

ON THE ARCHITECTURAL ORIGIN OF THE CONTEMPORARY ECO-REGIONALIST ARCHITECTURE IN SZEKLER LAND

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Abstract: *In 2019, the Research Institute of Art Theory and Methodology of the Hungarian Academy of Arts launched architectural research in Szekler Land. The aim of the project was to explore the context in which the new contemporary architectural trends, independent of the developments in Hungary but inseparable from the architectural and natural features of the local cultural landscape, emerged in Szekler Land in the first half of the 2000s. The research sought to explore the architectural-sociological background of the phenomenon and arrived at the conclusion that barns played a key role in the eco-regionalist shift in the contemporary architecture of Szekler Land. The study discusses the impact exerted by barns over time, while stating it as a thesis that barns became the catalysts in contemporary architectural aspirations because their details and solutions overlap with currently popular architectural solutions. Beyond barns being a source of inspiration regarding architectural forming, they have an indisputable urbanistic significance too: their position and scale provide examples of how new residential buildings, which are bigger than former peasant houses and which accommodate modern functions, can be placed in the rural tissue of villages. This means that barns have become valuable not only as an adoptable type and as an urbanistic organizational element but have also created an integral connection between the past traditions of form and popular trends in contemporary architecture.*

Keywords: *contemporary architecture, Szekler Land, Transylvania, eco-regionalism, barn*

1. INTRODUCTION.

A new chapter began in the history of European architectural regionalisms in 2004, when the belfry designed by Zsolt Tövissi for the garden of the old folks' home in Gyergyószentmiklós was unveiled. As it later turned out, the small edifice became the starting piece of eco-regionalist architecture in Szekler Land, demonstrating how architecture integrating local characteristics can be created in such a way that it remains independent of the impact of its Hungarian counterpart. Indeed, the emergence of eco-regionalism in Szekler Land is underpinned by extremely complex factors of architectural- and economic sociology: houses built in this vein in the past twenty years can equally be derived from the understanding and use of the cultural landscape as well as from their direct antecedents, the barns. This presentation and study attempt to prove that barns, which are the backbone of the local architectural heritage, were built based on methods of form- and detail creation that correspond to the prevailing and fashionable solutions applied in contemporary architecture.

The process of contemporary Transylvanian architecture finding its own voice was inseparable from efforts aimed at finding answers to phenomena such as the voluntary destruction of the architectural integrity of villages, the excessive one-upmanship in architecture, and the uncontrollable overabundance of motifs. It seemed to be an obvious answer to examine types, or to see if there are any types at all and, if there are not, can they be created? Looking for a type was carried out not with the intention to standardize but to find a kind of substitute for the model which those who built houses in the villages from the early nineties so spectacularly turned away from for various reasons, including the loss of their economic sociological foundation. A new model was elaborated thanks to the Székely Ház [Szekler House] competition, while the rediscovery of barns led to the revival of an old model.

In the meantime – especially in Szekler Land – contemporary and traditional architecture created and has been creating its new types and archetypes, varying in their ornamentation and scale but adopting the same constructional methods. Examples of this include Arnold Macalik’s infotowers and barns. A new and an old type, given a similar character by the logic of their building construction and by the permanence of their function: why would builders of either old or new have constructed markedly different buildings in a place with the same characteristics and the same function, and built from the same materials, with the same tools and with the same expertise?

Besides houses, the most beautiful examples of old archetypes are barns, whose analysis is inadmissible to understand the following: barns represent a connection between traditions and contemporary architecture not only in regard to building craftsmanship and technology but also in an aesthetic sense.

2. BARNs IN THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE.

The architecture and local significance of barns have been obvious to local architects for already a decade. These huge barns, which are basically a secondary defining element in the appearance of villages, had more than an economic function since they also regulated the microclimate of the rural home, referred to as ‘life’ around there, by separating the settlements from the lands like walls. “A barn is a genuinely ‘large-scale building’,” writes Zsolt Várday in a manuscript edited by Győző Esztány, “in the literal and figurative sense of the word too. It was in the barn that excess was allowed to manifest, which is rarely seen in folk culture: unlike residential houses (whose closely defined rules of construction allowed little room for variation), barns were adapted to local features more readily, and on larger farming estates even two barns were built sometimes. Thanks to their size, they substantially shaped the microclimate of the rural homes. The architectural character of barns derives from their function; carefully built old barns demonstrate the craftsmanship that emanates from everything that was made by people in the past (the fear of being scorned playing no small part in this). The barn was also a status symbol and could be seen by everyone in the village when people gathered together on the landlord’s farm for collective work (kaláka); its representational function was close to that of the so-called tidy room (by which the landlady’s diligence was judged) with the decoration of its gatepost rivalling the richly carved Szekler gates.” [1]

