

Theatre Architecture in Bratislava in the Context of Cultural-Social Changes, Urban-Planning Concepts and Architectural Innovations over Three Centuries

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Abstract: Architecture of theatres in Bratislava is interesting topic of research from various perspectives – urban, cultural, social, and architectural. Both buildings of the Slovak National Theatre – the first one called historical building situating in the centre of the city on Hviezdoslav Square and also the second, new one located on a former industrial periphery on Pribinova Street – are remarkable architectural works. Besides that, planning and thinking about appropriate location of the theatre buildings took place in important phases of urban planning in Bratislava, in different historical periods. While the original historical theatre was decided to be built relatively quickly – on the orders of the Queen Maria Theresa of Hungary and Bohemia in the 18th Century on grounds acquired by demolishing the city walls, the location of the new theatre was the result of architectural discourse lasting several decades, from inter-war period to late seventieth of the 20th Century. It illustrates, what an important social theme was the search for the location of theatre in urban structure of Bratislava in any political arrangement across three centuries.

Key words: Theatre architecture, Bratislava, town planning, social context

The buildings occupied by the Slovak National Theatre (Slovenské národné divadlo, abbr. SND) in Bratislava, one of the nation's foremost cultural institutions, consist of the historic theatre on Hviezdoslavovo námestie – originally the City Theatre (Ferdinand Fellner, Hermann Gottlieb Helmer, 1884 – 1886) and the new theatre in Pribinova ulica (Martin Kusý, Pavol Paňák, Peter Bauer, 1980 – 2007). Not only are these buildings noteworthy architectural achievements of the 19th and 20th centuries in their formal aspects, but also in their technical and conceptual innovations.

As much as the actual founding of the SND formed a key moment in the cultural life of Bratislava and Slovakia, the decisions regarding the location

of the theatre buildings in the city crystalized, in both cases, during points of far-reaching change in the planning of Bratislava, yet also in greatly differing historical periods separated by an entire century. Moreover, the siting of the present-day historic building of the SND was determined by its predecessor – the first permanent city theatre, dating from the reign of Queen Maria Theresa. And indeed, the construction of the historic SND building was completed far in advance of the founding of the Slovak National Theatre itself, which occurred only in 1920. As for the new SND building, its realisation spanned a long 27 years, being completed in a radically different political regime and social atmosphere than the one prevailing at the time when its designs were created. With this in mind, it is necessary to analyse the theatre buildings in a wider historical framework and greater spatial context in the development of the city, as described, which extends beyond both buildings' immediate situations.

The Theatre as a City-Forming Element

The coronation of Maria Theresa in June of 1741 formed one of the most significant moments in the history of Bratislava – or as it was then known, Pressburg (Prešporok/Pozsony) – after it assumed the status of the Hungarian capital in 1541 in connection with the territorial expansion of the Ottoman Empire. In addition, the queen supported cultural life in her cities. With her husband Francis I, Holy Roman Emperor, she tried to create the best possible conditions in her seat in Vienna primarily for the theatre.¹ On 14 March 1741, the Burgtheater was opened in Vienna, located close by the Hofburg Imperial Palace on Michaelerplatz in the Innere Stadt. The theatre, though, did not then have its own building, but used for its performances the adapted imperial ball-games court.²

For Maria Theresa, the city of Pressburg (now Bratislava) naturally had a special significance after Vienna as the site of her coronation. During her reign, she regularly visited it and took an interest in its architectural and urban transformation. Already in the first decades of the 18th century, Pressburg/Prešporok played host to a lively theatre scene in the form of itinerant

1 For more see KNOPFLER, M. J. *Das Theresianische Wien*. Wien : Hermann Böhlhaus, 1979, pp. 69 – 71.

2 SCHWARZ, O. *Hinter den Fassaden der Ringstrasse*. Wien : Amalthea Signum Verlag, 2014, p. 204.

theatre companies and small theatres in burghers' houses or aristocratic palaces. Performances were also held in marketplaces, inns, or the gardens of noble residences. Yet a fitting building for a city stage was still lacking.

The situation changed precisely during the period of preparation for Maria Theresa's coronation. At the urging of the future queen of Hungary and Bohemia, a temporary theatre was built – reflecting both the pressures of time and financing. This three-storey wooden structure occupied the site of the present school, cloister, and Church of Notre Dame in Palackého ulica.³ This theatre was intended to serve its purpose only during the assembly and coronation. Its realisation formed part of a wider context of construction work initiated by these two events, which were scheduled to last for several weeks. During this period, noble families commissioned palaces allowing them to live in the city to match their demands and ambitions. After the assembly meetings, their time was occupied by feasts, concerts, balls and theatre productions. Even the coronation was a court ritual with many theatrical elements, including the participation of the military, while the broader public ate, drank wine and danced in celebration of the new sovereign's ascent to the throne.⁴

The plot that the city set out for the construction of the theatre was situated outside the inner core. Additionally, the wooden theatre was situated far from the Castle, enclosed with its own ramparts, where Maria Theresa had resided for five days before her coronation procession emerged on 25 June 1741. At the same time, though, the theatre was situated on 'Coronation Hill', where the procession traditionally ended with the ceremonial oath of the new reigning monarch. This site had, thanks to its historic significance reinforced ever since the first coronation of Maximilian II in 1563, a notable city-forming potential, bearing in mind that it then lay outside the city gates, subjected not only to the possibility of military attack but also the threat of the frequently-flooding Danube. After the assembly and the coronation of Maria Theresa, the theatre was disassembled.

