COMMUNITY AND SPACE
The interpretation of a community space located at an ancient sacral place

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In the spiritual center of Central Europe, on the ancient hill of Pannonhalma (Hungary), a Benedictine abbey was founded in 996. The ‘sacred’ meaning of the hill emerging from the surrounding plane was architecturally realized in the basilica of St. Martin built in the 13th century. (St. Martin of Tours was born in the nearby roman settlement of Savaria.) Enlargement of the cloister was undertaken in the 18th century. In the 19th century, significant makeovers were completed in the building with the clear style of the puritan movement typical of the international practice of the period – the cultural value of architectural complex was recognized by inscription on Unesco World Heritage list in 1996. Today, after one century, the community, the Benedictine teaching order needs new spaces for the spatial expression of their contemporary spiritual life. The architect of these makeovers is the Englishman John Pawson, whose minimalism stands close to the conception of the monks both in style and in the reduced formal world. Beside the problems like the debates arising from the concepts which intend to end several attributes, or the resistance of professionals who fear for the art heritage only little attention is paid to the spiritual need of the users of the building which searches for its right place along the spiritual references of the reformation movements started in the 1920ies. During two years of reconstruction and restoration works a brand new sacral space has been established in the existing historical spatial structure. The font in the west door, the altar in the middle, the lectern and the circular window on the east end is recognizable of the use of same material, the white onyx.

Meanwhile, at the foot of the abbey-hill a pilgrimage house was established by Hungarian architect Tamás Czigány, and it was completed with a small chapel by the little path running to the forest: the wooden timber beams were built on each other by the hand of people searching for the truth; the walls emerged slowly but with the joy of work, the building elements formed a space with making a roof and in the middle of the square space, under the 3x3 divisions of the ceiling a modest altar table was created from the same material. It seems that beside the famous plans a statement was done in silence, which statement forms the contemporary spatial needs of the community made up of people.

This lecture analyses the two different contemporary space-interpretations originating in the history of the same place, in relation of soul, community and space. The purpose of the intervention, in both cases, was to create such spaces in which the users have a much more direct opportunity to achieve the encounter with God. Completely different methods were used, but these design and realization prosesses were accompanied by the same humbleness. The most important factors that these two sacred places have in common are both the monastic community and the humble and patient attitude of the invited architects towards the tasks. Constant dialogue and attention towards each other.

„The second degree of humility is, when a man loveth not his own will, nor is pleased to fulfill his own desires but by his deeds carrieth our that word of the Lord which saith: "I came not to do My own will but the will of Him that sent Me" (Jn 6:38)." The Rule of Saint Benedict

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SPIRIT OF PANNONHALMA

The monastic order of Pannonhalma has a long history. The abbey was founded in 996, from this point the spirit of the settlement was strongly defined by the presence of the order. Over the last decade, several significant contemporary constructions occurred according to the ideas of the Benedictines. One of the latest, and certainly the most mature element of these, is the renewal of the Basilica standing on St. Martin's Hill. For the millennium of founding the monastery, almost the whole reconstruction of the building complex of the abbey was completed, only the interior renovation of the Basilica remained for later completion. It may seem odd that every intervention preceded the refurbishment of the most important element, the church. The opening of the new buildings of management, hospitality and tourism occurred parallel to the preparatory background work of the renovation of the church. The Abbey Winery was built, the square in front of the Basilica was renewed, the Reception Building was completed in order to worthily receive the guests, the biomass heating plant, the restaurant on the Kosaras Hill, the arboretum and the orchard were renewed, the lavender and herb manufactory, the tea shop next to it, the St. James pilgrimage house and the chapel of the Cseider Valley were completed, at last the new Tourist Entrance of the abbey and the Major Visitor Center were finished a few month ago. Thanks to the conscious developments of the Benedictines, we can talk about an independent contemporary architecture in Pannonhalma that is unique and exemplary both in its content and also in its appearance and material value.

