe', to use a term coined by Thomas Masaryk, the emergence of state structures brought hitherto unknown opportunities of building modern identities in the states in the region. Modernisation involved both a creation of the foundations of independent political existence and economic reforms and cultural transformations. The expected progress of civilisation was not only to confirm the right of the new states to exist but also to occupy a prominent position in Europe. Any dialogue with Western countries was of considerable importance and, instead of mindlessly copying the patterns of modernity from them, there were endeavours to ela-



Zlín, Nad Ovčirnou residential district, 1932

Brno, Tugendhat Villa, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1929-1930

borate original concepts for reforms, based on both democratic nationalism and an attempt to reconcile modernity with the traditional values, which the different national cultures regarded as worth preserving. It was believed that only such particularistic modernisation programmes could produce the expected results rather than further marginalisation resulting from accepting external models which were inadequate or contrary to the local interest. The struggle with the consequences of the recent backwardness along with the readiness to quickly acquire the position in the centre of modernity made it necessary to seek original, hitherto and elsewhere unknown solutions, using contemporary art, architecture and design to this end. These shaped public and private space, educating 'a new human' and supplying the patterns of 'modern life'. Modernisation entailed the necessity to abandon utopian thinking and to replace it with a pragmatic attempt to implement modernity.

The implemented modernisation plans, which happened in the 'Future Perfect tense', resulted in changes in many spheres of life, but their most conspicuous example was architecture. The interwar period was the time of dramatic development of towns and cities, which became symbols of progress and the peak development of 'new states'. Czechoslovakia was the country which could boast of exceptional achievements as functionalist architecture enjoyed a privileged position there, all the more so since it was supported by architects, theoreticians and



private and public patronage. One of the prominent exponents of international avant-garde, Theo van Doesburg believed that Czechoslovakia was a model 'young nation', which had not had a fully developed culture of its own and hence promptly embraced the latest trends since it had everything to win, and not much to lose. The symbols for the Czech transformation became the building developments in two cities, Hradec Králové and Brno. In the former, called 'the Salon of the Republic', new districts were consistently built in the Round Cubist style at the beginning of the 1920s, followed by high class Functionalist buildings erected in the 1930s, according to the urban plans by Josef Gočár, including the seat of the state railways management (1929-1932) or the building of the district authorities (1932-1936). In Brno, which had risen to the position of an important economic and cultural centre in the middle of the country, many spectacular Modernist public edifices, houses or cafés were built, including the Tugendhat villa (1928-1930) designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,

which is listed in any history of architecture handbook. Whole complexes of Modernist architecture are noteworthy, including the model Functionalist housing estate (1928, designed by Bohuslav Fuchs *et al.*) or the Fair and Exhibition Centre (Josef Kalous, Jaroslav Valenta *et al.*) constructed for the Exhibition of Contemporary Culture in 1928.

Modernist architecture played an important part in the identity creation of new states on the Baltic sea, primarily in Estonia. The public buildings and private villas in Tallin or the functionalist buildings in the seaside resort of Parnava, were identified with the style of the liberal and pro-independence elite. After it had lost Vilnius, Lithuania started the building of Kaunas as 'the temporary capital of the country', as the Lithuanian constitution called it. Modernist forms were used to build public edifices or in the symbol of the Lithuanian national rebirth, the Resurrection church (after 1928, designed by Karolis Reisonas). The capital of Latvia, Riga, boasted the Modernist district of Teika.



Kaunas, Church of Christ's Resurrection, designed by Karolis Reisonas, after 1928

Below: Budapest, Újlipótváros residential district, 1933-1943



A lot of attention was given to the redevelopment of capitals, as it could raise the prestige of the new states. In Yugoslavia Belgrade developed dynamically, and the monumental palace of the State Printing House (1933, 1937-1940, designed by Dragiš Brašovan) and 'Albania' Palace (1938-1940, Branko Bon, Milan Grakalić and Miladin Prljević) still dominate over the city skyline. In Budapest the greatest Modernist initiative was the construction of the luxury housing estate Újlipótváros on the Pest bank of the Danube in the vicinity of St Margaret's Island, carried out in the years 1933-1943. The numerous constructions in Prague included the exemplary Modernist housing estate Baba (since 1929, designed by Pavel Janák *et al.*) and the suburban district of Barrandov, where a film city with modern studios, actors' and producers' villas and a famous café (designed by Max Urban *et al.*) was built since 1927. The image of Warsaw also changed, with the construction of Modernist districts in Żoliborz, Sadyba, Saska Kępa. The high class complex of the buildings of the Józef Piłsudski Central Institute of Physical Education (1928-1930, designed by Edgar Norwerth) was also fortunate to survive the war calamity. It is noteworthy that in recent years it has frequently been pointed out that besides Warsaw many high class Modernist constructions were erected also in the Silesia province, spanning from the town of Wisła to Katowice. The interwar architecture in many cities, even so well-known as Krakow or Lvov, stills remains to be similarly appreciated.