3. ELEMENTS OF AN ARCHETYPE.

The barn's layout, condensed into an archetype – under which I mean the unity of form and function, mutually having melded together and presupposing each other –, is an almost symmetrical, stereometric mass. Its central axis-governed balance is only broken by the eaves, behind which they lay the aftercrop to dry out before it was stored inside.

3.1. *Complex spatial structure.*

Defying the simplicity of its exterior, the barn's interior is multipartite: the highest, middle section was used for thrashing. Adjacent to this on one side were the stables, the top part of which served as storage for hay, while opposite it was another space, also suitable for storing hay. The barn's composition – one single space articulated by galleries as well as levels and semi-levels – converges at the entrance, creating a complex spatial experience, which one would not anticipate based on the exterior. While the barn separated 'life' from the lands behind it, when both its gates were open, it also connected the two spheres, with even carts stacked high being able to pass through it. Indeed, with both of its gates open the barn itself was the gate, lending it a metaphoric function and enriching space with a new sensation, which, viewed from the horizon of the present, lends itself to poetic interpretations. What came into being is a transitory, covered open space connecting two worlds within itself: it joins two types of cosmoses – that of the lands and that of the courtyard – to its own interior, which assumes a kind of temporariness between it being external and internal. The courtyard enclosed by the fence and the buildings can be seen as a pseudo-architectural and semi-urban space defined by spatial division lines, whereas the lands, defined by crops, farming methods and plough lines, are a hodological space, part of the landscape yet also separate from the 'natural'. Being a transition, the barn connects closed with open, delineated with infinite, measurable with perceptible and world from 'life'. While allowing a peek into a church-like space, the barn gates introduced yet another difference from the tiny openings of the facade in that, when opened, they divided the originally monumental mass into two smaller structures.

3.2. *Transparency provided by structure.*

The barn is structurally a single-storey building with a raised interior height, in which the walls – commonly log walls but in richer places brick walls – extend up to the eaves and are generally topped with a queen post truss. Regardless of the material used, the structure is composed of two elements: the 'crust-wall' and the 'cap', which is supported by it. Whether the building is constructed from timber or brick, the question of airing had to be solved where the crops were stored: this was provided structurally, by the gaps of the log wall, while in the case of brick walls it was solved by decorative perforation and holes. The gable end was similar in either case: airing was provided by the structural gaps in-between the board covering. The boards were never placed closely together so that they could breathe, as otherwise the planks and battens would have swollen in the humid air and separated from the base structure. They formed something like a 'robe' assigned the function to close off the hayloft but not to be a covering that evokes the geometry of the truss behind it.

3.3. Junctions defined by geometry.

Moreover, the junctions in barns were realized not by using materials or mediating structures but by exploiting geometry. For example, the gable end's vertical boarding, which covered the attic area, was placed in front of the structural log wall so that in the event of driving rain the water coming from the boards' surface would not run onto the structure but would drip off the ends of the boards. When they used shingles, drastica covering, or longer planks for roof covering, they allowed these to extend past the ridge of the roof by six or seven centimeters on the side from where the main wind blew, mostly on the north, so that the edge of the roof would not get soaked. Wherever openings had to be left in the walls, the ends of the logs were closed off with a column, even when there was no structural need for it, since they wanted to frame the emptiness left in the surface.

3.4 A shell for adaptive reconstruction.

The above resulted in a composition defined by surfaces and 'crusts', thus fitting in with the 'transition -principle', introduced earlier on in this study, both in regard to the building as a whole and in regard to its smaller details. In other words, all these things – call it building and space, landscape and nature, space and city, street and courtyard, frame and opening – are separated by distinct borderlines, or, if you wish, vice versa: connected to each other along these lines. In the context of barns a complex but not imposing composition resulted from the different textures of surfaces, with an optimal balance created between the qualities of mass and plane. While barns were very homogeneous in their materials – especially where timber was used for the roof covering –, they did not have an object-character because the individual junctions emphasised the building-character by exploiting the rules of geometry. At the same time, viewed from the opposite angle, the homogeneity of the surfaces also prevented the building from being 'overconstructed' and disintegrating into its component views, i.e. facades and planes. Although it is a closed system, the barn – due to its scale, spatial layout and structure – is a shell that can be filled in with great variability, so it can be reinvented by using functional furniture in the spirit of the 'house-within-a-house' concept but it can also be 'properly' redesigned by adding walls and slabs. The barn is a spatial structure that obviously satisfies the functional requirements of agriculture but, thanks to its openness and overall visual impact, it also evokes the universality of lofts. Simply put, the barn is genuinely contemporary inside and out; it is new and exciting and lures the architect to try out unconventional uses of space, while preserving its archetypal functionality.

