
AN ARCHITECT OF THE EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDE IN ORADEA: MENDE VALÉR

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ABSTRACT

Knowing the connections between the architectural heritage of Oradea with the one belonging to Central Europe is an elegant and intelligent way to overcome the spiritual, cultural and historical prejudices. Mende Valer is one of the European avant-garde architects who worked in Oradea, marking the routes of the international architecture connected to the mutual, most precious legacy: the Central-European cultural heritage. This study presents two of the most representative buildings designed by Valer Mende in Oradea, namely his first and last, in order to emphasize the rapid emancipation of the architectural language used by the architect by embracing the Viennese avant-garde vision and its entry in Oradea. It is worth underlining the stylistic and urban value of the curtain-type façade, the symbolic significance of the decoration, the sgraffito technique of rustic-medieval inspiration as well as the modern modular concept seen in Roth House. The study also comprises a parallel between Valer Mende's work in Oradea and the Hungarian town of Kecskemet, where the architect erected two of the most significant buildings of the Hungarian Secession: Calvin College and Luther Palace. It renders the connections and similarities of symbolic shape and expression by establishing the stylistic parallel between Oradea and Kecskemet.

*Keywords: curtain-type
façade, sgraffito, Kecskemet,
Viennese avant-garde,
modular building wings*

INTRODUCTION

Belonging to Secession architecture of Oradea and especially due to the intrinsic value of his creations, Mende Valér (1886, Pinkoc – 1918, Vienne) seems to be one of the most lucid and daring architects at the beginning of the 20th century. The buildings designed by him in Oradea have become conspicuous through their conceptual purism and accuracy of the visual language which place him among the best representatives of the avant-garde movement belonging to the complex phenomenon of the 1900 Art. His architectural vision made its debut under the sign of the Hungarian artistic movement called “national romanticism” which found its inspiration

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in the popular and medieval vernacular architecture, thus creatively turning the Hungarian tradition into fruition. This vision of traditional nostalgic style, which blended elements of popular and medieval architecture, had the European movement called Arts and Crafts as an essential reference point. Its ideology was centred on the Wagnerian idea of the “total work of art”, of that harmonious and noble, yet functional Gesamtkunstwerk, obtained after renouncing the uncompromising distinction between major and applied arts, between the centre and the outskirts, between functionalism and decorativism. In fact, one was trying to solve the contradiction between art and industry, on one hand and between art and craft, on the other hand. The new vision of the architecture school in Budapest was under the sign of Arts and Crafts movement especially due to the spiritual patronage of Lechner Ödön, who influenced, up to a certain point, the young architect Mende Valér. This tendency towards spatial and decorative language of popular and medieval architecture, moulded by the “revival” ideology that marked the second half of the 19th century, led shortly after to his adhering to the innovative group “Fiatalók”(“The Youth”) led by Kós Károly, an architect and man of culture from Transylvania. Yet his architectural vision would further refine through the influence of the Viennese avant-garde school whose promoters were Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Maria Olbrich and Adolf Loos. The buildings he designed in Oradea are:

- The Savings Bank of Bihor County on 3 Independence Street (façade) 1909-1910,
- Dr. Nemeş House, 10 Duiliu Zamfirescu Street, 1909,
- Agricultural Saving House, 7 Iosif Vulcan Street, (Fodor Iszo House), 1909-1910,
- Ertler Vila, 8 Episcop Mihail Pavel Steet, 1910,
- Roth Casa, 3 Vasile Alecsandri Street, 1912.

