

The Architectural Beauty of Ideological Changing⁽¹⁾

Interview with Erick van Egeraat

The Dutch architect, Erick van Egeraat's career started together with his three colleagues in a Rotterdam office called "Mecanoo" at the beginning of the eighties. Their office was engaged mainly in apartment building and housing estate design. Their creative pragmatism made them highly popular among the clientele of public as well as private housing within a short period of time. They successfully integrated the sense of Modernism into the lifestyle and taste of Dutch people of the eighties. Egeraat left Mecanoo at the beginning of the nineties and since then, he has been continuously given assignments for planning buildings with various functions in different countries of the world. In Hungary, his first work was the office building of the ING Group in Andrásy út. Presently, he is working for the same client on the renovation of the former MÉMOSZ (Trade Union) Building. His works reflect his permanent commitment towards "a new modernism". According to Egeraat himself, the essence of Modernism is the continuous revival, and this point reveals the difference between the "modern" renovation of a modern building and one built in "historical style"...

arc: The MÉMOSZ Building has an eminent importance for Hungarian architects, since this is one of the few modernist buildings built after the Second World War but the last one before the period of the Socialist Realism. But this does not necessarily mean anything for an outsider, does it? What are the most important values of this building for you?

Erick van Egeraat: Of course I know that the building was constructed in the very last moment, when it was still possible to build relatively free of the communist regime's political constraints. I felt it quite important to keep this fact in mind when I first saw the house and heard about the circumstances of its construction. A feeling emerged in me that the architects wanted to create something very important in the last hours of the living Modernism. Talking to György Szrógh it became clear to me that feeling the noose tightening around his neck, he as a young architect acted in the very last moment and created the house, which however – in my opinion, considering its nature – would have had much more to do with the Stalinist architecture. Can you imagine this? If we bear this in mind, the building is even more interesting. I also find its location unique: beside a park, along the

frontier between nineteenth and twentieth century Budapest, on one of the most beautiful points of the town, where the landscape – nature – "turns into" a city. Architects responded to this reality with a building of a very clear structure – in line with the sense of Modernism. One of its most valuable elements was to originally entirely open ground floor. My plan was to reopen it, but the client was not enthusiastic about this idea. Evaluating it from the point of its new function, and now I mean first of all the office wing of the building, this is a clear and convincing edifice radiating grandiosity.

arc: At this point I must ask the question: What will happen to the other annex of the building? ING surely had a vision concerning the congress annex when they decided to buy the building.

Egeraat: I must tell you, that from an architectural point of view I don't find the auditorium of the congress annex perfect. From the zoning point it is OK, but the internal space is, however, not well proportioned: the ceiling lowers towards the stage which reduces the apparent size of the space there. It is the theatre that should have appeared as small as possible, in order to create intimacy, and what happens in the front should be "magnified". If it is just the other way round, it will create a grotesque effect – not only from the point of the communist regime but also from the point of dramatic effects. When they bought the building, ING of course were fully aware of the shortcomings of the building as well as the fact that it will be not easy to find a new function for the large auditorium, that is to find a function which is able to preserve a hosting from so important from the aspect of cityscape. We envisaged the location of a Multimedia Centrum. Perhaps a smaller auditorium would do as well.

arc: Will this new function also mean that this part of the building – vis-à-vis the offices – will be open to the wider public?

Egeraat: Exactly. It would be wonderful, if for example a good book shop were placed in the building. This Multimedia Centrum, where new and traditional forms can equally flourish beside each other, shows that culture has an eminent importance in Hungary. We are lucky in this part of the world, not everyone, but this is true if we compare ourselves to the other two-thirds of the world. A



Centrum where anyone could reach any corner of the world could be built here.

arc: Do you think that these ideas can be realised in the complex?

