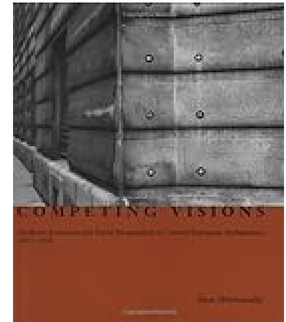

Akos Moravanszky. *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918.* Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1998. xv + 508 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-13334-0.

Reviewed by Samuel D. Albert (Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art)

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Many Nationalities, Many Visions

The geographic and cultural diversity of Central Europe, embracing myriad cultures and traditions, makes succinct analysis of its architecture difficult. Within the region, the overbearing ideology of international socialist brotherhood discouraged critical examination of the "decadent" architectural past. Vienna, as the only major Habsburg city available for study for such a long time, became the focal point of western interest in the Habsburg Monarchy, as evidenced by Carl Schorske's *Fin de Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* [1] and major shows in Vienna [2] and New York.[3] Since the publication of Schorske's book and then with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Central European architecture and art have reemerged in western consciousness; in recent years there have appeared monographic works on architects unknown to the West fifteen years ago such as Josip Plecnik, [4] and volumes on the role of art in the creation of national consciousness.[5] Within Central Europe as well, critical reconsiderations of turn of the century artistic production and culture are now appearing.[6]

Considerable range and depth of scholarship is needed to create a coherent argument about this vast area. But this is exactly what Akos Moravanszky has done with his *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918.* A Hungarian-trained architect and architectural historian, Moravanszky has devoted much of his academic career to studying the architecture and urbanism of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This book builds on his two previous works on the region, one devoted to architecture in Austria-Hungary [7] and the second devoted to the emergence of modern architecture in the Central European lands.[8] With such a background, perhaps no architectural historian active today has a better knowledge and understanding of the uniqueness and peculiarity of the region and its architecture.

In the preface, Moravanszky states that it is not his intention to examine the mundane architecture of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: the railroad stations, post offices, and banks which existed in every town and which made western Ukraine familiar to the visitor from Lower Austria, as he put it (p. x). Rather, he wants to explore what he terms "alternative visions," those of architects whose aesthetics drew upon a common intellectual her-

itage, but sought with their architecture to express regional, not individual visions.

These regional visions, though somewhat nationally-based, were not formulated as nationalist visions; it was the failure of historicist architecture to fully and adequately express modernity which furnished the intellectual impetus for these alternative visions. Though some architects, such as the Slovak Dusan Jurkovic, sought to revive traditional and vernacular forms and invest them with modern meanings, others, such as Jan Kotera and his fellow Czechs, devised radically new forms to express modernity. Idiosyncratic geniuses, such as Josip Plecnik, melded those two trends, creating an architecture that was derivative and expressive of vernacular traditions, though thoroughly and completely suffused by modernism.

The organization of the book advances this methodology and line of research. Each of the ten chapters deals with a single–and singular–aspect of architecture and architectural theory. The first chapter introduces the concept and problem of Central Europe, a region which Moravanszky puts forth as an imaginary one, invented by cultural theorists at the turn of the century and defined by an overlapping web of language, politics, and culture, all united by the overarching idea of the Habsburg Monarchy. As a remarkably incisive example of the internal divisions existing within this imaginarily unified region, Moravanszky discusses the two great Postal Savings Bank projects: Otto Wagner's well-known Postal Savings Bank (1904-6) in Vienna, and Odon Lechner's lesser-known, but equally interesting Postal Savings Bank in Budapest (1899-1901), built in the Habsburg capitals within five years of each other. Though these structures were designed for similar purposes, their respective architects' intentions and approaches to modernism differed greatly, illustrating Moravanszky's assertion that Central Europe could accommodate and nurture numerous competing modernisms.

The second chapter, "The City as Political Monument," thematically akin to the final chapter "The Architecture of Social Reform," confronts the question of urbanism within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both chapters explore how the urban designs of Vienna and Budapest reflected political and economic exigencies.

The first of these two urban design chapters explores questions of overall formal development: the necessity of imperial representation and the forms that representation imposed on the face of the city, analyzing the Ringstrasse as a "social gradient," an area where social forces in Viennese society (cultural liberalism, constitutional democracy, the Monarchy) were represented by public structures, creating a backdrop for the theater of modern life and furthering interaction of diverse social classes.

In contrast to Vienna, the urban plan for Budapest was the result of an international competition. It is here that Moravanszky sees the triumph of representational urbanism, that is the use of the entire urban fabric, rather than any one single component, for representing the nation. The most striking feature of the plan, Andrassy Avenue, is a major thoroughfare that, unlike the Vienna Ring, has few representational structures. It was developed instead as a residential area. Though grandiose in scale, the Avenue is actually of little utility as a traffic connector, opening vaguely at one end, and disappearing behind the Millennial Monument at the other. But, as Moravanszky proves, the purpose of the Avenue was not the improvement of traffic, but the creation of a show street. The second of the two chapters focuses on the social and economic difficulties posed by the expansion of cities and the political and tectonic solutions investigated at the turn of the century.