Mende Valér designed significant buildings in Kecskemét, Budapest, Gyula, Petrosani, Gyöngyös and Dorog. The buildings designed in Oradea are in keeping with a construction series of European proportions, strongly anchored in the 1900 architectural problems of the time. We list here these important buildings, true tops of the series of architecture belonging to the romantic nationalist genre, thus quoting Gerle Janos & comp. [1]:

Kecskemét:

Hajdú Vila, 10 Irinyi Street, 1909-1910

Calvin Secondary School and Law Academy, Szabadság Square, 1909-1913

Luther-udvar (Luther Palace – report building of the Reformed Church Diocese), Szabadság Square (Freedom Square), 1910-1911

Budapest:

Building, 91 Attila Street, 1912

Building, Bodó House, Belgrad dock no. 12, 1912-1913, currently altered

Gyöngyös:

General bank of Heves County, Main Square no. 9, 1911-1912 (a building altered after the fire of 1917)

Gyula:

Komló Hotel and Cafe, Béke Boulevard, 1912-1913

Dorog:

Bath Houses for miners and dwellings, 1914-1915, Hantken Miksa Street.

Petroșani:

Workers' Neighbourhood, 1914-1915

These buildings still exist nowadays and they can create an enlightening cultural route for the complex architectural vision that represented the European avant-garde movement at the beginning of the 20th century. This route also includes the buildings in Transylvania and Budapest erected by Kós Károly and Toroczky-Wigand Ede, together with some other followers of “Fiatalok”(The Youth) movement and the artists' colony in Gödölő, who, in their turns, worked in Transylvania and especially in Târgu Mureș. By Valér Mende's architecture one can understand better the complexity of avant-garde vision set towards the romantic-folk-national channel as well as towards the purist-geometric, functionalist one of the architecture school in Vienne. On the European map of the early twentieth century, this architectural route draws multiple connections created between cultural centres and suburban, boundary areas of the Transylvanian rurality. To be more specific, it is about the vernacular architecture, where the century-old syncretism between the peasants' art and architecture and the medieval art is still active, functional and of a unique picturesque nature. The route projected by Valer Mende's architecture shows to advantage the exemplary way in which the modern, urban vision turned these influences into fruition by interpretations that prove a high class of handling the architectural language, more and more interested in the intelligent way to dwell in a space.

When stylistically analysing the buildings designed by Mende Valer in Oradea, we notice a uniform architectural concept. They were erected in a short period of time, between 1909 and 1912, during which his talent

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manifested itself at high levels. His brilliant artistic career was abruptly stopped by the outbreak of the World War I when the architect was only 28 years old. Four years later, after falling ill on the front, he would die in Vienne. His grave, of the utmost simplicity, is in Kerepesi cemetery in Budapest.

The present study will analyze the first and last house designed by Mende Valer in Oradea, namely the Savings Bank of Bihor County – 1909 (photo 1) and Roth House – 1912 (photo 2).



Photo 1. The Savings Bank of Bihor County – 1909



Photo 2. Roth House, 3 Vasile Alecsandri Street, 1912

The first work of the young architect from Budapest consisted of remodelling the façade of an old building, a bank, namely the Savings

House of Bihor County located on the current 3 Independence Street. Work began in 1909, the year in which the 23-year-old architect who had just graduated the Polytechnic University in Budapest – Műegyetem, (1908), opened his own architecture office in the capital of Hungary. The façade design proves a surprisingly clear and decisive bi-dimensional vision, austere, of “curtain” type, with decorative fields under the sign of avant-garde geometrism and functionalism of the architecture schools in Vienne and Glasgow, but also under the sign of decorative symbolism cultivated in Kós Károly’s Transylvanian circle called “Fiatalok”(The Young). Yet Mende had already experienced the visual exercise of modernity due to the fact that he had won a scholarship in 1908, thus learning first-handedly about European avant-garde centres: Paris, London, Brussels, Berlin, Munchen.

Getting back to the old building of the Bank of Bihor County, we mention that it preserved its mixed dwelling programme that is bank plus flats to rent, the architect making an intervention in the façade only.

The purism of his austere vision is even better highlighted due to its vicinity with the Black Eagle Palace, which is the work of the architects Komor Marcell and Jakab Dezső. The association of the two façades expresses the major stylistic directions of the early 20th century (photo 3).



