"I do not assert myself."
Women architects in State Socialist Hungary

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State socialism existed for almost half a century in Hungary. During this time, the imposition of socialist ideology was uneven, and different manifestations of this political system came into being. After a brief period of multi-party democracy, the Hungarian Communist Party gained power in 1949. The country embarked on rapid and extensive industrialization which led to an uprising against the communist rule in 1956. The ensuing three decades, known as the Kádár Era after the first secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, János Kádár, was characterized by an unwritten social contract: the communist government was not to be criticized or opposed openly and, in return, individuals were allowed more freedom from the state than they had previously enjoyed. As a result, whereas socialist ideology had a decisive impact on the status of women, the peculiarities of the architectural profession in Hungary together with this country's rigid attitudes towards gender only limited the effectiveness of this attempt at social transformation.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the situation of women in general under the period in question and present the position of women architects that was closely connected to the economic and political changes taking place during the years of state socialism. In the second part, I consider Hungarian women architects of the period using a typical framework for gender research: How did they balance career and family? How did they interpret success? Did they achieve recognition according to the normative standards of this period? And, can it be assumed that women architects were most successful in architectural specializations that were perceived as being marginal or less prestigious?

State Socialism

Immediately following the cessation of the Second World War, the electoral law of 1945 granted women the same rights as men in Hungary. Thus, women gained suffrage and could stand for election—although men and women used envelopes of different colours at the first joint election. Just one year later, in 1946 all universities admitted women without restrictions, including the architectural faculty at the Technical University of Budapest.[1] As these changes were carried out during the so-called coalition times, they are usually interpreted as a part of the long-overdue modernization of Hungary.

The 1949 constitution, which conformed to the prevailing communist ideology, proclaimed the equal rights of women. Like the new family law, which came into effect in 1953, it declared that "the socialist marriage is a community built on the mutual affection of two free and equal human beings."[2] Women gained the same legal rights as men, but their freedom to work outside of the home was more than a possibility: now it was an imperative. Thus, remunerative labour by female citizens was not only an ideological position, but the government also expected it to be carried out. The communist regime subsequently intensified industrial production in reaction to the build-up of Cold War armament programs. The country needed women tractor drivers for the extensive agricultural production along with women engineers for industry, including architects, to design and build for the construction sector.

Compared to some European nations, women appeared in the architectural profession in Hungary at a rather late date, only after the First World War. Nevertheless, universities actively limited the number of women students. Those who were able to enroll at the architecture faculty usually came from a middle-class family, with a father who was an architect or a building contractor. Although the first woman architect graduated from the Technical University of Budapest in 1924, a recent publication on this theme lists only four women who went on to practice this profession in Hungary prior

1 University-level architectural education started in Budapest in 1873. The architecture faculty was integrated into the Technical University of Budapest in 1949. During the investigated period it was the only institution in Hungary where a university degree could be obtained in architecture.

2 Schadt (2002), 18.

to 1940. The names of a few others appear in a university publication, but no information exists about whether they completed their studies or had careers.[3] After 1946, women gained unrestricted access to the architectural faculty, but the number of women graduates increased slowly. Because architecture was considered to be an engineering subject and, as has been noted, the government needed engineers for rapid industrialization, the university accepted almost all applicants. Between 1949 and 1961, the average number of graduates in architecture per year was five times higher than the interwar period. Women, however, only comprised a modest 13% of the total.[4]

Female equality was a key component of state socialist ideology, and political propaganda took advantage of every opportunity to publicize the progress made in this area. A brochure, published in 1960 and devoted to the 50th anniversary of International Women's Day, declared that: "In our country work for women is not an act of coercion but a social need."[5] And: "Equal wages are due to women who perform the same jobs as men."[6] The positive report was illustrated with images of smiling and happy women from all walks of life successfully participating in different kinds of work, from politics to science, industry and finally to the assembly line. This situation was possible because the state provided them with childcare services, public laundries, cafeterias at their place of employment, semi-prepared food and so on. In the same year, the first statistics were published on Hungarian women. This data highlighted the changes that took place in the 20th century and drew attention to the radical development occurring between 1949 and 1958, that is, during the socialist era. Yet, in contrast to the impressive supporting materials and the general tone of optimism, the report also acknowledged one problem. Namely, there was an inverse relationship between the level of wages and the proportion of women in a given profession or line of work: the higher a position regarding its status and responsibility, the fewer the number of women who could be found there. The brochure also published data about the situation of women engineers, noting that women in