Egeraat: I hope so, we are certainly working very hard on it. Naturally, it is a very complicated project. It will require a lot of money and we must overcome a lot of difficulties. ING takes the issue seriously. At the same time, we must not overlook the fact that this is a profit oriented company, and what they do is not done as art pour l'art. But I think we don't do anything condemnable by taking this opportunity. If such a work is run in a proper way and aims at high quality, I support the idea. I believe, this is an ambition which the protectors of historic buildings can agree with. The question concerns the approach to our culture. Discussions with György Szrógh were especially interesting. He stressed two things. Firstly, he understands Modernism as a phase of development, as one given moment in the history of architecture and he keeps a close watch on the changes of times. He feels it is very important to move ahead, together with history, but not to lose our timeliness. Why it is interesting to assume this kind of task is to see how much is timeless in a building – which is in reality an object of human usage – whose existence is justified by its ability to adapt its space for ways of use changing during the passing time able to host totally different functions without deteriorating the architectural concept.

The other thing what he highlighted was that when he designed the building, he endeavoured to incorporate the maximum level of technology of that time, and he believes that with the present possibilities he would have been able to create a far better building. Only one example: for the sake of flexibility, the space division of the building was originally planned in the frame of a system of modules. But they did not have enough money to use removable partition walls, so traditional brick structures were built. As a consequence, the house did not become more flexible than its nineteenth century predecessors. Now, using flexible partition walls, we will realise the original concept of the designers.

arc: As far as I see, you were on the same wavelength with György Szrógh, weren't you?

Egeraat: Szrógh made a deep impression on me with his free way of thinking not accepting boundaries. I knew the building first. Before our meeting I knew also that he designed the building together with four other architects. I learnt pieces of information on the history of the building, the architect, and perhaps I gained a deeper knowledge of Hungary in the past eight years, however I continuously gain new experiences day by day. And what is more, I was given the chance to become acquainted with such a personality, who is more than eighty years old, but is able to approach new things and changes with total openness. He doesn't consider the building as a closed entity, as a remnant of the past that must exist as it was designed in 1948 and as they were able to construct it with certain luck in spite of the changing times. He recognised that the fact that he was able to do almost what he wanted to do was the result of the Party's acceptance. At the same time he also realised that he was unable to do other important things. While

we were talking about our works, I realised that we have similar ways of thinking: in the society, in the culture where you work, you are one of those few who have the chance of forming this culture in a visible way. Additionally, he told that he wasn't afraid of changes thus he didn't need to stick to the past. He is able to love life because he accepts it as it is, and through this, the excavation of opportunities becomes determinant, not the terror.

If I remember correctly, we met four times. Twice in his flat and twice elsewhere. "Plezierig mens" Dutchman says. He is a phenomenon.

For Szegedy, this renovation is the test of the building's capability of renewal, and he looks forward to it. In this sense, this assignment is a great joy for me. This kind of building is far more appropriate for renewal – even for a continuous renewal – than any other in Andrássy út or any historic building from the previous centuries.

arc: What do you mean by that?

Egerat: Modernism is not just one style among others. Modernism differs from Gothic art, the Renaissance or the Baroque. Continuous renewal belongs to its very nature. That means, in case of the MÉMOSZ Building problems of architecture are totally different. Our basic concern is to explore what is topical today, what happens in the present and how it can be shown through the reconstruction. And this – in itself – can be the aim of the renovation. These are the architecturally important details: massive pillars, the frame structure, slabs and the mass composition – these together challenge the architect to fill them with new contents. In the case of the ING Centre in Andrássy út, the basic architectural problem was, how to create up-to-date entities whilst precisely restore nineteenth century details of the building, and how to amalgamate almost imperceptibly the two solutions in order to create a harmonious whole, while both the new and the old preserves its own identity. In case of the MÉMOSZ Building, the main problem is, how to evoke the continuous renewal while keeping the contour and magnificence of the building. It can not be said of this building that it has fine details. There are interesting things in it, but they don't represent the highest quality.

arc: So you think that the building's location within the city and its main technical elements are the most important values of the building. However, its cultural historical importance is pre-determined by ideological and social-political contents that created and used the building.

