

Horia Moldovan, JOHANN SCHLATTER: CULTURĂ OCCIDENTALĂ ȘI ARHITECTURĂ ROMÂNEASCĂ (1831-1866), București 2013, Ed. Simetria, 260 pages, 326 illustrations, ISBN 978-973-1872-26-1

In 1843, while Filip Oliva, “*digger in marble stone and plaster*” was producing and selling “*monuments, crosses, garden vessels, wells for keeping cold water, natural lions carved in marble and a lady’s figure carved in marble, called ‘Venera’, as well as another figure called ‘the Water God’*”, Johann Schlatter was signing an alignment plan in his capacity of architect of the city of Ploiești. The first decades of the 19th century had already significantly altered the structures and fashions of Wallachia. The Kiseleff administration had come to an end. Prince Bibescu had started his reign and the important public works which are due to him. Newly arrived in the principality, the Swiss architect was 35 years old; he had been educated in Central Europe (probably in Munich) and had then worked under the guidance of his professor, Friedrich von Gärtner, architect of the Bavaria Court, for building the royal palace in Athens (1836-1840).

Horia Moldovan addresses, in this work published in Bucharest in 2013, the period of the Organic Regulations and the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, three and a half decades when the Romanian Principalities transfigured, becoming part of the European modernity. The figure of architect Johann Schlatter – a traveller in Wallachia in 1833, active here between 1842 and 1865, when he passed away – is present throughout the whole period, as subject and at the same time pretext of Horia Moldovan’s research. Johann Schlatter occupied administrative positions: employee of the Architecture Department of the Ministry of Interior, from where he is transferred in 1845 to the Department of Religion, in the position of “monastic architect”, which he keeps for two decades.

The first part of the paper reviews the “sources” of Schlatter’s architecture, enabling an introduction to the shaping context of the German architecture at the end of the 1820s, when the *Rundbogenstil* principles offered a pragmatic solution for expressing the ideals of the age. The second part of the paper presents the Swiss architect in the context of Wallachia, with the author describing in detail a large number of aspects related to the architectural practice. Following a historical and bibliographical introduction to the subject, Horia Moldovan describes the beginnings of architecture education, the organisation of construction works and hence of architectural practice, the administration of towns, the preparation of topographical surveys, town building regulations, the special case of the new Danube towns, public and religious buildings (including the model designs for “council houses”, sub-prefectures, schools or churches).

All these aspects are presented from the point of view of their relationship with legislative and

administrative changes, mentioning the persons involved in the reform (including engineers and architects) and giving – based on a very robust literature and archive research – some examples of significant importance for the history of architecture, most of them not studied previously. The architectural contribution of the project authors is shown in its cultural context, which is of particular interest – their relationship with the project initiator, the sources used, the composition principles, the symbolic implications as well as the relationship – difficult to identify – with the “tradition”, as this can be understood in the reference period of the research.¹

The description of Johann Schlatter’s activity – site reviews, architecture projects or building details, his correspondence to the benefit of the administration, together with a private practice of his profession – is again revealing for the various ways to practice this profession in that period. Along the presentation Horia Moldovan concentrates upon the development or construction of some representative buildings in Bucharest: Golescu palace on the Podul Mogoșoaiei avenue, turned into a princely court (with Johann Schlatter also participating in its refurbishment), Brâncoveanu palace near the Metropolitan Church, Cotroceni palace, Bibescu palace at Băneasa (designed by Schlatter but not finished), the National Theatre or the Academy Palace.

One of the most interesting chapters of the work is the one regarding church architecture: we owe to Horia Moldovan a detailed presentation of the intervention works upon a large number of important churches in Bucharest undertaken in that period; the need to transform these churches was mainly a result of the earthquakes and fires in the first half of the 19th century, rather than of the cultural choices of the project initiators. The author interprets historical data, discovers unknown elements in archives, discusses the architectural composition and form, studies influences and similarities, makes hypotheses, mentions issues which require further research for clarification. For the Săririndar Monastery, he publishes a survey of 1868, he describes and documents the interventions of Gaetano Burelly of 1869; for St. Demetrius Church behind the Post he reviews the work of master Josef Weltz and notices the recurrent use of classicist “decorative patterns” at religious buildings in the 1830s and even more during the following decades; he describes the interventions of Villacrosse at St. George New church and – in another style register – the project of the same Villacrosse, together with Lipizer, at St. Spyridon New church; he also publishes the spectacular project of Johann Schlatter to rebuild the Râmnic Episcopate subsidiary

¹ See, for instance, the discussion on the first theological schools (pp. 50-51).

monastery (Figs. 1, 2), an unaccomplished project.²

In addition to these important churches, Horia Moldovan also presents model-projects for churches built for clergy estates by Schlatter (1853), Orăscu (1856) and in Moldova by Anton Kaetanovici (1858, 1861) and Burelly (1863), as well as projects of less known churches – this subject providing one of the author’s many openings for further research.