A permanent theatre was constructed in 1776 through the efforts of Count György (Juraj) Csáky, who invested the funds for its construction un-

3 HORVÁTH, V. *Bratislavský topografický lexikon* [Topographic Lexicon of Bratislava]. Bratislava : TATRAN, 1990, p. 126.

4 LAJCHA, L. *Divadlo v korunovačnom meste* [Theatre in a Coronation Town]. In MAŤAŠÍK, A. (ed.). *Slovenské divadlo/The Slovak Theatre. Historická divadelná architektúra* [Historical Theatre Architecture in Slovakia]. Bratislava : Národné divadelné centrum, 1996 (appendix, not paginated).

der the condition that the city provide the land for free. The building was designed by the city master builder Matthäus Walch, once a pupil of Franz Anton Hillebrandt, as a late Baroque structure of lengthwise outline, symmetrically divided into two nearly identical sections for the theatre and dance hall.⁵ Initially, only the theatre section was completed, starting operations on 9 November 1776 with the play *The Medicis* by Johann Christian Brandes. Maria Theresa again displayed her interest in improving the cultural life of Pressburg in November 1775, when she came to view the still-incomplete theatre in person. Only later was the rear section of the building completed with the aid of Csáky's descendants, with the dance hall opening in 1793.⁶

The location chosen for the theatre was the open area facing the Fish Gate (Rybárska brána), only a few metres north from the site of the earlier wooden temporary theatre. Its situation within the urban structure was most significantly influenced by the directive of Maria Theresa from 1774 calling for the demolition of the inner fortifications and filling of the city moat, occurring in the period 1775 – 1778. This process, undertaken in parallel with many other European fortified cities, allowed for the unification of the space of the central core with its suburbs, as well as the routing of new streets on the site of the ramparts, giving the first impulse for the creation of an urban ring-boulevard. Shortly before the start of demolition, the queen assigned the Viennese architect Franz Anton Hillebrandt the task of preparing the first regulatory plan for Bratislava.⁷ Hillebrandt ranked alongside Giovanni Battista Martinelli in the circle of architects who played a significant role in the personal building chamber that Maria Theresa established for state construction activities in the kingdom of Hungary.⁸ Hillebrandt in his regulatory plan addressed most ambitiously the treatment of the southern section of the fortifications. In the eastern section of the moat, he planned

5 For more see DULLA, M. – STACHOVÁ, M. – POHANIČOVÁ, J. – KRIVOŠOVÁ, J. – VODRÁŽKA, P. – MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. – LUKÁČOVÁ, E. *Majstri architektúry* [Masters of Architecture]. Bratislava : Perfekt, 2005, p. 8 – 9.

6 LUKÁČOVÁ, E. – POHANIČOVÁ, J. *Rozmanité 19. storočie. Architektúra na Slovensku od Hefeľeho po Jurkoviča* [Omnigenous 19th Century. Architecture in Slovakia from Hefeľe to Jurkovič]. Bratislava : Perfekt, 2008, p.14.

7 For more see MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. Earliest Conceptual Interventions into the Urban Form. In MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. – SZALAY, P. – HABERLANDOVÁ, K. – KRIŠTEKOVÁ, L. – BOČKOVÁ, M. *(Un)Planned Bratislava*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2019, p. 10.

8 WAGNER, V. *Franz Anton Hillebrandt a jeho staviteľská činnosť na Slovensku* [Franz Anton Hillebrandt and His Building Activities in Slovakia]. Turčiansky Svätý Martin : n.s., 1934, p. 2 – 3.

two new streets (today's Gorkého and Jesenského), while in the western section, in front of the newly rising masonry theatre, he defined a new square.⁹ The one city gate saved from the demolition of the fortifications was the Michael Gate (Michalská brána) close to the edge between the present-day squares Hurbanovo námestie and Námestie SNP. All the others – Vydrická, Laurinská, and even Rybárska – were torn down, the last on the site where the new theatre would arise. Among the built works realised by Hillebrandt in connection with the demolition of the fortifications and the acquiring of new construction spaces, we should mention the city granary, with its main façade turned north to face the cloister of Notre Dame and hence also the already planned theatre.¹⁰

Additionally, the urban space containing the theatre, which belonged to the area historically known as Grössling, then Franz Josef-Stadt, could gradually be modified after the removal of the fortifications into the promenade by the Fish Gate (Fischerthor – Promenade, 1785), also known as the Spatzier-Platz or Spazier Allee. For the shaping of today's Hviezdoslavovo námestí (in the 1840 – 1852 period still called Theaterplatz) in its current appearance and area, the positioning of the theatre at its front and the orientation of the main façade to the west formed one of the determining city-shaping factors. The promenade, built under the tenure of burgermeister Josef Stettner and running from the theatre as far as Rybné námestie (Fischplatz), consisted of four walkways lined with five rows of trees,¹¹ representing a typology of urban landscaping for recreational purposes arising along former fortifications and typical for many European cities at the end of the 18th century.¹² Additionally, since Hillebrandt's designs succeeded in being realised to a considerable extent, they created for Pressburg at the start of the 19th century particularly good spatial conditions for the creation of the previously mentioned urban ring, or circular urban boulevard, later supplemented with a horse-drawn rail line (1840) and then an electric tram (1895), with the final stop right by the theatre.

