

# Othernity – A curatorial attempt to recondition our modern heritage

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On May 24, 2021, the exhibition *Othernity – Reconditioning Our Modern Heritage* opened in the Hungarian Pavilion as part of the 17th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. As a result of a 2019 open tender, Budapest’s Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art commissioned the exhibition project from the *Translations of Modernism* team, made up of the art historian Dániel Kovács along with the architects Attila Róbert Csóka, Szabolcs Molnár and Dávid Smiló.

*Othernity* deals with the post-1945 built heritage of the Central and Eastern European region and examines this problem on the basis of twelve selected buildings in Budapest. Due to their historical associations and dilapidated condition, these buildings are unpopular in Hungary (as they are in most countries in the region). Typical ways of handling them vary between demolition and complete insulation—both approaches resulting in the total loss of any architectural values. Nothing illustrates the urgency of the problem better than the fact that two of the twelve buildings chosen were demolished in the year between the original date planned for the opening of the exhibition, in May 2020 (delayed due to COVID-19), and the actual opening in 2021.

»It is ultimately our collective imagination that will get us to the future«, said the Biennale’s chief curator Hashim Sarkis in an interview. It was based on this premise that the Hungarian curatorial team invited twelve architectural firms from nine countries in the region to rethink the fate of the twelve selected buildings and outline their potential future. These were: A-A Collective (Poland/



[1] *Stars, dead body and other forms that don't change*, installation by LLRLLRR, exhibition view of the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2021



[2] *The Death of a Building*, installation by A-A Collective, exhibition view of the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2021

Denmark/Switzerland), Architecture Uncomfortable Workshop (Hungary), BUDCUD (Poland), b210 (Estonia), KONNTRA (Slovenia/North Macedonia/Croatia), LLRLLRR (Estonia/UK), MADA (Serbia), MNPL Workshop (Ukraine), Paradigma Ariadne (Hungary), PLURAL (Slovakia), Vojtěch Rada (Czechia), and Studio Act (Romania). The invited architects share an insider's knowledge of this particular architectural heritage and its social context. Although the participants are of a generation that no longer has an active first-hand experience of socialism, they have grown up among these buildings—whether it be in Warsaw, Bratislava, Belgrade, Tallinn, Odessa, Krakow, Bucharest, Zagreb or Prague—and have similar experiences of the period's architecture.

The invited teams presented ideas for the application phase, which we then developed during the preparation stages of the exhibition. Due to the pandemic, we only had the opportunity to meet once in person, in the autumn of 2019; otherwise, we kept in touch online.

In the period between the autumn of 2019 and the spring of 2021, we were not only able to complete the plans for the exhibition in Venice, but also the works to be presented at the exhibition. After that, the installations themselves were produced, mostly in Budapest.



[3] *Domus Baths*, installation by BUDCUD, exhibition view of the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2021

Due to the symmetrical floor plan of the Hungarian Pavilion in Venice, we decided to split the contents of the presentation into two parts. In one of the exhibition halls, the so-called Lab, we presented the twelve selected buildings with the help of archival materials, and in the other (the Showroom) we lined up the twelve contemporary reflections envisioned for them.

We left ample space for the architects who were invited to participate. Although the buildings were selected and allocated by the curatorial team, all we asked of the participants was to think through the values of the buildings and what meaning they might bear for the future, without being afraid to take their own personal experiences and memories as a starting point. We also determined the size of the space available, as the dimensions of the pavilion were fixed. As expected, twelve completely different works were created, of which I can now present only a few.

A-A Collective was assigned the building of the National Power Dispatch Centre, designed by Csaba Virág. In 2019 the building, which had once been a very striking, high-tech construction, had been standing empty in Buda Castle for years, despite several protests on the part of architectural circles. A-A Collective asked the question: what if they



[4] General view of the installation in the Lab of the Hungarian Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2021

planned a demise instead of a concept for the future? Their project, *The Death of a Building*, outlines a vision for the Centre in which it would be stripped of its façade and interiors and turned into an urban park for a few years. Then, after this public ›mourning process‹, it would make way for a new building. The intuition of the A-A Collective proved to be prophetic: the centre was entirely demolished in the summer of 2020.

BUDCUD from Krakow was given the former Domus furniture store, built according to the plans of Antal Lázár and Péter Reimholz. They were inspired by the huge, undivided interiors and the characteristic cantilevered floors. The store, which had once served the everyday needs of the average person, was to become a place of luxury and comfort in the future, as a special wellness spa providing its visitors with the stimulation of abstract spatial arrangements, colours and controlled light intensity, humidity and air ozone levels, as well as special sounds.

The LLRLLRR, operating in Tallinn and London, dealt with the Planetarium, built in the 1970s (original architects: László Lux and Tamás Tömöry). They designed a relief entitled *Stars, dead body and other forms that don't change*, which merged a cross-section of the planetarium with an unrealized idea: Étienne-Louis Boullée's famous design for Newton's cenotaph. In addition to the geometric similarity, the idea tells of the future canonization of the modern.

The delay of the exhibition had a positive effect, in that it gave us time to prepare installations of an extremely high quality. We be-



[5] General view of the installation in the Showroom of the Hungarian Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2021

lieve that the exhibition succeeded in arousing interest in the built heritage of the era and in showing how inspiring these buildings can be, even for contemporary architecture —assumptions that have been corroborated by critics. I quote from two published articles:

»Some of the outstanding examples both in terms of content and display include shows such as *Othernity* in the Hungarian pavilion—a carefully and beautifully composed exhibition on alternative narratives of Eastern European modernity displayed through a mixture of contemporary practices involved with urban space, from photography to art to design.«<sup>1</sup>

»There's one moment, in the Hungarian pavilion, that demonstrates the real potential for designers in exploring the vanished built environment of Communism: In a proposal from Ukraine-based MNPL Workshop, a looming 1960s apartment tower would be partially covered in a sort of sky-patterned tablecloth, complete with fluffy white clouds, in a way that simultaneously masks its bulk and celebrates its soaring ambition. As a form of loving satire, it's a pitch-perfect idea, skewering the megalomania that drove the socialist builders while defending their contributions from the megalomania of modern capital. Only architecture could

manage this kind of critical cannibalism: building a new world within the shell of the old, while finding a place for the old world in the shell of the new.«<sup>2</sup>

We hope that *Othernity – Reconditioning Our Modern Heritage* will indeed contribute to a long-term dialogue on our post-1945 building heritage, and perhaps help us understand the potential of these buildings.

Dániel Kovács studied art history at the ELTE in Budapest and La Sapienza in Rome. Since 2010 he has been a board member at the Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre. 2015–2018 he served as programme director at the Collegium Hungaricum Berlin and in 2019 he co-curated the interdisciplinary event series Montag Modus in Berlin, along with Lena Szirmay-Kalos and Jasna Layes-Vinovrski. Currently he works at the Hungarian Museum of Architecture and Monument Protection Documentation Center in Budapest as curator of the post-1945 collection.

## Notes

- 1 Markus Lähteenmäki, »The Shifting Fundamentals«, in: *Strelka Mag*, 29.6.2021, online: <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/the-shifting-fundamentals>, 1.12.2021.
- 2 Ian Volner, »Building Blocs«, in: *Art Forum*, 25.6.2021, online: <https://www.artforum.com/architecture/ian-volner-on-the-17th-venice-architecture-biennale-86147>, 1.12.2021.

## Photo credits

[1]–[5] Dániel Dömölky, 2021.