Photo 3. The association of the two façades

The volumetric and decorative concept of the palace is indebted to the sumptuous direction opened by Ödön Lechner, whereas the façade of the bank included in the report building bears Valer Mende’s bi dimensional stylistic mark which we also find at Komló Hotel in Gyula and the Calvin College and Law Academy in Kecskemét: a broad flattened façade, whose

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only spatial rhythm break is a monumental pinion pierced by a vertical opening that creates a simple yet sophisticated visual effect. Thus, the visual tension is not born out of the decorative rhythm or abundance, such as in the Black Eagle Palace, but out of the tight ratio between ample areas of smooth surfaces and abrupt compressions of the slit pinions with graphical values. The slit pinion is Mende Valer's true mark. We find it at Ertler Villa (photo 4) and the villas in Kecskemet and Budapest, and also Luther Palace in Kecskemet (a large report building belonging to the Reformed Bishopric) (photo 5).



Photo 4. Ertler Villa



Photo 5. Luther Palace in Kecskemet

The volumetric composition is very rigorous: perfectly symmetrically ordered, the façade displays fourteen bays, equal as a surface and artistic expression. The only element that breaks the space is the pinion, a sign of strength, yet it also remains on the vertical plan of the façade. The façade is of screen or curtain type, its simplicity and uniformity undoubtedly representing a sign of modern vision that renounces the game between full and empty spaces of volumetry in order to insist on the basic language of spatiality: point, line, and plan (photo 6). It is not the outer limit of a living space, but the inner limit of a public place. The decoration is also designed in a two-dimensional plan, with equal duct, which testifies the architect's vocation as a sketcher. The decoration design is engraved in the masonry, in graffiti technique, preserving the cobalt blue in the deep route (photo 7).



Photo 6. The façade design



Photo 7. Graffiti technique

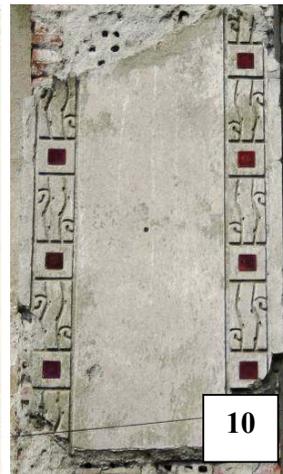
Minimally drawn, the vegetal elements are highly stylized. They are set in stop-frames, in metopes, they are not surprised in their germination or efflorescence stage but in the crystallized one of the effigy or the heraldic sign. In this encrypted reading, the stalks become vertical sinusoids, the corollas become solar signs (photo 8). It is interesting to follow the similarities moulding on this façade, the ones on Ertler Villa (photo 9), on Nemes Villa (photo 10) and the building of the Reformed College in Kecskemet (photo 11).



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Photo 8, 9, 10. Similarities moulding on different façade

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Photo 11. Kecskemet Reformed College Hardware

One can notice here the dove motif whose graceful movement of circular twisting counterbalances the rigour of the truncated shape of the hive. The hive, the symbol of banking pragmatism and efficiency, is placed on the pinion shaft. The spirit that animates the decorative shapes is a heraldic one, as we have already mentioned, fostered in “the Youth” circle. It is as if this decoration would refine the street from within, but with the utmost discretion, acknowledging it as a true modern show. The simplicity and rigor of the decorative language is enhanced by the technique used, that is sgraffito, inspired from medieval art. We see the same type of decoration at Ertler Villa on 8 Episcop Mihail Pavel Street, especially in frameworks of the windows, at Nemeş Villa and also the building of Agricultural Saving House on 7 Iosif Vulcan Street (Fodor House).

Roth House was the last building designed by Mende Valer in Oradea. It is extremely important as it marks a fundamental change in the architectural vision, by adopting a formal, highly purified language, inspired, as he himself declared, by the vision of the avant-garde vision. The three axis of the façade are perfectly identical and represent a product of a spatial view, underlined by the composition symmetry (photo 12).