3 Prakfalvi/Ritoók (2011), 297–302.

4 Between 1949 and 1961, 2330 architectural degrees were awarded. Only 314 were given to women. Az Építőipari és Közlekedési Műszaki Egyetem évkönyve (1949-1960/1961), passim.

5 The liberated women of Hungary (1960), 5.

6 Ibid, 6.

this group received 31% lower wages than their male colleagues.[7] The author explained that this inequality came about for two reasons. Most important was the fact that women had less experience, as the average age of women engineers was significantly lower than that of their male colleagues. Secondly it noted that women tended towards less-demanding jobs because they were still expected to carry out household tasks when they returned home.

We do not have contemporary information about how women experienced the extreme changes that upended their lives throughout the 1950s because, up until 1963—when the stabilization of the Kádár Era resulted in an easing of ideological controls—, the field of sociology as well as the practice of social research had been abandoned in Hungary. However, the majority of university-educated women architects were satisfied with their work, and they were proud of their newly attained equality. "The situation, opportunities and wages of Hungarian women architects are equal to those of their male colleagues. They do the same work as men and they are able to reconcile their family life and career, thanks to social infrastructure like mending services, laundries and restaurants," said Éva Spiró at the first congress of the International Union of Women Architects (UIFA) in 1963 in Paris, the perfect venue to express such sentiment.[8] Even if we take into consideration that the representative of a socialist nation at an international conference had to think very carefully about what she said in public, we have to assume that in this situation, she really believed her words.

After the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989/90, research about the system of State Socialism has proposed different conceptual frameworks to portray the experience of women in Central and Eastern Europe. "State feminism," "socialist emancipation," "forced emancipation" and "emancipation from above" are just a few variants which describe a condition where women ostensibly did not have to struggle to attain equal rights. This circumstance was taken as one of the possible explanations to clarify why newly constituted women's movements were weak and disappeared quickly in the former socialist states after the changes of 1989/90.[9] However—at least from the

7 A nők helyzete régen és most (1960), 34.

8 1st UIFA Congress Report, 1963. Gertrud Galster Publications, Ms2009-054, 6–7.

9 A study discovered that the so-called democratic opposition of the 1970s and 1980s in Hungary was male dominated despite having several female members and the gender question was never raised. (Acsády (2016)).

perspective of the United States—socialist emancipation did produce lasting results. As scholars of modern Europe, Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead, note: "And yet, by most every measure, women had a degree of education, economic independence, and legal standing that their Western peers would not have until much later and, once won, always seem on the verge of losing."[10] The authors of this quotation refer to the level of education and the relative economic independence that women attained under socialism as being crucial factors, which made a lasting difference and enabled them to adapt to the new post-socialist society. Another reason can be found in the heterogeneity of female experience and the relatively privileged place that those at the top—as women architects tended to be—occupy in this spectrum. As sociologist Mária Adamik discovered while looking for reasons to explain the lack of feminist movements in post-socialist Hungary, the "liberated women" never constituted a coherent group. Under socialism, women's ability to take advantage of professional opportunities depended upon their economic situation, with the most affluent women, "amongst whom at the expense of some self-delusion it was always easier to maintain a universal (female) identity (work, sex, children) that was not class dependent in the past, was undoubtedly equal with the most advantageous group of men."[11] Those women with the highest educational levels measured themselves in relation to the normative behaviour of the male world, even at the expense of uncritically adopting masculine attitudes towards professional work and private life.

