1. Žilina’s high school and its history in short

The historic building, known as “A” building of the Žilina’s University had an interesting history. There is very little known about its creators, the architectural team Ambrus Orth and Emil Somló, known biography of stone portal sculptor Géza Maróti is richer.

Jesuits founded and led high school at the building of monastery at Mariánske Square from 1691 till 1776, then the school was led by Franciscans. As a public school, it was named in 1885 as the king’s Catholic Grammar School. In 1900 – 1907 the school operates as the Hungarian imperial high school in Žilina – Zsolnai Állami Főreáliskola.[1] Secondary schools in Austro-Hungarian Empire were perceived as prestigious buildings located in significant urban places, and at the same time they should fulfill requirements of modern education. This was also an idea behind construction of a brand new building in 1910 – 1913 (design 1909). The role of this school in Žilina was unfortunately also to raise sole use of Hungarian language and culture in the region, that`s why higher education was available only in Hungary.

The school was taken under the patronage of newly established government of the Czechoslovak Republic in December 1919, when some ministry officials arrived in Žilina and the ministry operated at this building. Žilina was a capital for 2 months. Ján Palárik (a Roman-catholic priest, writer and politician, who fought for rights of the Slovak nation) studied in Žilina, so the high school in a secession building was given a new title Czechoslovak Public Grammar School of Ján Palárik in his honor and fulfilled its educational role until 1938. Many famous names appeared among the graduates, for example the architect of functionalistic style Michal Maximilian Scheer (1902 – 2000).

The modern history of the building is connected with the history of the University of Žilina. Its origin dates back to 1953 when it was founded as the College of Railway in Prague. In 1959 it was renamed the College of Transport in Prague (VŠD). In the years 1960 – 1962 VŠD was moved to Žilina as the College of Transport in Žilina and the new wing marked “building B” was added to the historic former grammar school building “A”. In 1980 VŠD was renamed the...
2. Secession architecture in Žilina and Orth – Somló’s designs

Art Nouveau, also considered to be the last fully manifested building style, was very diverse in Slovakia. The conditions were not ideal, financial background and rural underdevelopment did not allow the significant development of liberal, jovial Art Nouveau design. However, in Žilina, the center was evolving mainly due to the Košice-Bohumín track, emerged quality and attractive Art Nouveau architecture. Designers were various, from architects to architectural studios, local and foreign. New creative ideas also brought the industrial exhibition of the Upper Hungarian Empire in Žilina in 1903. Fine examples of secession architecture in Žilina include the Craftsman House with the statue of Minister of Public Works and Transport Gabriel Baross, today’s the House of Arts Fatra, originally Bio Grand Universe (1921), the Rosenfeld Palace with the grand staircase, etched glass and ornamental facades. The former high school, building „A” is definitely included among these valuable architectonical designs. Its design is often incorrectly attributed to Ignác Alpár, the famous hungarian architect. Many young architects started their career in his studio, including his brother-in-law Ambrus Orth (1871 – 1931), who graduated the Budapest University of Technology.[3] In 1904 Orth as an independent architect formed a studio together with the architect Emil Somló (1877 – 1939) and they worked together until 1914. An impressive number of proposals of schools and public buildings appeared in their portfolio.

Four Orth – Somló´s designs are interesting in terms of analysis of the architectural elements of the secession building in Žilina, all created around 1909: Állami Felsőipariskola in Szeged, the post office building in Sopron (Postapalota), the former Népház (day nursery for the poor) in Budapest and the High school for girls in Uzhgorod. In terms of material-spatial composition and tectonics of the façade it is also interesting to mention the building of school in Győr (Ráb in slovak).

2.1. Állami Felsőipariskola in Szeged, designed in 1909 (built 1912 – 1914)

Fig. 1. The school foyer in Szeged on the left, the foyer of secession building in Žilina on the right

Obr. 1. Foyer školy v Szegedi vľavo, vpravo foyer secesnej budovy v Žiline

In the past the school building was also used as a military hospital during the world wars, now it functions as a technical high school – Déri Miksa Ipari Szakközépiskola. The same design ideas and inspirations are obvious comparing these two school buildings, in Žilina and in Szeged. Structures are composed very similarly on a central axis with gradation of
ornaments and tectonics of the façade to the mansard roof. [4] The interior reveals the use of identical trapezoidal reinforced concrete frames and identical architectural elements such as stone staircase balustrade and variations in geometric motif stucco ornamentation.