9 For more see MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. – BOČKOVÁ, M. The Ambiguous Ring/Inner City Ring. In MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. – SZALAY, P. – HABERLANDOVÁ, K. – KRIŠTEKOVÁ, L. – BOČKOVÁ, M. (Un)Planned Bratislava, p. 264.

10 WAGNER, V. *Franz Anton Hillebrandt a jeho staviteľská činnosť na Slovensku* [Franz Anton Hillebrandt and His Building Activities in Slovakia], p. 16.

11 SZEKCSŐ, T. Pressburg und dessen Umgebung in topographischer und statistischer Hinsicht. In *Pressburg und seine Umgebung*. Pressburg, 1865, p. 114 – 115.

12 ČIČO, M. Oddychové a výletné miesta Prešporka koncom 18. a v prvej polovici 19. storočia v kontexte rozvoja krajinárstva [Leisure in Pressburg in the Turn of 18th and 19th Century in a Mirror of Landscape Painting]. In *Forum Historiae*, 2016, Vol. 10, Issue 2, p. 116.

Maria Theresa influenced the change in the city's image no less through initiating other projects in the spaces linked to the frontage of the theatre on today's Hviezdoslavovo námestie, most notably on Námestie Ľ. Štúra, which contains the previously mentioned coronation hill (originally 'Kráľovský kopec' / Königsberg gegen Neustadt, 1709). On this square, which reaches up to the Danube bank with a view toward the opposite bank in Petržalka, as part of the construction of the first public urban park, the Sternallee (now Sad Janka Kráľa), she launched in the 1770s the first efforts at river regulation. This plan illustrates how the queen was aware of the importance of the embankment space in the city, not only for economic reasons but also for relaxation, cultural or social events, or even political and public representation. Through Hillebrandt's efforts, a new coronation hill was created on Námestie Ľ. Štúra in 1776, since the previous hill now occupied the site reserved for the planned city granary. Hillebrandt moved the hill closer to the square's centre, on the visual axis from Petržalka and the river, as well as the axis from the city – from the space in front of the theatre.

When in 1870 this coronation hill was removed, at the bequest of the mayor Heinrich Justi, for additional regulation of the river, plans were made that Námestie Ľ. Štúra would eventually be supplemented with a monument, though its precise purpose remained unspecified. A suitable occasion arose only much later, in the year of the Hungarian millennial celebration (1897): the square received an equestrian statue of Maria Theresa from the sculptor Ján (János) Fadrusz, an homage to the monarch who in the 18th century had given the decisive impulse to the urban development of Pressburg, while at precisely this moment the definitive placement of the city theatre was also being made.

The spaces of the river embankment, along with the ring of open territory along the perimeter of the demolished fortifications, offered the chance for the successive construction of imposing public buildings or the development of economic activity. Tivadar Ortway wrote with respect to the construction on the promenade in front of the theatre in 1905 that " (...) the buildings will give the square a metropolitan stamp – here, where in medieval times there stood right beside the city moat various cattle-barns, tool sheds, latrines, the mouths of sewage gutters, after the demolition of the walls and filling-in of the moat there rose buildings, each more beautiful than the next (...)." ¹³

13 ORTVAY, T. *Ulice a námestia Bratislavy – Mesto Františka Jozefa. Franz Josefstadt. Ferencz-József-Város.* [Streets and Squares of Bratislava. Franz Joseph Town]. Bratislava : Marenčin PT, 2005, p. 26.

Moreover, the newly created urban space near the theatre became, right at the moment of its creation, a significant traffic intersection of the city. This area was defined no less by the pedestrian flows between the historic core, the river embankment, and the suspension bridge.

Establishing the Placement of the Theatre in the Urban Structures in the Later 19th Century

Starting in the 1860s, Vienna began to demolish its own city walls, which had by then definitively lost any defensive function. Because of their massive thickness, as well as the extensive counterscarp (*Glacis*), the space was available for creating the essential urbanistic units of the 19th century city along both sides of the emerging ring. The creation of this outer boulevard, the famed Ringstrasse, atop the former defensive system was preceded by a regulatory competition initiated at the end of 1857 by Emperor Franz Josef I, in which the winning design was that of the Viennese architect and planner Ludwig Christian Friedrich von Förster.

Even the new court theatre (Burgtheater) was erected along the Ring (Gottfried Semper, Karl Freiherr von Hasenauer, 1888), at the axis of the City Hall, completed a few years previously (*Wiener Rathaus*, Friedrich von Schmidt, 1872 – 1883). Finished still earlier, in 1872, was the city theatre (Stadttheater), designed by the Viennese architects Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Gottlieb Helmer.

In Pressburg, a decision was made at the start of the 1880s to revitalise the increasingly decrepit building of the city theatre. Yet the original plan, involving the renovation of the 18th century structure and its possible expansion with new spaces offering more modern technical equipment, was altered. The evaluation of the building's structural condition, entrusted to Ferdinand Fellner, found that it was on the verge of collapse.¹⁴ And in the wake of the fire that destroyed Vienna's original Ringtheater in 1881, claiming several hundred lives, the authorities of Pressburg then shifted to a more radical solution: to demolish the extant theatre and build a new one.¹⁵ Fur-

14 In January 1879, a part of ceiling fell down in the dance hall (Reduta) added in 1793 to the Theatre building. For more see POHANIČOVÁ, J. – BUDAJ, P. *Storočie Feiglerovcov. Príbeh bratislavských architektov, staviteľov a stavebných podnikateľov* [The Century of the Feigler family. The Story of the Bratislava Architects, Builders and Property Entrepreneurs]. Bratislava : TRIO PUBLISHING, 2015, p. 138.