The middle seven chapters analyze aspects of architectural production in Central Europe, examining aesthetic issues and artistic ideologies, such as historicism, art nouveau, the Wagner school, the search for a national style, Adolf Loos and his influence, and Czech cubism. Moravanszky is at his best in these chapters, bringing together examples from all over the empire to illustrate the individuality and national similarities of modern architecture in the Dual Monarchy.

By organizing the chapters around intellectual themes, rather than architects or chronologies, Moravanszky intends to "dissect the tight web of biographical, cultural, and aesthetic cross-connection" (p. xi) of the period. This radically different approach lets the reader perceive the depth of cultural diversity and interconnection within the Habsburg Imperium as well as see the repeated engagement with the same cultural questions by the various nationalities within the empire. A drawback of the author's innovative organization, though, is that many of the same figures–Josef Hoffmann, Joze Plecnik, Jan Kotera, or Max Fabiani–appear in different guises in different chapters, but the isolating nature of the chapters prevents a full exploration of these multiple roles.

Each of the chapters is a self-contained essay which could stand alone. They were seemingly written over a period of time, as the quality of the writing is uneven

and sometimes repetitious; similar fragments of argument are used repeatedly in differing contexts. Though the hermetic nature of each chapter (only a few cursory references to other chapters or arguments are grafted in) allows the reader to focus on one particular aspect of aesthetic invention and social imagination in Central Europe, it also requires the reader to know a great deal about Central Europe beforehand; a familiarity with the architectural, cultural, and political history of Austria-Hungary, as well as with the major architectural theorists of the time, is taken for granted by the author.

The assumption of familiarity with Austro-Hungarian art and culture permeates the book. Many of the numerous photographs are contemporary, and show the buildings removed from the original urban fabric, wrenching them from their discussed and their intended visual contexts. Though the photographs throughout the book are numbered, the lack of reference to photograph numbers makes understanding the visual aspects of Moravanszky's argument difficult to one not familiar with the structures considered. Two of the photographs (2.10 and 4.10) are backwards, and two of the captions are reversed (7.32 and 7.34). There are several errors in names as well: presumably the Hungarian painter Mihaly Munkacsy is intended when the author writes Miklos (p. 112), and the architect's name is Louis H. Sullivan, not Henry Louis Sullivan, as it appears on page 336 and in the index.

Perhaps the greatest problem with the book is posed by its intended scope as reflected in the title; though claiming to focus on "Central Europe," Moravanszky deals almost exclusively with the Austro-Hungarian Empire which, though a significant force in Central Europe, is by no means the entirety of that region. This orientation toward the Habsburg Empire is further underscored by the period on which the book focuses, 1867-1918, dates which are of particular Austro-Hungarian significance–the date of the historic compromise which elevated Hungary to equal partner with Austria, and thus marked the genesis of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the year that same empire ultimately collapsed.

Organizational and production problems aside, this book, with its innovative approach to a region that still needs to be better understood, is a welcome addition to the library of scholars or laymen with an interest in Central European cultural history.

Notes

[1]. Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980).

[2]. *Traum und Wirklichkeit: Wien, 1870-1903* (Vienna: Museen der Stadt Wien, 1985).

[3]. Kirk Varnedoe, *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture & Design* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986).

[4]. Damjan Prelovsek, *Joze Plecnik, 1872-1957: Architectura Perennis*, Translated from the German by Patricia Crampton and Eileen Martin (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1997).

[5]. David Crowley, *National Style and Nation-State: Design in Poland from the Vernacular Revival to the International Style* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1992).

[6]. Two examples of this reconsideration are Janos Gerle, Attila Kovacs, and Imre Makovecz, *A szazadfordulo magyar epiteszete/Turn of the Century Hungarian Architecture* (Budapest: Szepirodalmi konyvkiado-Bonex, 1990) and Nicola Gordon Bowe, ed. *Art and the National Dream: the Search for Vernacular Expression in Turn-of-the-Century Design* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993).

[7]. Akos Moravanszky, *Die Architektur der Donaumonarchie*, translated by Marina Annus and Franz Gottschlig, (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1988), originally published in Hungarian as _Epiteszet az Osztrak-Magyar Monarchiaban (Budapest: Corvina Kiado, 1988).

[8]. Akos Moravanszky, *Die Erneuerung der Baukunst: Wege der Moderne in Mitteleuropa 1900-1940* (Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz Verlag: Salzburg, 1988).

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