BASILICA – HISTORICAL CONTINUITY

Due to its special location, the Basilica always played a central role in the life of not only Pannonhalma but also the country. Since its establishment binds to the Hungarian Christian statehood, it was always a special place for the national memory. It is a national memorial according to its spiritual content. Most of the church’s mass was built in early Gothic style, at the beginning the 13th century. Besides the work of the Hungarian masters, the influence of Upper Rhine and North France is detectable. The star vault of the chancel, the eastern end of the aisles and the St. Benedict Chapel were completed during the reign of the most significant medieval Hungarian king, King Matthias. At the margin of the Ottoman conquest advancing from the Balkans, it functioned as a border fortress as well. The conquerors looted it, and the interior fitting was almost completely destroyed. During the 1720s there were major renovations, but the truly radical changes occurred in the 1860s in the course of the renovation by Ferenc Storno. The order has been engaged in secondary education since 1802, one of the oldest schools in Hungary can be found here, which is still one of the most high-standard secondary schools of the country. An important element of St. Benedict’s regulation is that it carries the possibility of the monastic community’s reformation on itself. The determinant changes in the community’s life can be altered by the current abbot, as far as it proves to be necessary to achieve the goals of the order. The Benedictine monastic community of Pannonhalma is a currently operating, active community, so in order to have a successful religious life even in this age, the claim of renewal has become obvious.

The entire work was started before the beginning of the architectural planning by the establishment of the Basilica Workshop in 2003. The Workshop was responsible for the consideration of liturgical, theological and monastic aspects of the interior refurbishment. Reviewing the values and shortcomings of the existing building and interpreting the spatial organisational intentions of certain ages were also important parts of the research. The spiritual preparation of the liturgical space transformation outlined solely the monastic community’s liturgical vision, the material, shaped and visual appearance of this was entrusted to the architects. Besides the exemplary thorough preparatory work, finding the adequate architectural designer was the result of a carefully considered selection. They sought someone who had
worked with monks before, and in whose works the pure presence of sacrality was always noticeable. The choice fell on the British architect John Pawson, primarily because of the convincing power of the constructions by the monastic Trappist order that live in Nový Dvůr of the Czech Republic. It was important to separate the roles from the beginning: neither the monastic community nor the architect should take over the duties of the other party. The Basilica Workshop developed a firm liturgical concept, while John Pawson gave framework to the spatial-physical realization of the vision.\textsuperscript{4} (Fig.I.)

The architects faced three major challenges when creating a coherent space that met every expectation of the monks. The Basilica bore the marks of several eras that did not build integrally on each other, the church space was divided multiple times, furthermore, the relatively small space was used for many purposes. (Fig.II.)

At last, the concept of the renovation was based on preferably the strongest realization of two main aspects: the restoration of the monastic character and the reconsideration of the historic space of the church. In order to validate the factors, it was important to set up an order of priority. According to the original purpose of the liturgical space, it is the source of a praying monastic community’s everyday life, so this had to be the primary organizing force. Aligning to this, the artistic, historic preservational and technical developments had to emphasize the main line of the monastic nature. The historic reinterpretation of the church space can be understood with the initiating nature of the longitudinal axis. The strong longitudinal axiality and the openness towards east had to be respected. The church is the heart of the monastery, the location of common prayer. The monastic presence in the new space can be detected primarily through the monastic choir consisting of two stalls with the ambo in its center. It was important to find a role for the spaces that are currently out of use, in order to functionally reconnect them to the liturgic space of the church.

The liturgical elements are organized to the longitudinal axis, and follow the deep sequence of the connection with God. The first element is the semicircular window above the western gate, followed by the baptistery under the western tower, then the altar, behind it the ambo on the planum between the stalls, and finally the eastern rose window in the chancel. The individual elements connect visually to each other due to the common material, the onyx. According to the second chapter of the Book of Genesis the onyx is one of the precious stones of the Garden of Eden. The liturgical objects, which have pedestals of the same material as the flooring, monolithically emerged from the homogeneous surface made of limestone of Süttö. The completion of the contemporary liturgical idea would have been the ‘space of emptiness’ in the chancel, but due to the historic preservational constraints, the altar with ciborium designed by Storno stayed in its original location, so the idea could be realized only partially. The old vestry on the northern side was renovated, the entry area and the dressing room were connected to this space. The preparatory room had a strong sacred spirit by itself: between the snow-white walls and vaults there is only one object in the space: the ferula, the croiser ending in a cross that was used in the occasions of festive liturgy. The marching of the monks to the planum happened in the northern aisle before, now it returned to the nave in accordance with the early Christian traditions, as a ceremonial procession in the main axis.

In the crypt under the former altar space that emerged in the eastern wing, the altar also guards the renewed relics of St. Martin - the new enclosing is similarly made of onyx. The altar with ciborium above it points out this spiritual center, too.