15 For more see SCHWARZ, O. *Hinter den Fassaden der Ringstrasse*, p. 181 and subsequent.

ther support for this step was offered by the statement of the chief city engineer, Anton Sendlein that in the case of a fire in the old theatre, out of a full house of eight hundred spectators less than a quarter would be expected to survive.¹⁶ At first, the Pressburg City Council addressed this problem through the creation of temporary exterior emergency staircases, though the city's newspaper *Pressburger Zeitung* was strongly critical. Hence, in 1884, the old theatre building closed its doors for the last time, and in the same year its demolition began.

Ferdinand Fellner and his partner Hermann Gottlieb Helmer were the authors of the design for the new structure, a project approved in 1885 by the Hungarian Royal Ministry of Public Works and Transport. The selection of these architects, whose cooperation had started with the founding of their joint Vienna atelier in 1873, was no accident. The design of the previously mentioned Vienna Stadttheater was only the start of the successful creative career of these two architects, whose relations arose across a wide section of Europe: e.g. in Brno (*Mahenovo divadlo*, 1882), Rijeka (1883 – 1885), or Prague (the New German Theatre, now the State Opera, 1887).¹⁷ Additionally, both the theatres in Prague and Brno similarly were placed on the edge of demolished city fortifications, each in their own urban rings. The theatres of Fellner and Helmer are marked by strong formal similarities, yet the architects managed to integrate as well successive technical innovations, primarily improvements to the safety of interior functions (initiated after the tragedy of the Ringtheater, particularly in the design of the staircases) and original artistic touches reflecting the local context of each individual theatre building.

The imposing eclectic palace of the Pressburg theatre, bearing all the characteristic signs of its authors' work, was ceremonially opened on 22 September 1886. Its construction lasted just over a year, which can be ascribed to the skills of the building contractors, Ignatz Feigler Jr. and Alexander Feigler. Their company could well be the greatest example of the family construction firms of Bratislava, with a history of operation spanning nearly 150 years.¹⁸

16 GAŽO, M. – HOLČÍK, Š. – ZINSER, O. *Bratislava pred sto rokmi a dnes* [Bratislava a Hundred Years Ago and Today]. Bratislava : Marenčin PT, 2003, p. 63.

17 For more see LIPSKY, T. Nationaltheatre Bratislava. In *Fellner & Helmer. Die Architekten der Illusion Theaterbau in Europa*. Graz : Stadtmuseum Graz, 1999, p. 139 – 141.

18 POHANIČOVÁ, J. – BUDAJ, P. *Storočie Feiglerovcov. Príbeh bratislavských architektov, stavitelov a stavebných podnikateľov* [The Century of the Feigler family. The Story of the Bratislava Architects, Builders and Property Entrepreneurs], pp. 6 – 11.

The productions of this firm are equally a testament to the regular implementation of innovative construction elements and procedures throughout the 19th century, allowing for the rapid realisation of extensive and spatially complex building commissions. Proof of this success is given by the rapid pace of construction of the Bratislava theatre; after all, theatre buildings were not realised as an everyday assignment. Indeed, a theatre formed an exceptional challenge for architect and builder, a major event followed by professional experts, the cultural sphere, journalists, and indeed the wider public. Special emphasis was placed on the tempo of construction, while the success of the result lay not only in the quality of the design but equally in the targeted selection of local assistants and contractors.¹⁹

Along with the completion of the new, stylistically more imposing theatre with technical facilities fully matching the era's demands and possibilities, the urban space in front of the theatre continued to be shaped, with the addition of the Ganymede' fountain (Viktor Tilgner, 1887) and park landscaping.

The Theatre and the Beginnings of Modern Urban Planning

Though mid-19th century Pressburg never saw the realisation of a complex urban project linked to extensive new construction, as embodied by Vienna's Ringstrasse –, particularly if we recall that the city's fortifications had been demolished almost a century previously – other modernisation efforts in the city's fabric, made possible equally through various innovations in the construction industry, were no less vital.

In 1849 and 1850, following a commission from the city council, the Budapest engineer Miklós Halácsy prepared a regulatory plan for the city. It was not a "regulation" in the fullest sense of the word, since Halácsy's plan affected primarily the extant urban structure, yet it sketched out a future street network and the structure of city blocks, prefiguring the eventual growth of the city in the eastward direction. In parallel, an essential condition for organising Bratislava's urban development at the end of the 19th century and early in the 20th was the City Construction Statute from 1872.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 139.

²⁰ MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. Premeny obrazu mesta. Storočie plánovania a výstavby Bratislavy [Changing the Image of the City. Century of Planning and Building of Bratislava]. In DUDEKOVÁ, G. (ed.): *Medzi provinciou a metropolou* [Between the Province and the Capital City]. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV, 2012, p. 131.