Hungarian women architects

Several recent interviews with women architects who were active during the period of state socialism confirm these observations. Accompanying the change of political system in 1949, architectural practice in Hungary was reorganized, and all architects found employment in large, state-run offices. Soon after they left the university, the first generation of women architects received a job and had the opportunity to carry out responsible architectural work; most of their designs were realized. They had the sense that they

10 Ghodsee/Mead (2018).

11 Adamik (2001), 195.

were building up socialism and, even if they did not support the communist party, they felt that they were contributing to the modernization of the nation. Large state design offices desperately needed the skills of women architects. Although the office managers were male, some incidents reveal that a few supported female equality. One interviewee told me that when she asked the manager if she should sign her first independent design with "Mrs." and followed by her married name, or with "Ms." and her maiden one, he answered that she received her degree as Sára Juhász, so she surely had to use her name before marriage.[12] Nevertheless, women architects strove to relate to the profession in a gender-neutral manner, that is, they compared their architecture to the buildings produced by men. In a somewhat similar manner, another interviewee, who was extremely active in the International Union of Women Architects (UIFA) during the state socialist period, recalled that she and her female colleagues viewed the congresses as an opportunity to present their buildings to a large audience and to prove that they were able to produce architecture that was equal to the work of men.[13] On the basis of politically declared ideology as well as a deeply internalized sense of gender equality, Hungarian women architects felt their attitudes towards work and the nature of their architecture were equivalent to the outlook and products of men. They did not want to appear inferior to their male colleagues by asserting that their work might be feminine or embody gender-specific qualities. However, it was exactly this attitude which informed the manner in which most male architects viewed the architectural production of women.

A gradual change can be detected in the situation of women architects in the second part of the period in question. Around the middle of the 1960s, the years of economic growth came to an end. Politicians realized that they needed fewer people in the workforce, especially those who were less well-educated. At the same time, they wanted to increase the birth rate. Women, who in the 1950s were considered to be a supplemental labour reserve, now were sent back to the household—so to speak. In 1967, a childcare benefit, lasting up to three years, was introduced to secure a woman's workplace if she took time off to care for her offspring. Although the benefit was targeted at those with modest education and training, all women took advantage of it. Even though university educated women usually did not use the full three

12 Interview Sára Juhász, 2018.

13 Interview Mária Fejes, 2014.

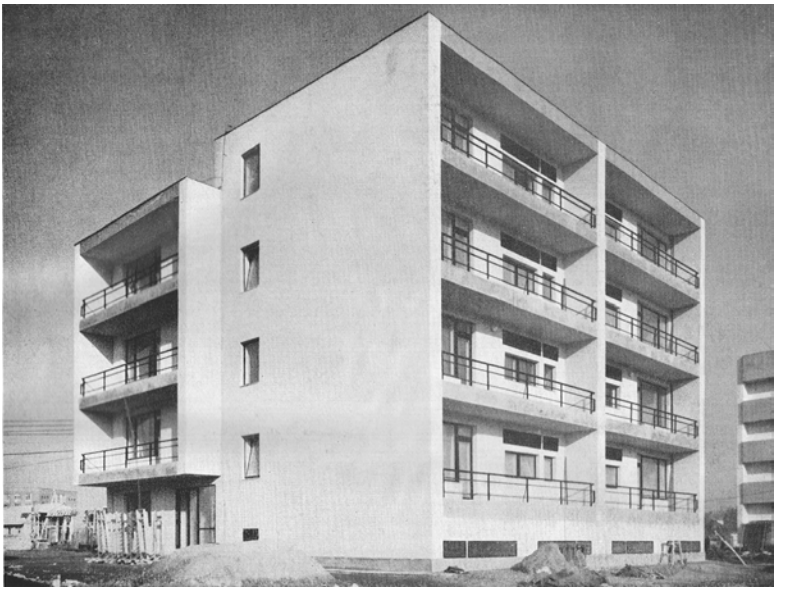

Figure 1: Apartment house, Budapest 1961. Architect: Olga Mináry (1929-2000). Minary received the Ybl Prize for this building in 1964. Source: Magyar Építőművészet 1961, 1, 11.

years of leave, the officially propagated "double vocation" only amplified the deeply ingrained attitudes toward women's traditional roles as mothers and housekeepers. For women architects in managerial positions, interrupting their career to care for children removed them from the workforce for long periods and diminished their status within the office hierarchy.