Egerat: At the beginning of the design process there were serious debates on question like: How far should this building represent its own history, a symbol of the proletarian dictatorship being the ex-Centre of the contaminated Trade Union. I was totally flabbergasted hearing this requirement of the Authority of Historic Monument Protection. The history of the building is well documented. Everything can be told about it in books and through exhibitions or films. There are many state-of-the-art tools by which people are able to become acquainted with the important events of history.

arc: You mean, the building itself is not needed to fulfil this requirement...

Egerat: I think something more. A building must not be used for satisfying such needs. The very idea is absurd. Even historic buildings listed as World Heritage don't satisfy such requirements. There are the pyramids for example. They don't satisfy such requirements, in spite of the fact that in principle they haven't got a new function. Notwithstanding, none of them remained untouched: thousands of tourists travel there, make photographs and paw them. They became a part of modern life. Their original state could have been preserved only in case they were used further as sepulchral structures. But pyramids are mere scenic spots today. Similarly, the antique churches were attended by only the pick of the bunch. Today, these are open to tourists. Millions visit the pyramids and the Saint Peter's Cathedral daily. Two thousand hundred people daily awe frescos of the Sistine Chapel. This is not a chapel anymore. And it doesn't matter. This is life today, and such things make life interesting. Therefore it is ridiculous to declare the ideology – that belonged to a certain building in the past – a building belonging closer to the ordinary life of everyday people than the pyramids and ancient churches for the contemporaries – suddenly untouchable. The debate was shortly closed: we simply refused accept this requirement.

arc: It is not only that the tools of ideology – red carpets, worker portrayals – have lost their importance, but as far as I know, you want to throw them out.

Egerat: This is true. But I think the banality of trade union art and the frescos of the Sistine Chapel can't be compared to each other. I think, even stricter criticism is reasonable. And I also believe that if we succeed in realising the Media Centrum, a very interesting bridge will rise connecting the townscape values of the building worth for preservation and today's reality.

arc: So you think, what does not represent a value in itself "only" through its meaning can be preserved

independently of the building or even it is enough to preserve it in documented form only.

Egerat: Yes, and the building can be simply used. It doesn't mean the denial of the past. We deny only the idea of creating a museum of a building. Think it over: every culture has the right to express an opinion of its preceding culture, and every culture does this. I live in this era, and I form opinion on the previous culture, and my grandfather did the same. If we change the function of a building transforming it into a museum, by this we make a serious decision. In case of a modernist building like MÉMOSZ Building, where the primary point of planning was usage only, I can't even imagine this.

Going back to the issue of ideology: generally speaking, I don't believe that a building may bear any ideology. Think it over! On one of my lectures, I compared Nuremberg Olympic Stadium to Los Angeles Stadium. In Nuremberg, the Nazi Germany organised its Olympic Games and in Los Angeles, the "Friendship Games" were held. If you have a look at the used architectural clichés, you'll find them quite similar to each other. Looking at the buildings of the Olympics, you can't tell which organiser regime was the democratic and which was the Nazi one. Only people like to interpret architecture. Certain details may have ideological contents. An illustration or a film can be ideological. Literature is almost pure ideology. It is interesting that architecture is almost never. There are buildings in Cyprus for example, which served different ideologies or theological ideas through the past centuries.

arc: We also have such buildings in a great number...

Egerat: It is quite natural in the world. It shows that a building may at most represent certain ideologies but can never become the bearer of an ideology. When the function tied to an ideology ceases, the ideological content also vanishes.

arc: Do you think that the new functions of the building designed by you can be also filled with ideological contents?