A further formulation of a ring in its rudimentary stages, itself influenced by treatment of the urban structures in the vicinity of the theatre, was confirmed by the city regulatory plans prepared right at the turn of the century (Viktor Bernárdt's plan from 1905, the plan of the Technical Department from 1906).²¹ In connection with these activities of the city, changes also began to occur in the shaping of the block behind the theatre, outlined by today's streets Gorkého (after 1786 St. Andreae Gasse, after 1823 Theatergasse, after 1836 Rosengasse, after 1839 Andrassy Gyula-Gasse) and Jenesského (after 1786 Neustift, after 1804 Rosengasse). Gradually, modernisation also affected the buildings along the northern edge of Gorkého ulica. Since the new theatre building was shorter than its predecessor, without the additional dance hall, or 'Reduta', an open space emerged, that of today's Komenského námestie, containing a public park (after 1836 Redouten Platz, after 1879 Csákyplatz). Toward the east, in the direction of Štúrova ulica, once the site of the medieval fortress known as the 'Old Camp' (Starý tábor), the building of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce was built to the plans of architect Jozef Hubert in 1903, with its main façade facing the square. The block between Komenského námestie and Štúrova ulica was later filled by the headquarters of the Assicurazioni Generali and Moldavia Generali Insurance Companies (Alexander Skutecký, 1935) and completed with the construction of the Slovak National Bank (Emil Belluš, 1936 – 1938). With its asymmetrical four-wing layout to match the curve of Štúrova ulica and its main façade facing the same street, it forms a significant portion of the ring-section linking the river embankment with the modern city centre – Námestie SNP (in the inter-war years Námestie republiky).

The Theatre in the Young Metropolis

The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Habsburg monarchy) and the formation of the Czecho-Slovak Republic in 1918 were decisive historic events bringing sweeping changes to the political and social life of Bratislava. In turn, they were reflected in a revival of construction activity in the city. The mosaic of the interwar cultural changes in Bratislava (officially bearing this name only after 6 March 1919) included, just under two years after the

21 For more see MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. – LOVRA, É. – PASTOREKOVÁ, L. Červený alebo modrý? Začiatky moderného plánovania Bratislavy [Red or Blue? The Start of Modern Planning in Bratislava]. In *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 2017, Vol. 51, Issue 1 – 2, pp. 30 – 44.

founding of Czechoslovakia on 1 March 1920, the founding of the Slovak National Theatre – the first professional theatre company in Slovakia.

The first mention of the need to create a new building for this cultural institution was an article by the poet and translator Bohumil Mathesius, which appeared on 17 June 1920 in the newspaper *Slovenský denník*. The aim of building a new theatre formed a natural part of the wider context of the emancipatory efforts of Slovakia's cultural scene after the formation of the new Czechoslovak state.²² Yet even with the finding of a way to provide financing for the construction – organising a lottery of donated items – in the end all the money collected was invested into the existing, now somewhat outdated building.²³

While the discussions on the construction of a new theatre building waned, already by the start of the 1920s one major theme of architectonic debate coming to the forefront became that of urban planning. In the light of the social changes of 1918, the work on the inter-war regulatory plans for Bratislava was long assumed to be a thoroughly new step, rejecting all previous efforts in the field. Research in later years, though, has shown that it continued to rely on several fruitful ideas in the regulatory plan by Antal Palóczi, completed in 1917. The two Czech architects who worked most intensively on the question of Bratislava's regulatory planning in the early 1920s were Alois Balán and Jiří Grossmann. Their prime target of critique was initially Palóczi's solution of the rail network assuming the movement of the main station to the east, yet in time they came to agree with him and further developed this idea in their own regulatory studies. Connected to the moving of the rail station were other ideas with significant impact on the entire city, primarily the proposed construction of an urban boulevard from the new station that would have curved around toward the south to the industrial zone of Mlynské Nivy and the river port. This boulevard would have run through the former outer suburb of Blumentál, giving it the strong potential for construction of a new urban centre. In part for this reason, Alois Balán and Jiří Grossmann in their study for Greater Bratislava situ-

22 For more see LASLAVÍKOVÁ, J. *Mestské divadlo v Prešporku na sklonku 19. storočia. Medzi provinciou a metropolou* [The City Theatre in Pressburg at the End of the 19th Century. Between the Province and the Capital City]. Bratislava : Hudobné centrum – Historický ústav SAV, 2020, p. 28 and following.

23 MARTIŠOVÁ-BLAHOVÁ, E. *Slovenské národné divadlo 1920 – 1995* [The Slovak National Theatre 1920 – 1995]. Bratislava : Národné divadelné centrum, 1996, p. 3.

ated the new theatre building precisely here.²⁴ The work that these architects put into their urban regulatory studies paid off in the international competition for a general regulatory plan held in 1929. Though they only won third prize in this competition, and even the highest-ranked design by architects Juraj Tvarožek, Alois Dryák and Karel Chlumecký was never realised, the discussion about the new theatre and its location managed to remain uninterrupted.

The main impulse for construction in Bratislava after 1918 was primarily the lack of administrative buildings and apartment blocks, yet even buildings for cultural purposes eventually came onto the agenda. In 1925, the headquarters of the Slovak Art Association (Umelecká beseda Slovenska) were completed and opened on today's Šafárikovo námestie, another major work of Alois Balán – Jiří Grossmann, regarded not only as the first modernist work in their oeuvre, but as a breakthrough in the development of modern architecture in Slovakia. Perhaps most influential in the later 1920s was the discussion around the competition for the building of the Slovak National Museum, eventually realised in 1928 from the plans of Milan Michal Harminc on Vajanského nábrežie. In the very same year, a competition was also announced for the new theatre building, ending without success even though the theatre was intended as one of the important landmarks in the previously mentioned new urban centre in Blumentál. This district was planned in the form of modern urban blocks constructed in the 'national style', including a city hall as well as a new public space of a large square with the theatre.