The spacial transformation can not be considered as an exclusively a contemporary intervention: it refers to the earliest use of space of the church, wants to emphasize the aspect of that again, as it was originally built as an oratory for a small Benedictine monastic community. The most important intention of the detail design was the moderate appearance and the simple, clean shaping. Taking the edge of the details that take attention was necessary so that the monks could become more immersed in the occasion of the daily chant, their thoughts would
not be disturbed by the surrounding elements. They tried to dampen the vivid colors. A former
quader plaster sample was restored and the latest colorful paints were pushed into the
background. However, the ceiling frescos from the 19th century were restored, because they
were less dominant in the overall impression. The furniture was also renewed: it became
simpler and was designed to be mobile. The furniture was made of solid American walnut wood
treated with oil and wax. Since the space has to be able to accommodate a large number (more
that 300 person), hidden storage units were placed for the foldable chairs used in the Sunday
convent mass and student mass. The artificial light complements the natural light in the church.
It was important to establish a differentiated lighting technology appropriate for the time of day
or the occasion. With their shape, the luminaires indirectly refer to the medieval candle light, still
they present it with contemporary means.
The transformation not only has an exemplary message towards the religious communities but
is a guide for the profane life and profane architecture as well. On the one hand with the
thorough preparation, consciousness that happened in the preparatory phase, as well as with
the dialogue that went on between the architects and the monastic community during the
planning. The goal of the transformation was to create such an architectural, spiritual and
liturgical quality that forms the monastic self-identity, and at the same transmits something to
the visitors of what the community wants to represent and achieve.

CHAPEL IN THE WOODS – A NEW INTERVENTION

In Pannonhalma the Cseider Valley provides a suitable place for the visitors coming to the
Abbey for resting and accommodation. The complex is located on the more gently sloping hill
slope, on the northern side of the Martin Hill. It was created by using a former manorial
residential house and placing completely new building blocks. The chapel, that gives place for
quiet contemplation and retreat, can be found not too far from the pilgrim accommodation, in the
woody parkland area. The 20 m2 area, 9 m high chapel was created with the possibly most
compact spatial shaping. (Fig.III.) The openings of the chapel built with redwood beams
developed from a designing similar to bonfire. Regarding its floor plan, it is a simple central
space: there are no windows, doors of the traditional sense, the wind and the sun directly reach
the one inside. The building primarily doesn’t delimit a space, but it marks out a place for
calming down. (Fig.IV.) Thanks to the use of natural material and homogeneous appearance, it
integrates to the environment. It is a contemplational place that bears a strong sacrality, but is a
proportional, good-scale receptive space for the individuals that come around.5 It deserves a
special mention that the construction is the work of a university student group led by Tamás
Czigány.6 During the execution, the participants became richer with not only the practice of the
final construction of the profession but also the experience of the communal creative work.

DIFFERENT PATHS TO THE SAME TRUTH

It is difficult to compare the two buildings in their physical appearance and architectural design.
Both can be characterized with contemporary architectural formation, clear design, but they
strongly differ in their effects on the outside world. The Basilica educates and forms a
community, while the small chapel in the forest concentrates on retreat and the individual with
its presence. One of them is limited and formed by the built environment and historic context,
the other indicates a point in the natural environment. In the Basilica, there are noble, special
materials in the space, the chapel is made of one of the most ancient, most elemental building
materials, wood. The dimensions of the spaces also lead to different types of spiritual processes. The elevating dynamics of the broader space of the abbey-church predicts a longer initiation process, but the chapel forwards a direct, momentary encounter with its inward-focused space. The light has an important role in both interior spaces, in the connection with God by contemplation. It obviously becomes clear by individual experience, but the sacrality of the spaces has the strongest effect on everybody mainly in the early morning hours. There are no prominent details that would draw the attention from concentrating on the inside. It is just all appropriate and natural. The same designer behavior and attitude can be detected in both cases: humbly serving the needs of the community, creating such a strongly spiritual space for the visitors, where everybody can find a substantive part of their souls in themselves.

Fig.I. Pannonhalma, Basilica, after conversion, 2012. Architect: John Pawson. Photography by Tamás Bujnovszky

Fig.II. Pannonhalma, Basilica, after conversion, drawings, 2012. Architect: John Pawson.
Fig.III. Pannonhalma, Cseider Valley Chapel, 2010. Architect: Tamás Czigány. Photography by Tamás Czigány

Fig.IV. Pannonhalma, Cseider Valley Chapel, drawings, 2010. Architect: Tamás Czigány.


6 Tamás Czigány designed not only the pilgrim accomodation, but the recently inaugurated Tourist Entrance, the buildings of the Manor and the winery as well. - see: Nagy, Tamás. Kortárs építészet Pannonhalmán. [Contemporary Architecture of Pannonhalma] Pannonhalma: Pannonhalmi Főapátság, 2011.