Egerat: Let us put it this way: A high level of freedom is embodied in the whole realm of the Internet, which overlooks physical and cultural frontiers – at least in the area of the exchange of thoughts and goods. Imagine we'll be able to achieve this through the creation of the Multimedia Centrum that we planned... This building was the symbol of the proletarian dictatorship at one moment and becomes the symbol of the individual freedom in the other, which are two totally contradictory entities. And this is interesting in it.

arc: And how does the official protectors of national monuments interpret the issue?

Egerat: Their task is not to monitor the functional changes. Instead, their problem is how to preserve the building as the representative of a period of the history. It's no wonder that their feelings in connection with the building are absolutely different than mine. This is why I will never agree with such authorities, neither in the Netherlands or in England nor in any other countries. Of course, we must consider each other's view. My mission as an architect is – while I must recognise the values of the past, my own cultural background, the country where I live and the town where I have my home – is trying to work up the events of our days, in the present. Now I am forty, and hope to be eighty as well. What I can do now – is to add something extra to life. I can not be asked to do something that had already been done by my grandfather. This would betray my existence. Consequently it is totally logical that I try to create a value that belongs to this century, this year and this day. Those who are working for the Authority of Historic Monuments, will inevitably believe that it is important to preserve the memories of the cultural past. These are two contradictory approaches that are not necessarily excluding each other. Exclusiveness never creates anything interesting. I am convinced that the beauty of life resides in the coexistence of extremities. I feel it very important to consider all that is seen as significant by the protectors of historic monuments. But at the same time I believe that after doing this we don't have to rebuild or restore everything what is valuable, rather we should preserve its essence.

In my view, Andrássy út is a perfect restoration of a historic monument where – at the same time – the present also has a role. This was why I liked this work so much.

arc: Numerous Hungarian architects believe that the restoration of the building at Andrássy út was a kind of break-through. I mean, the strict restrictions of the Authority seemed to become relaxed.

Egerat: If the starting point is that we must restore perfectly everything, it would inevitably mean that we judge everything new worthless. At the same time, we must see that a causeless innovation – only for the sake of Modernism and alternativism – is just as inappropriate as the slavish restoration. What is important – originally, but it is worthless in itself. New flavours have sense only if we have the opportunity to taste old flavours as well.

arc: Nowadays, architects' aptitude towards extremities seems to decrease.



Egera: Yes, I see things in a similar way. This is the same in England, where the gulf between restorers who want to imitate correctly every old building and high-tech technocrats is huge. They belong to two different realms. However, the power of existence resides in the interaction between different cultures. Such renovations offer excellent opportunities for the observation of extremities.



Az átalakítási munkák kezdetén (2000 márciusa)
At the beginning of the renovation building

arc: Let us revert to the topic of the MÉMOSZ Building. As far as I know, during planning the elevation on the Dúza György út side, you were forced to make serious compromises with the Authority of Historic Monuments. Are you satisfied with the outcome?

Egera: After all, yes. Our plan was a simple solution: to cover surfaces between slabs wholly by glass. In this case, slabs, columns, the frame and the corbelled part would have got a special emphasis. We felt, that the sense of Modernism could have continued by strengthening the contrast between solidity and transparency to the utmost limits. It might sound unbelievable, but Szógh – looking at our design – literally said that what we had done was the possibly best solution. He really liked it! He, of course, added – and I totally agreed with him – that we had to pay close attention to the smallest details. Perhaps we designed something similar to what he would have planned at the time if conditions had allowed it then. But the representatives of the Authority – at least those whom we met – did not accept the idea of transforming the original elevation. Glass surfaces had to be divided into windows, and even windows had to be divided by mullions. “We don’t make a mistake if everything remains the same as previously.” This was their absurd motto. I can accept this approach in case of a statue or a small architectural detail. But in case of an industrially manufactured system of windows that must comply with perfectly new requirements, this is not logical at all. But what is positive: new elevation frames will be built showing that we are living in another historical time.

arc: Will there be spectacular changes regarding structures, materials or colours?