A few years later, in 1935, work began on reconstruction of the theatre on Hviezdoslavovo námestie. It, however, only concerned the modernisation of the stage and set technology, which was realised by the firm Českomoravská-Kolben-Daněk. A partial solution to the insufficient space came with the completion of the new drama stage for the SND, named 'Divadlo P. O. Hviezdoslava'. This theatre was opened in 1955 in the building of the Slovak National Bank in Štúrova ulica (now the General Prosecutors' Office of the Slovak Republic), following the realisation of the project by Eugen Kramár and Štefan Lukačovič from 1942. The result was a unique concept integrating in a single structure the bank premises, a shopping arcade and an entire theatre, with the building itself situated once again on

24 BALÁN, A. – GROSSMANN, J. Regulační studie Velké Bratislavy [Regulation study for Greater Bratislava]. In *Časopis ČSL architektů SIA*, 1902 – 1926, Vol. 25, Issue 1, p. 50.

the city ring, which in the interwar years had already acquired its metropolitan appearance.²⁵

The Theatre as an Axiom of Bratislava's Post-war Urban Planning

Without question, the year 1945 is another enormous milestone of the 20th century in Bratislava's development with the arrival of a new political regime and the associated changes to urban planning grounded in the assumptions for its post-war growth. A central role in reflections on the city's further growth was played by heritage protection, considering the need to deal with the poor condition of historic buildings in urban centres. Emerging as a national priority was the explicit protection of heritage zones in the form of urban heritage reservations, yet at the same time the large-scale demolition of historic urban fabric and its replacement with entirely new construction became a far more realistic possibility than ever before, even though the subject had been broached already by Antal Palóczy and further expanded by the inter-war Modernists. Assistance to this effort was further given by the nationalisation of the housing stock. Discussions on the demolition of historic urban formations and their replacement with modern structures concentrated primarily on the oldest section of Bratislava, i.e. the Castle and the southern section of the Lower Town below the Castle (Podhradie) with the former subject villages of Vydrica, Zuckermandel and Osada sv. Mikuláša. These formed the very earliest core of the city settlement in its historic course, and thus bore an indisputable historic value, yet had long been neglected and left damaged by fires or military action.²⁶

At the start of the 1960s, the square Rybné námestie, as the main transport nexus at the western end of Hviezdoslavovo námestie opposite to the historic theatre building, linking it to the settlements below the Castle, was chosen as one of the development localities outlining what was now termed the 'Central Urban Area'. Besides this locality, the other focal points of this conception, published in 1961 in the journal *Projekt*, were today's Hodžovo

25 For more see SZALAY, P. Mesto v zázemí [The City in the Background]. In SZALAY, P. – BOGÁR, M. – HABERLANDOVÁ, K. – BARTOŠOVÁ, N. – KRIŠTEKOVÁ, L. In *Vojnová Bratislava 1939 – 1945* [War and Bratislava 1939 – 1945]. Bratislava : Marenčin PT, 2019, p. 106.

26 For more see MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. Post-war Renewal of the City]. In MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. – SZALAY, P. – HABERLANDOVÁ, K. – KRIŠTEKOVÁ, L. – BOČKOVÁ, M. *(Un)Planned City*, pp. 46 – 54.

námestie (then Mierové námestie), Americké námestie in the former suburb of Blumentál, the Central Market in Miletičova ulica and Martanovičova ulica. Inside the Central Urban Area, a siting competition was held for the location of the new building for the Slovak National Theatre. In total, 16 proposals were submitted for the theatre's potential situation: in 13, the theatre was situated in the inner centre, while 3 others had it on the embankment (two of them directly within Podhradie on Rybné námeste and one in Martanovičova ulica, close to the river port).

Placing the theatre on Rybné námestie seemed most promising with respect to harmonisation with the city masterplan, as well as matching a long-established trend favouring the transformation of the Danube embankment into a representative space containing the buildings of the nation's most important cultural institutions (the Slovak National Museum, the Slovak National Gallery and the Slovak Philharmonic). However, the initial designs were insufficiently supported with analysis of the urban clearance required, and failed to address the wider urban relationships.²⁷

At the same time, the siting competition was intended to test the idea of the 'lengthwise axis' with respect to the variant locations proposed for the theatre. The north-south connection of the central area, which was planned in the post-war years as the underlying compositional element of the entire city, was allegedly first termed the 'lengthwise axis' by urban planner Emanuel Hruška, drawing both on the early 20th century idea of Antal Palóczi for connecting the riverbank with the forested hillsides of the Lesser Carpathians and on the plan for an urban boulevard running from the rail station to the river port published by Alois Balán and Jiří Grossmann in the 1920s, which resonated with the planned situation of the new theatre building close to Americké námestie. Ján Šteller, one of the post-war planners assisting in the creation of directive urban plans, prepared a document defining the axis as a transverse greenbelt sided with rows of public buildings.²⁸ However, the competition held at the same time made it all too clear that the transverse axis lacked the requirements for creating a cultural-social centre along its length; similarly, it failed to produce a complex solution for the area below

²⁷ *Projekt*, 1961, Vol. 3, Issue 12, p. 235.

