ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

These pages offer a summary of the architectural reasons presented in the work of the European avant-garde architects who worked in Oradea as well: Vágo Joszef și Vágo Lászlo. Among the works created by them in Oradea following the avant-garde line of the Viennese Secession, Vila Darvas – LaRoche is an exceptional creation by the beauty of the proportions and the daring spatial and decorative vision. This is one of the eloquent testimonies of the circulation of the European values in this cultural area at the beginning of the 20th century. By the innovative vision of the two architects, who are also joined by Valer Mende, the architecture in Oradea was connected to the avant-garde architecture of the cultural centres belonging to the former Habsburg Empire: Vienne, Budapest, Debrecen, Kecskemet, Gyula, Subotica and so on. These architects, who were also active in Oradea, aligned themselves with the Viennese avant-garde architecture of purist-geometric orientation, considered the most innovative European artistic vision at the beginning of the 20th century. The urban display of the villa is exceptional, the building having openings towards two streets. The architects created an extremely elegant, strongly geometrized decoration both inside and outside the building. The asymmetrical composition and the parabolic arch at the main entrance, the stained glasses, the stucco works and the interior fountain decorated with Zsolnay tile all these make the villa the most exquisite and complete architectural work in Oradea.

Keywords: avant-garde, parabolic arch, stained glasses, Zsolnay tile, eosin, geometric style

INTRODUCTION

A representative creation of the brothers Vágo László and Vágo József, Darvas – La Roche Villa is one of the most exquisite examples of architecture in Oradea. Built between 1911 and 1912, the villa is real jewellery in the myriad of the buildings erected at the beginning of the century (photo 1). This villa is not only a pride of the city, because, by the avant-garde design of the spatial composition, by the volumetric purism and the refinement of the decoration, it can stand amongst the most original...

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creations of the European architecture. Although it has been preserved exceptionally well for over a century, the last two decades have been ill-fated for the beautiful villa. It has been almost entirely stripped of its extremely valuable stained glasses, its pieces of environmental sculptures; its interior courtyard was and still is neglected. Moreover, the overall architectural composition of the façade facing the bank of Crisul Repede River has suffered alterations.

Things have changed from bad to worse since the observation made over the years with reference to the deplorable state of the monument belonging to the European heritage. Little evidence has been left from the architectural decoration (stained glasses, ironworks, and mouldings). Bare and ordinary glass surfaces bounded by double pane glasses distort the monument nowadays. The plaster comes off the masonry, some of the rectangular tiles fell off from the main façade a long time ago, the remaining gaps making the building look deplorable, most of the Zsolnay ceramics buttons being broken or completely dislocated (photo 3). The ironwork in front of the main gate has been long gone (photo 2); the polychrome ceramics decoration at the base of the semicircular colonnettes that vertically unify the large window openings is currently exfoliating (photo
4). The parabolic arch at the entrance has been completely, yet improperly rebuilt, irretrievably losing the decorative framing made of polychrome mosaic. Cables of all types increase the note of high disregard for what could have represented one of the main attractions of a touristic and cultural route in Oradea.

Photo 2, 3. The Darvas Villa’s architectural decoration

Photo 4. The Darvas Villa’s polychrome ceramics decoration
Nevertheless, this monument of architecture still preserves some of the exceptionally defining elements, still waiting for a well-deserved restoration made by specialists. Let us discover them together.

Firstly, the purist, geometric style of the architectural composition. The main façade on Iosif Vulcan Street was created in a refined, asymmetrical manner, in an avant-garde vision that bears the mark of the Viennese school of architecture and the school in Darmstadt. The architects of this school fostered a geometrical minimalist, functionalist style, renouncing any type of traditionalist decoration (historical or eclectic). The geometric purism confers a unique touch of austere elegance, with an artful play of empty and full spaces, of light and shade. The two dimensional plan of the façade is strongly dynamised by vast level breakages which introduce spatial depths, of spectacular plasticity, in the volumetric syncopes. The more spectacular emphasis of the façade is given by the curve of the parabolic arch that marks the main entrance. The cement boards of the entrance hall and stairs are also decorated with a rectangular, geometric drawing, of a discreet elegance (photo 5).

At the end of the stairs, the hall is closed by a curtain wall with stained-glasses of an exceptionally artistic value (photo 6). This translucent wall contains the access door to the upper floor, a glazed door having the same game of decorative and floral elements strongly geometrized. Let our eyes enjoy the chromatic harmony and especially the rich textures given by the opalescent coloured glass and especially by the rigorous, yet flexible, drawing of the lead lamellae that define the glass fragments (photo 7).
We have the chance to be so close to an authentic example of a 1900 art of the highest quality. Yet, let us detach ourselves from the spell of this decorative splendour and return to the street rumble, to the façade. The cubic volume of the entrance is surmounted by a terrace that makes the most of the highest visual interest point of the villa: a dreaming Atlas imbued with that “mal de siècle” so specific to the 1900 Art or “weltschmertz” which does not assert anything, on the contrary, it arches itself full of melancholic grace over a monumental vase with stars on it. (photo 8, photo 9).

The stars are made of Zsolnay ceramics, with metallic radiance of highly iridescent green. The same colour effect is reproduced in the ceramic buttons decorated in various geometric ways which rhythm, with an exceptional elegance, with the neutral, unitary field of the grey slabs of polished stone (photo 10); this cladding represents a true brand style of the Vago architects.

The game of the volumes is exceptionally balanced, the dominant visual artistic effect arising from the intrinsic laws of architecture. The decoration, whether carved or made of glass, metal or ceramic, emphasizes the architectural ensemble in a happy manner.
The spirit of pure geometry is reflected in the pinion shape of the balcony balusters. The pinion that crowns the highest volume on the right side of the façade has the same elongated shape. The metallic tracery work emphasizes the harmonious counterpointic musicality of the architectural ensemble by equilateral triangles containing strongly geometrized floral elements. A powerful and dynamic effect of the façade is given by the extremely wide openings of the stained-glass windows that flank the entrance.

The two levels provided with stained-glasses are unified by four high, semi-circular colonnettes; their shafts are elegantly bordered at their ends with multicoloured ceramic strips inspired by the folk repertoire.

The secondary façade, the one facing Crisul Repede River, has lost its expressive characteristics. Nevertheless, the volumes game has preserved its austere cadence. The upstairs balcony is largely arched on a circular route, reminding us of the fact that the architects have designed, in this intimate environmental area with an opening to the small park, a greenhouse with stained glass windows that contained an indoor decorative stone pond.

By the manner it was designed by these two architects of acknowledged European value, this villa proves an avant-garde architectural thinking, organically connected to the whole urban ensemble, able to provide a functional and elegant habitat (photo 11).

*Photo 8, 9, 10. The Darvas Villa’s Atlas*
Although it was built a century ago, the villa is in perfect accord with the contemporary outlook on architecture and dwelling. Waiting for the restoration of its original artistic expressiveness, Darvas – La Roche Villa is one of the most beautiful architectural creations of its time. It is a real privilege for the inhabitants of Oradea to have it in patrimonial heritage of their town.

REFERENCES