Women architects who graduated in the 1970s had to wrestle with another problem. Those who graduated in the 1950s and in the early 1960s quickly received commissions and were able to build their own designs while they were young and active. Although the number of architecture students who completed their degrees decreased to approximately 140 per year in the 1960s and about 120 in the 1970s, the ratio of women graduates steadily increased to 35%. Translated into contemporary language: just as the number of women architects increased, the market for architectural work, particularly large buildings and representative structures, decreased. At the same time, women architects were being devalued because of their officially

declared "double vocation" as professionals who also required time to be mothers and housewives.

Because of the lack of commissions and the fact that many important positions in the large state offices were already occupied, the above-mentioned economic changes affected a whole generation of architects, both men and women. Sociological research about the recent architecture graduates during the 1970s revealed that they felt that their intellectual and creative capacities were unused.[14] Despite the fact they could find a job, as everyone, excluding women who took leave to care for children, was required to be employed, young architects had to wait for a very long time to work on their own projects and assume responsibility. To compensate for the lack of challenging work, young architects participated in design competitions in their free time. The sociological research mentioned earlier did not explicitly investigate gender, but at this point in the study, the author felt it was important to note that significantly fewer women regularly took part in these competitions. According to the researcher, the underrepresentation of women in architectural competitions "is only partly explained by differences in their abilities, but women's lower self-confidence should also play a role." This observation leads us to the second part of this paper: namely to family matters, to how women perceived success and to architectural specialities that had a significant proportion of women.

Areas of specialization of women architects

When turning to the areas of architectural practice that women architects specialized in, I find it necessary to first discuss how they balanced the competing demands of career and family. As Laura Weissmüller's essay in the *Frau Architekt* catalogue notes, women professionals have struggled with this issue, regardless if they were active in a capitalist or in a socialist society.[15] In the absence of relevant research, we have to rely on general information published about women and the fragmentary documentation that exists about those members of the first generation who gained professional recognition: they are known because a publication of an important building

14 Szilágyi (1976).

15 Weissmüller (2017).

Figure 2: Machine Tool Plant, Esztergom 1966. Architect: Sára Cs. Juhász (1926-2020). Juhász received the Ybl Prize for this building complex in 1966. Source: The children of Sára Cs. Juhász.

Figure 3: Hotel, Balatonfüred 1968. Architect: Margit V. Pázmándi (1930-1995). Pázmándi received the Ybl Prize for this building in 1968. Source: Fortepan No 65685 http://download.fortepan.hu/?search=65685, accessed on August 23, 2020.

that they designed exists; they won an architectural prize; or had a leading position in the Association of Hungarian Architects. They were few in number, but they served as role models for the following generation of women architects. Those who were married usually had a husband who was also an architect. If he was not an architect, he usually had a university degree and a profession that required academic training. Although the Hungarian government increased the number of childcare facilities in the 1950s, the long, inflexible working hours in the state-run offices were an impediment to the participation of women architects. For this reason, the exemplary women architects of the first generation either had no children, only one or, at the very most, two. Similar information about those women who graduated later and received professional recognition does not exist. Based on the extant research, it is clear that women architects overwhelmingly chose architects as their husbands.