²⁸ For more see SZALAY, P. – KRIŠTEKOVÁ, L. *Fragmenty konceptov/Vládna štvrt' a priečna os* [Fragments of Concepts/Government District and the Transverse Axis. In MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. – SZALAY, P. – HABERLANDOVÁ, K. – KRIŠTEKOVÁ, L. – BOČKOVÁ, M. (Un)Planned Bratislava, p. 206.

the castle and the embankment. After the siting competition, a theoretical architectural competition was held for a proposed theatre building on Rybné námestie and the wider urban context, in which the architects were required to pay attention to the future design of the bridgehead of the planned Danube bridge. The results, though, were never brought into realisation. In 1972, though, the new bridge across the river Danube – the Bridge of the Slovak National Uprising (Most SNP) – was completed, the construction of which led to extensive demolition of the historic built fabric on Rybné námestie, as well as the old settlements under the Castle. Yet a question still unresolved was the form of Podhradie, along with the plan for the location of the new theatre.

The construction of the theatre in the immediate timeframe was unrealistic, yet at the same time the historic building was threatened with closure after a hygienic investigation that revealed severe structural deficiencies. As a result, in 1965 steps were taken toward preparing project documentation for the enlargement and modernisation of the theatre on Hviezdoslavovo námestie (general contractor Stavoprojekt, chief designer Rajmund Hirth, assistance Vladimír Hazucha, 1965 – 1972).²⁹ Next to the rebuilding of Bratislava Castle, the theatre restoration formed the most significant heritage project on such a large scale in this period. Moreover, it made use of several technical innovations. Since the theatre is located on land originally occupied by the Danube riverbed, and hence originally the cellar was regularly flooded with groundwater, it was necessary to surround the building with an insulation wall anchored in an impenetrable layer of soil. Similarly, the new addition was grounded on a “diaphragm” system, i.e. a Milan wall sunk into impermeable soil, creating several below-ground floors used for ballet halls and set storage.³⁰ In terms of the urban planning of the theatre environs, the enlargement of the building meant that the public space of Komenského námestie with its park was reduced and served as a car park.

In 1979, a competition for the new theatre building was once again held. Possible construction sites included the original locations in the Central Urban Area, though other sites considered included three variations of positioning the theatre on the opposite bank of the Danube – in the suburb

29 MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. – DLHÁŇOVÁ, V. *Divadelná architektúra na Slovensku* [Theatre Architecture in Slovakia]. Bratislava : 2001, Divadelný ústav, p. 81.

30 MAXA, M. – RAJMUND, H. SND/Bratislava. Rekonštrukcia a prístavba budovy opery SND v Bratislave [SND/Bratislava. Reconstruction and Extension of the Opera Building in Bratislava]. In *Projekt*, 1972, Vol. 14, Issue 10, p. 42 – 47.

of Petržalka, making this rapidly growing area into a full-scale modern district of Bratislava and changing it from a city “beside the Danube” to one “on the Danube.” However, eventually the focus of attention turned, on the recommendation of the Office of the Chief Architect, to the locality of Martanovičova ulica (now Pribinova ulica), where extensive demolition of historic urban structures would not be a requirement. The final choice for the situation of the new national theatre thus illustrates a shift in the relationship of planners to historic urban cores starting in the early 1970s and the contemporary ideas on the conception of Bratislava’s growth. Additionally, this industrial district was also witnessing a gradual decline in manufacturing, while the river port itself never achieved its earlier figures for frequency and capacity of shipping under post-war economic conditions. While these industrial complexes had been provided with a detailed mapping starting in the mid-1970s by the Bratislava City Board of the Care of Historical Monuments and Preservation of Nature, it must be said that practically no vision then existed for their preservation in the sense of architectural heritage. Hence it could be stated unequivocally that “the space of the central urban zone, bordered by the left bank of the Danube, Dostojevského rad and the route of the new bridge leading into Košická ulica [now Most Apollo – authors’ note], creates the preconditions for the situation of the Slovak National Theatre.”³¹

The 1979 architectural competition for the new theatre was won, from among 53 project submissions, by a group of then-youthful architects, Peter Bauer, Martin Kusý and Pavol Paňák from the State Research and Project Standardization Institute. They positioned the theatre, as did most of the other participants, in the ‘first horizon’, i.e. on the north side of Martanovičova (now Pribinova) ulica. The main urbanistic advantage of this placement is the contact with the river and the city centre at the same time, visually underscored by the landmark of the Castle visible at the central axis of the street Martanovičova (Pribinova). The winning authors connected these attributes to two volumes, turned toward each other from the main axis at a 45-degree angle, a move allowing the visitor to perceive from the inside not only the unique visual link between the Castle and the Danube but equally the theatre building itself. The wider urban plan for the zone was proposed following the principle of a street with a high cornice line and an

31 FAŠANG, V. Novostavba Slovenského národného divadla. Výsledky súťaže. [The New Building of Slovak National Theatre. Competition Results]. In *Projekt*, 1980, Vol. 21, Issue 10, p. 5.

atmosphere evoking the spaces of the historic core.³² Unlike the other participants, who by contrast largely proposed compositions of freestanding, isolated volumes, the Bauer – Kusý – Paňák team created a natural continuation and complement to the urban context of the specific locality. The building of the new SND, in essence, was conceived not merely as an autonomous volume, but as an integral part of Bratislava as a whole, and equally the cultural focus of the new urban district. Just like the construction in the 18th century of the first masonry theatre on Hviezdoslavovo námestie, the realisation of the new theatre was to be closely tied to the transformation of its wider surroundings, in this case the ‘Zone Martanovičova’ – on either side of the square in front of the theatre, the winning design assumed the construction of the buildings of the ‘Museum of the Workers’ Revolutionary Movement and Communist Movement’ and a large hotel. Likewise, from the very outset the plan included the pedestrian connection of this new cultural-relaxation urban space to the central core with a riverbank promenade.