Mende renounces the influences of the vernacular medieval and peasant architecture and heads toward modern architecture with elegant shapes without any historical and rhetorical accents. Architecture becomes again the play of shapes, cleared of the elusive, romantically nostalgic elements. The decoration is minimal; it mainly outlines artistically its shapes, rather than cover them with adjacent symbolic meanings. The frontispiece is the most spectacular one; the three mentioned pinions remind us of the haughty dash of “The Marriage Tower” from Darmstadt, Joseph Maria Olbrich’s manifest work. The same as with Olbrich or Josef

Hoffmann (Stoclet Villa), the building canopy becomes very important, even though it has no functional role – or precisely this is why. The tremendous rigor of this architecture, unique in Oradea and in Mende’s architecture, may be related to the Art School in Glasgow, Ch. R. Mackintosh’s work, completed in 1909.



Photo 12. The three axis of The Roth House façade

The three axis of the building, the balconies and the three pilasters mentioned covered in brick remind us of the geometry and the smoothness of the avant-garde aesthetics, thus being much closer to the impersonal world of the industrial era than to the nostalgic myths and “Arts and Craft” Movement. Mende’s modular vision was unique in Oradea during that time: the building spans are emphasized series, like some clichés or matrices. The semicircular balconies seem to be swung-over from the vertical plan, emphasizing the existence of the third dimension (photo 13).

It was ingenious of him to use the “mirror image” of the balcony floor connection with its apparent birth plan. The decoration is minimal, having a mere discreet accent that reminds us of the floral motif (photo 14).

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Photo 13, 14. The semicircular balconies of The Roth House

The ironwork is simplified, the decorative motifs becoming point-like and linear. We can find the same type of ironwork as in Roth House in the works of the architects of the Avant-garde School in Vienne such as Adolf Loos, (i.e. Goldmann & Salatsch shop in Vienne, 1911, where the high ground-floor housing the owner's shop becomes a register that makes the monumental staircase of the building look monumental in a highly-proportional relationship).

The compositional significance given by the continuous horizontal aspect of a shared balcony, similar to a birth plan of the upper floors, can be seen in Majolika House in Vienne, the work of Otto Wagner.

The patio is very narrow, yet gracefully articulated such as a curved space with alveolar suggestions (photo 15). This “matric” space, defined by continuous, shared balconies, is enhanced by a corrugated sheet decoration which festooned them in their upper part (photo 16, 17).



Photo 15. Roth House courtyard

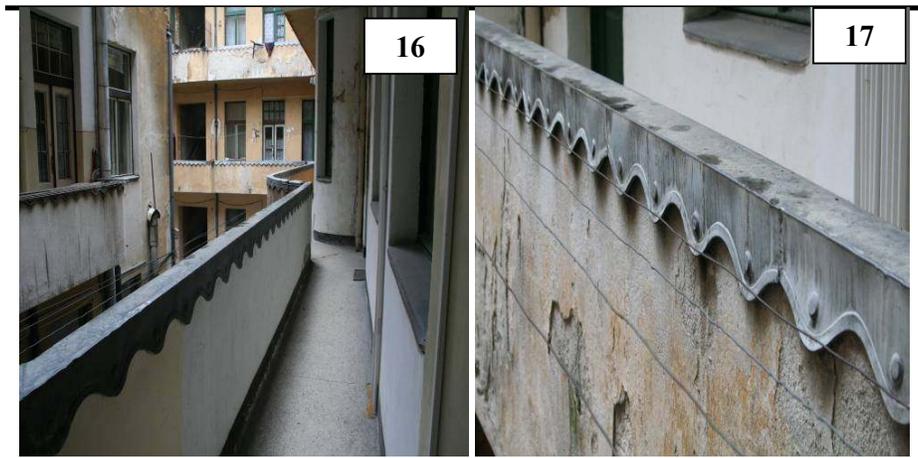


Photo 16, 17. Roth House galvanized steel guardrail

The extremely balanced game between verticals and horizontals, between full and empty spaces, between function and shape, between structure and ornament finds its full-fledged artistic expression. With this building (but also with Darvas – La Roche Villa, Moskovits House, the building of the current University and so on), Oradea can be enlisted successfully among the avant-garde European architecture.

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