Egera: No there won’t. Where it is feasible, we keep the original parts. Where we must change something, we’ll use the same materials, or similar ones but of better quality, but anyway, we’ll use materials of similar appearance. You’ll see when it will be ready. It will become the pride of the district and the whole town. In this case, my role is minor, more modest and less spectacular than it was in the case of the Andrásffy út renovations. Here is no place for the usage of free forms I designed in the previous case. Or rather: the building’s character is not going to be manifested in its appearance, but in the opportunity of permanent renewal. I believe, this is the most important feature of this work. •

Egera: – A tervezés kezdetén komoly vita folyt arról, hogy mennyiben kell az épület történetének érvényesülnie – köztudott, hogy a proletárdiktatúra szimbóluma, a kommunista rezsim alatt működő szakszervezet székháza volt. A műemlékvédelem ezirányú igényével szemben a legteljesebb mértékben értetlenül álltam. Az épület története dokumentálva van. Kiállításokon, könyvekben mindent el lehet róla mondani, filmet lehet róla készíteni. Számtalan korszerű eszköz áll rendelkezésre, hogy az emberek megismerjék a történelem fontos eseményeit.

arc: – Ehhez tehát nincsen szükség magára az épületre.

Egera: – Még tovább megyek. Az épületet egyáltalán nem szabad ilyesmire használni. Van ebben a gondolatban valami abszurd. Ilyesmit még a Világörökséghez tartozó műemlékekkel sem tesznek. Például a piramisokkal sem, annak ellenére, hogy azok elvileg nem kaptak új funkciót. Mégsem maradtak érintetlenül, még azok sem: turisták ezrei látogatják, fotózzák, tapogatják őket. A modern élet részeivé váltak. Eredeti állapotban csak akkor maradtak volna meg, ha továbbra is sírkamráként szolgáltának. Ma azonban pusztá látványosságok. Nem különben az ókori templomok, amelyek belsejébe valaha csak az arra kiválasztottak léphettek be. Ma ezek is nyitva állnak a turisták előtt. A piramisokat és a Szent Péter-bazilikát naponta milliók látogatják. A Sixtus-kápolnában naponta kétszáz ezer ember társaságában bámulhatod a mennyezetfreskót. Kápolnároli tehát már szó sincsen. Ez nem baj. Ez ma az élet, és ettől érdekes. Nevetséges tehát, hogy egy olyan épület esetében, ami a mindennapi élethez, a közönségeshez sokkal közelebb áll, az ideológiát egyszerre csak valami érinthetetlen ilyennek nyilvánítjuk. A vitát tehát igen gyorsan rövidre zártuk: egyszerűen nem voltunk hajlandók belemenni.

arc: – Itt azonban nem csak arról van szó, hogy az ideológia kellek: a vörös szőnyegek, a munkásábrázolások elvesztették eredeti jelentőségüket, de ha jól tudom, el is akarják őket távolítani.

Egera: – Valóban így van. De azt hiszem, hogy a szakszervezeti művészet banalitása és a Sixtus-kápolna freskója között nem igazán lehet párhuzamot vonni. Ebben a vonatkozásban, úgy gondolom, akár sokkal keményebb kritikának is helye van. És azt is hozzátehetem, hogy amennyiben sikerül a médiacentrumot megvalósítani, akkor szintem egy igen értékes idő-híd jön létre az épület megőrzése méltó városépítészeti és építészeti értékei és korunk valósága között.

arc: – Tehát úgy gondolod, hogy ami önmagában nem, „csak” jelentése révén képviseli értékét, azt meg lehet őrizni az épülettel függetlenül, is, sőt, a maga tárgyi valósága helyett akár elegendő csupán dokumentálni?

Egera: – Igen, az épületet pedig egyszerűen csak le-



Szentiványi Lajos festménye a tanácssteremben
Painting by Lajos Szentiványi in the Congress Hall
OMHt archivum



MSZMP XII.Kongresszus a Kongresszusi teremben
XIIth Congress of The Communist Party in the Congress Hall