The architecture of the new theatre bears the traits of the postmodernist architecture of the 1980s. Among the technical innovations applied in its construction, it is worth noting the unique ceiling construction realised by the company Hutní montáže Ostrava. In its urban setting, the theatre building created a spatial axiom for the basis of the development of this urban locality even after the changing political regime in 1989, but not in the original extent. A major role in how this space was later treated was occupied by the emergence of private investors, in other words a category of participants who were naturally never imagined at the time of the creation of the theatre’s first designs. As such, the embankment line was filled in with the commercial-social centre Eurovea and Námestie M.R. Štefánika to the east, shaping the entrance space for the theatre from the river.

As for the actual construction of the theatre, which first began in 1986, it spanned several different governmental arrangements, not to mention ministers of culture or general directors of the SND. In 2004, the government even decided to sell the incomplete building into private hands, though after great public pressure through the initiative ‘A Voice for Culture’ the decision

32 KUSÝ, M. Poznámky k 28-rokov trvajúcej výstavbe SND v Bratislave [Notes on 28-year Long Construction of SND in Bratislava]. In RAGAČOVÁ, J. – ŠKRINÁROVÁ, A. (eds.). *Kultúrne dedičstvo 2019 – Divadlo v umení / Umenie v divadle* [Cultural Heritage 2019 – Theatre in Art/Art in Theatre]. Banská Štiavnica : Združenie historických miest a obcí Slovenskej republiky, 2019, p. 45.

was dropped, and the final stages of work, as it happened, completed from the state budget.³³ In any event, the opening of the new theatre in Pribinova ulica in 2007 formed the culmination of nearly ninety years of reflection on the new theatre's most suitable insertion into the urban tissue, formed throughout the 20th century primarily by the principles of modernist urban design but often brought to reality in fragmentary, altered or sometimes even contradictory forms. And moreover, with the passage of time it has become clear that precisely this competition and realisation of the theatre in this particular location led to the creation of probably the only unified public space in the city centre after 1989.

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33 Ibid, p. 50.

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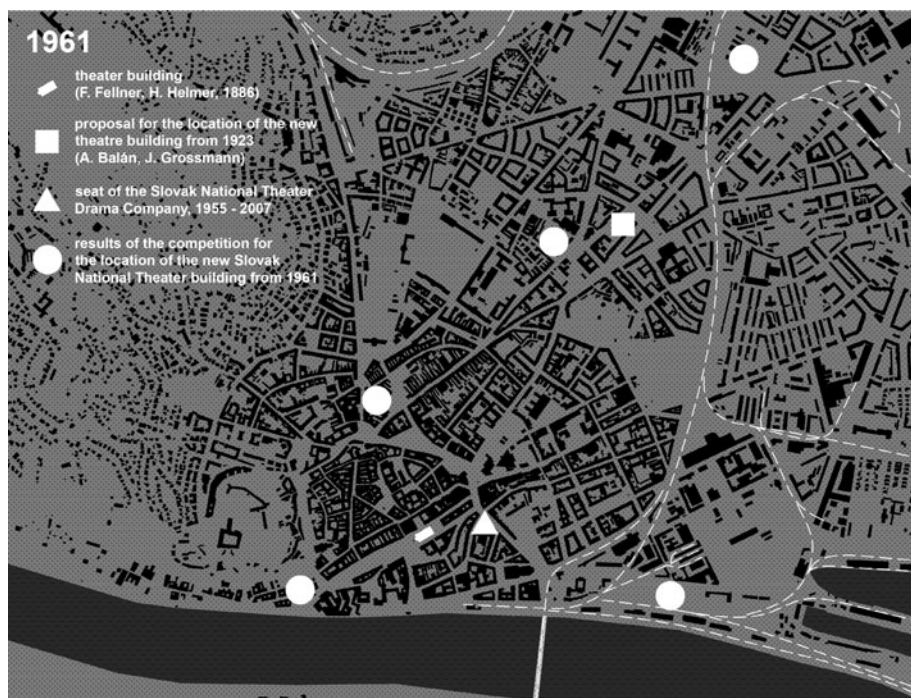
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Historical Building of the Slovak National Theatre on Hviezdoslav Square at the end of the 19th Century. Bratislava City Museum (P-01971).



Situation of the theatre buildings in the city structures in the 18th century and now. Picture by Laura Krišteková.



City structure of Bratislava in 1961 with variants of the new theater building location. Picture by Laura Krišteková.



*Aerial view of the Slovak National Theater on Pribinova Street under construction in 1991.
Department of Architecture, Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences archives.*



Building of the Slovak National Theatre on Pribinova Street. Photo by Martin Črep. The Slovak National Theatre archives.