

From the Master Class of Otto Wagner
István Medgyaszay – Hungarian Modernist Architect
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(registration at info@airt.at)

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Opening hours: Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)

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Born in Budapest, architect István Medgyaszay (1877-1959) graduated from the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts – where he studied under Otto Wagner – in 1903. After continuing his studies in Budapest and completing internships in Berlin and Paris, he went on to research Hungarian folk art in Székely Land in Transylvania. The insights he gained there laid the foundations for his formal language. In his writings, he emphasised the importance of unifying structure and decoration, and vernacular wood constructions define his architectural designs. The theatres he designed in Veszprém and Sopron underline his guiding principle behind the use of reinforced concrete: the forces at work in the construction should be reflected in the architecture. His fascinating and unmistakable architectural language can be found in buildings in Lviv, Chernivtsi, Vienna, Budapest as well as numerous other towns and cities that were then still part of Hungary. Alongside Ödön Lechner, he is regarded as one of the fathers of Hungarian Modernism.

István Medgyaszay is widely regarded as the most important Hungarian-born protégé to graduate from the master class of Otto Wagner at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Besides the fact that Wagner only accepted students who had already received in-depth training on the technical aspects of construction, it is also well-known that he attached great significance to draughtsmanship, and painting skills.

Without a doubt, Medgyaszay was extremely gifted in these disciplines, which were essential for prospective architects. The project he submitted with his enrolment application, a park gate, obviously met the requisite quality standards, even though it had a Neo-Baroque design. This paved the way for him to join the exclusive circle that was Wagner's master class – Jože Plečnik had graduated two years earlier, and Otto Schönthal was one of Medgyaszay's fellow students.

After continuing his studies in Budapest and completing internships in Berlin and at the Paris offices of Hennebique – a major company specialised in construction techniques using reinforced concrete – he returned to his home country, where he became one of the leading proponents of Hungarian Modernism thanks to his unique style of architectural expression. Hungarian Modernism was not bound to the principles of formal functionalism and downright sobriety that were commonly seen as part of the modernist canon; instead, it was about redefining characteristic regional architecture with historic roots in line with the requirements of contemporary life.

At a very early stage, in the construction of the Veszprém theatre (1907-08), Medgyaszay was able to put his vision of a new architectural direction into practice and experiment with the aspects that were important to him – free from the shackles of a predefined style, and separate from, although not entirely untouched by, emerging movements such as Art Nouveau and the Secession, with their focus on renewal. As a former student of Wagner, his desire for architectural authenticity also comes as no surprise: referencing classical Greek and Gothic architecture, he placed an emphasis on showcasing the forces at work in the construction.

In this regard, as he subsequently explained in his famous observations to mark the eighth Vienna Congress of Reinforced Concrete in 1908, working with reinforced concrete was evidently important to him. As the son of a master builder and cement manufacturer, from his childhood days Medgyaszay had been influenced by the construction business. A desire for perfection was part of his personality and flowed into all aspects of his work. He was also one of only a handful of his contemporaries who had the opportunity to discover the technical properties of reinforced concrete – the most modern building material available at that time – directly at its production source in Paris. Although little is known about his activities there, the notes held by his estate show that he definitely had a perfect command of French (which was a far more important language of international communication than English in those days). His excellent command of multiple languages enabled him to effortlessly find his bearings in the architectural cultures of many different places, and to travel to distant countries.

Invited to travel to Transylvania together with a small group of artists as part of an initiative headed by the writer Dezső Malonyay, Medgyaszay began to take an interest in aspects of Hungarian folk art. In the course of his travels across Hungary in 1904, he is thought to have discovered that Gottfried Semper's principles, which defined the direction of modern architecture, were actually reflected in the country's folk architecture. Medgyaszay was familiar with the principles from his studies under Otto Wagner, although at the time Semper's writings were possibly viewed as simply an abstract theory developed by an architect. The impressions he gained during his investigation of folk art are said to have laid the foundations for his particular formal language throughout his life.

In his writings on folk architecture, Medgyaszay emphasised the unity of structure and direction that he took from his observations. His architectural oeuvre was mainly shaped by the tectonics of folk wood constructions, which remained a recurring theme in the formal language of his work. Presumably thanks in no small part to his emotional ties to the main component of concrete – superheated limestone – and most certainly due to the increased relevance of Semper's Stoffwechsel (metabolism) theory as a result of the emergence of new possibilities during Medgyaszay's life, he focused his attention on concrete, a modern building material. Medgyaszay's study of artistic design using reinforced concrete consolidates the principles he had previously applied in the construction of the theatres in Veszprém and Sopron. He developed his personal, clearly recognisable formal language in the design and decoration of the facades and interiors of both theatres – a language that is sometimes reflected solely in the ornamentation or coloured ceramic elements found in all of his later designs. Medgyaszay also deployed his increasingly refined style to great success in rental apartment buildings in Budapest that featured modern layouts, adding dignified touches by means of oriental-themed embellishments on the balconies and sgraffiti on the facades (featuring themes taken from Hungarian mythology).

Oriental references – such as the stepped roof of a rest home in Mátraháza, which was reminiscent of an Asian temple – began to appear more and more in his designs, no doubt influenced and reinforced by an extended trip to India in 1932. Ultimately, Indian-inspired forms became increasingly significant in Medgyaszay's later designs: one eye-catching example is the architecture of the Reformist-Calvinist Baár-Madas girls grammar school and boarding school, one of the most innovative teaching institutions of the time. In terms of formal unity, Medgyaszay remained true to his ideals. However, his later designs dating back to the end of the 1930s reveal a cautious step towards international modernism shaped by urban influences.

The balconies at the TÉBE residential and commercial property in Budapest (1939-40) give a sense of modern vividness, casting a dramatic shadow. The clear, stone-clad facades with their rational segmentation and the high colonnades at ground level are a prominent and undeniable reference to schools such as Milanese Modernism. They give the building what would now be called a timeless elegance, while also leaving space for allusions to Hungarian folklore.

With his unique wealth of forms based on historic and folklore motifs, unconventional colour schemes, facades that often feature painting in the form of sgraffiti, the use of sculpture as finials for structural elements, as well as sloping roofs commonly found in regional architectural styles, István Medgyaszay's oeuvre, created in the generation after Ödön Lechner, has earned him a place as one of the founders of Hungarian Modernism.

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