Another achievement was the development of provincial regions: a test of the ability of the new states to progress. In Czechoslovakia major investments were made in the poorest province in the country, i.e. Transcarpathian Ruthenia, where new infrastructure was provided and the main cities, including the administrative centre of Uzhhorod, expanded. In Poland a similar process took place in the Central Industrial District, and a monument to progress was the building of a new town of Stalowa Wola. Transformation took place also in Besarabia, a former province of the Russian Empire and part of historical Moldavia, which had recently been incorporated in Romania, and was particularly marked in the capital Chişinău and on the Black Sea coast. To the Romanians, however, the jewel in the crown was the development of Bucharest, whose population rose from 350,000 to nearly a million in twenty years, and due to the scale and quality of the Modernist architecture erected at the time the city could claim to be one of the most important centres of Modernist architecture in Europe.

Two stories of modernisation visibly stand out from among a plethora of examples: they illustrate great ambitions and equally great successes which interwar modernity made possible. In Poland an example of the realisation of hopes for modernisation was the modern port and city of Gdynia. In the Second Republic of Poland it was a proof of the limitless possibilities of the reborn country, as it implemented daring plans for

industrialisation and enabled the country to have open contacts with the whole world via the sea. A monument of modernity was first and foremost Gdynia's architecture, but it also involved various concepts focusing on the city and port, which postulated the promotion of modernist lifestyles and free time activities, the building of wealthy 'Sea Poland' and the plans to acquire colonies overseas. In Czechoslovakia an exceptional programme for the extensive construction of a modernist universe was made by the Bata company based in Zlín, which specialised in mass production of shoes. The firm expanded beyond the country, which enabled it to introduce a unique social scheme for employees: from the construction of houses, through the supply of food and health care up to common entertainment – a programme which was ostensibly a realisation of the hopes for the ideal society of the future.

In the interwar period there was the first attempt to establish modern identity for Central and Eastern Europe and to find for her a place among the more developed countries which formed the centre of the civilised world. Although the interwar period remained an 'unfinished project', it formed the foundation for the modern subjectivity of both the whole region and each of the 'new states'. It made it possible to begin to verify the thesis of their age-long, innate backwardness and the semi-peripheral status within the Old Continent. The interwar period, another 'golden age' of modernity and belief in a better future based on technological progress and new patterns of

culture, created favourable conditions to undertake the transformation. It was a challenge for the 'new states' to avoid superficial modernisation, based on copying patterns which did not have much in common with the local realities and which caused the simulacrum effect, i.e. emulation of a non-existent original of modernity, and not actual transformation. It was also attempted to avoid the so-called 'island modernisation', i.e. reforms of selected aspects of economic or cultural life, which *de facto* confirmed the semi-peripheral status and strengthened the small elites that took advantage of the benefits of modernisation. Island modernisation was useful also to the opponents of modernisation, who were interested to preserve the status quo at a possibly large scale, and to international competitors, who wanted to retain the semi-colonial status of 'New Europe'. Having embraced modernity and its ideals, its proponents believed that a proper mechanism of transformation should be formed, one which would preclude further marginalisation of the region but would make it possible for the countries to realise their own ambitions. Modernisation was then the only answer to the question of the future of the region.

New states offered an opportunity to implement modernisation plans devised by the respective nations and societies, which were striving to change their peripheral status. Without undue idealisation of the interwar realities, it is impossible to underestimate evident achievements of many of the enterprises embarked on in the years 1918–1939. Central and Eastern European countries conceived original modernisation projects whose equivalents are not to be found in the key centres of interwar modernity. Their quality consists in their 'peripheral' location, which allows us to discover hitherto unknown modernisation strategies that resulted from various aspirations, from the ability to synthesise many sources of knowledge or the necessity to experiment. It is noteworthy, too, that culture was considered of paramount importance in the process of transformation, and artists and architects were given unprecedented opportunities to create experimental works, in the belief that their activities would shape the new reality under the conditions of recovered freedom.

Translated by Anna Mirośławska-Olszewska

Warsaw, Central Institute for Physical Education, designed by Edgar Norweth, 1928. On the photograph: ceremony of naming the Institute after Józef Piłsudski, 21 March 1938