Several studies have been published about how architects, and especially women architects, interpret professional success. On this topic, there are few relevant sources. The afore-mentioned sociologist, who surveyed young architects in the 1970s and later extended her research to those who graduated in the 1980s, returned to both groups in the 1990s.[16] In the interviews, she focused on the architects' rhetoric and their understanding of achievement. She concluded that those who graduated in the 1970s maintained notions about architectural success—which had been impressed upon them during their university years—throughout their careers. For them, professional accomplishment meant the built object, the completed HOUSE (in capital letters), the larger the project the better. In short, success meant productivity, quality and creativity, and, of course, professional and social recognition. As the researcher put it: the architectural ideal overshadowed existential prosperity. The ensuing economic changes, that is, the recession of the 1970s accompanied by the weakening of political power, made it possible for architects to start smaller private practices in the 1980s. However, the idea of architectural achievement hardly changed. In the 1980s success in architecture was still measured in terms of a completed building, creativity and social recognition while the profitability of a practice was seen as a by-product. There were men and women among the interviewees of the

16 Szilágyi (1999).

study, but the fact that the researcher did not separate their answers by gender suggests that there were no significant differences.

Around the millennium, I made a series of interviews with Hungarian women architects.[17] The aim of the project was to investigate women architects who already had professional recognition but represented the different generations who were active in the second half of the twentieth century. They graduated between 1957 and 1996, so their activity spanned almost 40 years in architecture. I put the same question to all of them: "What does success mean for you?" Regardless of their age and the different political and economic situations during their years in practice, my interviewees almost unanimously mentioned the joy and satisfaction they found in the design process itself, the intellectual challenge of architecture and—of course—the excitement of experiencing a completed building. Some of them also mentioned that they were able to balance professional and familial responsibilities. It should be noted that the women who I selected as interviewees were all present in the public sphere. They achieved recognition in design competitions, taught at universities and were active in professional organizations, but they interpreted these activities rather as the expression of an internal need, and not primarily as a means to draw attention to themselves. All of them denied that they worked exclusively to be successful in the normative sense. As the architect Judit Z. Halmágyi stated: "I do not assert myself, but if something happens, that could take the country's standard ahead, and I know about it, I pick up the phone and announce that everybody should know. I bustle about to shake up my colleagues."[18]

A typical indication of success is professional recognition: a higher position in the design office, a prize-winning competition entry, or an international or national architectural award. The highest professional recognition in Hungary, the Ybl Prize, was established in 1953.[19] The first woman architect won the prize in 1964, which is consistent with the fact that women had a delayed entry into the profession and the ratio of graduated women architects grew steadily at that time. (Figure 1) If we consider the period between 1964 and 1990, 263 architects were awarded the prize and only 26 were women.

17 Simon (2003).

18 Judit Z. Halmágyi, quoted in: Simon (2003), 110.

19 Schéry (ed.) (1995), passim.

Women won 10% of the prizes, averaging one female awardee per year. In actuality, the Association of Hungarian Architects, the professional organization that nominated the candidates and the Ministry of Building Affairs, the official body that chose the prize winners, adhered to the following rule: one women architect per year must receive an award.

A recurring assumption is that women are better suited to carry out small-scale projects and domestic designs: dwellings, community buildings and monument protection. Data is not available to determine if this statement is valid for Hungary, so I turned to the aforementioned Ybl Prize winners. 13 of the 26 women received the award for residential or public buildings. However, among the public buildings, we also find larger ones, like hotels, a hospital and a sports hall. One award was given for the design of industrial buildings and three were granted to urban designers. (Figures 2–3) The remaining nine Ybl Prize winners received recognition for their work in monument preservation. The approximately 35% ratio of monument preservation awardees, however, did not reflect the total amount of monument preservation work within the total completed construction during the period in question. The explanation regarding this discrepancy is simple: for women, it was easier to work in monument preservation at a time when the majority of architects in Hungary were striving to build a new, modern house.

Finally, we should turn to the women architects who were employed as university lecturers. During the 26 years in question (1964-1990), 13 Ybl Prizes were awarded to university professors. All are men. The change of the political system did not alter this trend: over the last 30 years, other university professors have received this award. Not one is a female professor of architecture. After all, this is understandable: since they entered the profession, women architects have held teaching positions at the architectural faculty of the Technical University of Budapest, but, up until the present day, women have not been appointed to the highest academic rank, the full professor. The issue of gender equality remains problematic in Hungary.

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