The most consistent chapter of the work presents Schlatter in his capacity of monastic architect, a position created in 1844, during the reign of Gheorghe Bibescu, the initiator of the “rebuilding” process of many monasteries. Horia Moldovan describes the context of systematic concerns regarding the protection of churches and monasteries in Wallachia and develops the subject by a structured presentation of the types of interventions undertaken, between 1844–1865, under the management of the Swiss architect: reconstructions, remodelling, minor interventions as well as interventions which remained at the design project stage. Together with his collaborators – Gheorghe Gaudi, Alois Gutha, employed as assistants by the Department of Religion, or the better known Karl Benisch and Iulius Fraywald – Schlatter rebuilds the Bistrița monastery ensemble and the Chindiei Tower in Târgoviște, reshapes Tismana, Arnota, Dealu, and Mărcuța monasteries and starts works at Cozia and Măxineni monasteries, works at the Annunciation church (at the Old Court) and the Antim monastery in Bucharest. Horia Moldovan presents both the development of churches and the intervention works at the middle of the 19th century, designed or accomplished, including the projects no longer accomplished at Snagov monastery, the Bucharest Metropolitan Church or the Târgoviște Metropolitan Church, the latter being taken over by Lecomte du Nouÿ later on. The research leads the author to address the voievodal residences within monasteries separately, based on the generous documentation on Tismana and Bistrița monasteries, finding modern interpretations of this medieval architectural programme. The author concludes the work by studying a surprising programme, that of prisons. “The princely arrest” at Arnota monastery – on the reconstruction of which Schlatter worked between 1851 and 1856 – is a first example of Wallachian prison with individual cells, as shown by the author. This “*grand fortress*”, conceived

by prince Barbu Știrbei for political prisoners and maintained as such by Alexandru Ioan Cuza, has turned into “*the most fearful dread of the country and of the whole population*”,³ although it had hosted a single prisoner. Arnota was the last item among Johann Schlatter’s contributions to Wallachia’s architecture, and hence also in Horia Moldovan’s research.

The book is dense and perfectly documented; the author describes in detail – by the multiple means of the architecture historian – a period known only in its general aspects and succeeds to create – by describing a series of architectural items and placing them within their cultural context – a complex picture of the century when the Principalities built their new, bourgeois and European identity. The stories of the engineers and architects involved in this adventure are spectacular; Johann Schlatter is only one of them. The multicultural and multi-European – let us say “multi-Romanian” world – of Benisch, Blaremburg, Borroczy, Burelly, Melik, Hefft, Orăscu, Kuschnovschy or Villacrosse is the one which created the new figure of Wallachian towns, before the *Beaux-Arts* layer brought by the generations of the late 19th century and early 20th century.

The works of these engineers or architects, more often minor than major, have reformed the cities in this part of the world: tool shops, belfries, gardens, alleys or palaces, shops, fences and prisons. All these traces of the 19th century seem to be present in the characterisation of the National Theatre’s hall in Bucharest, written by Ulysse de Marsillac in the 1870s and cited by Horia Moldovan: “*very elegant, freshly painted and gilded... The hall in Bucharest is one of the most beautiful in Europe, after the monumental halls. The seats are not made with parsimony. Everybody can take a comfortable seat*”.⁴ This *comfort* is probably related to a certain tradition.

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² Horia Moldovan shows that the reconstruction works started in 1853 and stopped several years later, following the death of a worker. After the seven year break following the death on the construction site, according to Church rules, the idea to build here a museum for church precious objects was advanced in 1863; the proposal was approved but it was not taken further (p. 105).

³ Alexandru Pelimon, *Impresiuni de călătorie în România (Travelling Impressions in Romania)*, 1858, cited by H. Moldovan (p. 190).

⁴ Ulysse de Marsillac, 1869/1877, cited by H. Moldovan (p. 69).