3.5 Elements of contemporary architecture.

To reiterate the main points: (o) homogeneity of form, surface and material use in an asymmetrical yet stereometric mass that has become an archetype; (i) geometrical junctions; (ii) extremely diverse and complex interior spaces coupled with (iii) a transparency of surface. Well, these, whether taken individually or together, are elements, factors, objectives, processes and compositional principles that have fundamentally defined popular contemporary architectural trends, whether they are included in the categories of minimalism, neo-vernacularism, Kenneth Frampton's critical regionalism or late modern architecture [2].

4. THE BARN AS INSPIRATION.

If we want to meticulously examine the factors that contributed to the emergence of Transylvanian eco-regionalism in 2004, which has by now matured enough to be included in the architectural canon, then we cannot ignore the existing local architectural heritage, created through everyday practice, as it defines the character of a settlement's landscape, while lending itself to be placed in the crossfire of contemporary architectural sympathies. That is, in a sense, it can be identified with contemporary architecture. In other words, the architects of Szekler Land were sitting amidst a huge architectural material in which contemporary architectural solutions were in the guise of the archaic. But before we would conveniently gloss over this fact by calling it obvious, it is worth remembering that the same architectural material existed in Hungary, yet it did not become an obvious source of inspiration, not even the cube houses and István Janáky's collection documenting hidden beauty, despite their initially enthusiastic reception [4].

In contrast, barns did provide inspiration for architects in Szekler Land, which is confirmed by Győző Esztány's aforementioned private research [1]. All this is far from being rhetorical, which is shown, for example, by the project of architect Barna Lőrincz, whose design of his own family home was determined by the position and architecture of their barn. The potential inherent in archetypes was also exploited in the communal barn design of the blipsz! architecture office [3] and in the mortuary chapel in Csíkménaság, designed by Attila Gergely, who also reverted to the archetypal barn layout. Then there is Szabolcs Guttmann, who treated function as an issue of urbanism. The traditional rural plot distribution and the development method have, to this day, preserved the comfortable outdoor courtyard space, which they call 'life', enclosed by residential and farming buildings.

"Were I to compare the elements of this composition to a string quartet," writes Guttmann, in Esztány's questionnaire, "the residential building with the brilliant solutions of the porch would be the first violin; the outdoor or 'summer' kitchen, adding a supplementary mass to the residential function, would be the second violin; while the buildings in the courtyard could be assigned the accompanying role of the viola; while, without doubt, the barn, holding together the courtyard space, would play the monumental basic rhythm of the cello." [1]

5. SUMMARY.

To be fair, it must be noted that the repositioning of barns into architectural inspiration did not happen overnight: it took some time for the local scene to embrace this function and add it to its horizon. An especially important lesson can be learnt in this context from an article by Zsolt Tövissi, which he wrote in 1998, when he enlarged and renovated his own home in Csíkpálfalva, Transylvania. "The residential building was no longer there," he begins, "on the Felszeg plot with its massive stone and brick walls and beam roof structure. It was built in 1950 and after it went to another owner in 1993, it was necessary to enlarge it. There was a decent farm building standing there too. At first impulse," he continues, "while appreciating its merits, we wanted to demolish it to replace it with something smaller and more practical. Fortunately, since we had a shortage of funds, this 'common sense' solution could not be realised, so the barn was spared. When we have the opportunity, it will be properly taken care of." Tövissi's first reaction was to demolish the barn, which conveys the crucial message that values were not and are still not treated obviously as such. Moreover, his article is a

milestone in the process of ‘rediscovering’ and ‘rehabilitating’ barns [5].

To sum up, barns appeared not only as an applicable type, an urbanistic organisational element, but established an integral connection between the traditions of form that existed in the past and the popular trends prevailing in contemporary architecture.

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