2.2. The main post office in Sopron, designed in 1909 (built 1911 – 1913)

Fig. 2. The main post office, Sopron, the main façade and staircase with pillars. Source [5]
Obr. 2. Hlavná pošta v Šoproni, hlavná fasáda a schodisko s pilíermi. Zdroj [5]

The tender for the construction of the Main Post in Sopron was published in Magyar Építőművészet 1910, VIII. évf., 2 sz. (Hungarian architects 1910, Vol. 8., No 2.).[5] The main façade has a pair of bays, completed by a curved secession gabled roof, tectonics is strongly geometric. The same prism balustrade motif, a geometric pattern of squares, structured on the fine-grained plaster and trapezoidal shaped windows as here also appear on the main façade of the secession building in Žilina. The interior is interesting by a monumental main hall with a skylight (14 m span) and equally impressive staircase. Staircase pillars are exactly the same as those in Žilina, but here the lamppost lightning is placed on them (maybe they were to have this use in Žilina too, but the pillars are empty there). Trapezoidal reinforced concrete frames create post office halls and corridors, covered with a plastic stucco with similar and identical motifs as there were used in Žilina.

2.3. Népház in Budapest, (built 1911 ?)

The industrialization brought a rapid increase in population of Budapest to over a million inhabitants in 1910. Many people could not afford the high price of housing, so projects for accommodation and training services were subsequently created. Népház in Budapest served under the motto "work and education instead of alms" for the unemployed, providing accommodation, cheap food and assistance in obtaining a job and also as a day nursery for children. The building served its purpose for a long time, unfortunately during the reconstruction to a school the original interior was removed.[6]
The design of Orth-Somló’s team was accompanied by decoration of the famous Hungarian sculptor and architect Géza Maróti, who collaborated with them on several of their projects. Attitudes of children’s characters, facial expressions, background in low relief and plant motifs on the friezes on the façades of both buildings, Népház in Budapest and the school in Žilina (also created by Marót) are variations of the same subject – education, to the Népház façade motifs of craft work and food were added.

Géza Maróti (1875 – 1941) was a sculptor, architect, graphic artist and interior designer in one creative personality, one of the most versatile artists of the Art Nouveau movement in Hungary. He worked on a wide range of artistic designs for public buildings as artist and architect: sculptures on the facade of the new building of the Academy of Performing Arts in Budapest, Gresham Palota (life insurance building), Hitelbank, Pesti Magyar Kereskedelmi Bank and Pesti Takarékpénztár Haza and many others.

2.4. The higher girls’ school, Polgári Leányiskola, Uzhgorod (built 1912)

Originally the higher girls’ school in Uzhgorod (Hungarian Ungvár, a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to 1918, then a part of Czechoslovakia to 1938) now serves as a Linguistic Grammar School of T. G. Shevchenko. The building, registered as a cultural monument, was built between 1912 – 1913 under the guidance of the architect Karoj Koch. Design incorporate gradation of the building mass and tectonics of the facades crowned by mansard roof and other architectural elements that are again a variation of the theme used in Žilina.
2.5. Žilina’s high school, Zsolnay Állami Főreáliskola (project 1909, built to 1913)

The project for the technical secondary school in Žilina was created by Somló and Orth in 1909. Original documentation is stored in the Provincial Archives of Hungary in Budapest — Magyar Országos Levéltár. The construction did not go smoothly, with numerous problems for lack of funds. In 1913, Magyar Építőművészet 1913 (Hungarian architects) under the headline Házak published photos of the completed building.[7]

The secession building has retained many original architectural features up to date. An exterior is not significantly changed, including tectonics and historical pink color tones of the façades (according historic postcards). Several smaller areas of the original tiles and terrazzo are preserved in an interior, as well as the most of original windows and doors, including glass wall mounted on the trapezoidal reinforced concrete frames (some damaged by lack of care and utility use). As the original elements should also be mentioned stucco decorations and geometric plant motifs as well as elements of the stone staircase railings, pillars and metal bars. The building has retained the construction of an original mansard roof, without significant intervention and in a good condition.
Fig. 7. The building A. Left: furnace niche, right lattice of the air heating. Photo Grúňová 2012.


The technological systems are not so preserved, but some very interesting fragments remain form warm-air heating facilities. There are niches in the corridors, where furnaces have been placed and rooms are equipped with warm-air circulation channels, covered by metal lattice with floral secession motif.

3. Conclusions

The historic building of the former high school in Žilina is an architecturally interesting witness of its time, although it is not a unique solution in the context of designs of the architectural team Orth – Somló. It is valuable contribution to the historical center of Žilina genius loci and the contribution to the art nouveau buildings set in the city. Securities are also a number of architectural preservation and maintenance of facades and building materials without significant alterations. After the restoration and removal of utilitarian intervention the historic building „A” of the University of Žilina might serve as a truly representative object, with the possibility of adapting the gym space for a multifunctional conference hall.

4. Literature

Článok sa zaobiera dejinami a rozborom architektonických prvkov historickej budovy Žilinskej univerzity v kontexte výberu z realizovaných verejných stavieb jej tvorcov - architektonického týmu maďarských architektov Orth a Somló. Stavba sa nevymýká z priemernej tvorby štýlu maďarskej secesie, no na severnom Slovensku je zaujímavým reprezentantom kvalitnej historickej architektúry so vzácne zachovanými interiérovými aj exteriérovými prvkami.