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BULLETIN 28

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SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RURAL LIFE IN HUNGARY

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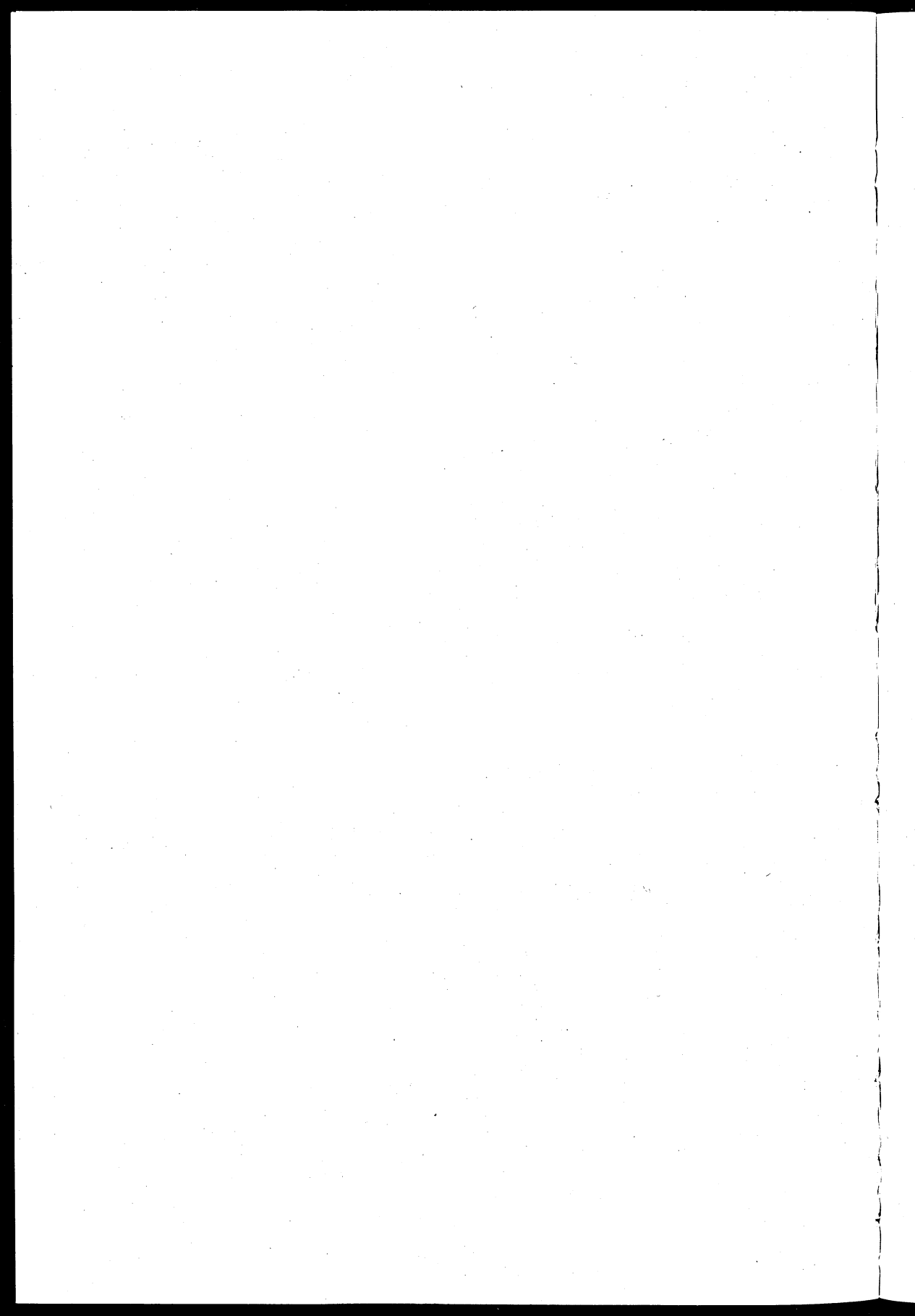
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Péter Halász

Rural architecture - unsolved questions



The architectural picture of Hungarian villages is determined mainly by the houses built between the two world wars, further by those built at the turn of the century. Most of these traditional peasant houses are harmonious, of a fine shape and nicely decorated. Concerning their material and purpose they fit into the surroundings and serve the given cultural level well and are an integral part of our people's material and spiritual culture.

After the first world war, and especially in the last decades peasants' life underwent radical changes, which shattered the creative capacity of the community. Ferenc Erdei called attention to this phenomenon in the thirties, and he was among the first ones to observe and mention a decline in peasant traditions: "where peasant traditions lost their strength the distorted taste of village tradesmen met the confused taste of bourgeois-minded peasants which resulted in all kinds of distortions"^{1/} "Examples of the worthless style of the last decades have reached the villages... houses, compared to which, peasant houses and country houses with all their social drawbacks seem to be real masterpieces" writes Ferenc Erdei in his book on the Hungarian village^{2/}.

János Toth, famous expert of the traditional architecture describes his anxieties saying: "The dilettants have spoilt the harmonious picture of villages, confused the rhythm of country streets, distorted the simple houses and painted the bright white walls in many colours."^{3/}

Erdei recognised the necessity of this process, stating: "Every village element is a social relation which changes together with the changes of society, and it is an open question whether it undergoes a transformation, and if so, a profound one, or - on the contrary - ceases to exist."^{4/}

Nobody has yet answered this question of more than 30 years. However, the peasant form of life underwent a more essential and extensive change than ever - a change that had a thorough influence on country architecture as well. Houses that are being built nowadays- and have been built for the last 10-15 years by the inhabitants, totally differ from the traditional peasant houses as to their shape, ground-plan, roofing and equipment. The way of using the house is, on the other hand, characteristic of the ambiguousness given by the transition period.

If these usually multicoloured country houses with their tent roofs and quadrangle basis are compared with the old whitewashed peasant houses of long ground-plan and different facades and gabled roof, the following three essential differences are found:

1. The traditional peasant houses are not water-proof, therefore they are damp, have generally earthen floor, small cubic capacity, small windows; on the whole they are not healthy. Those of today have water-proof walls, generally with warm flooring and a larger cubic capacity, and being light render a healthy, civilized way of life possible.

2. The arrangement of rooms and the equipment in the old peasant houses were in compliance with the poor claim of inhabitants; those of today are either too small or too large, and do not meet the rapidly changing and increasing demands of peasants concerning other functional requirements either.

3. The traditional peasant houses were proportional, simple, nice or decorated with taste; they were varied even in their uniformity. Houses of today are shapeless, monotonous and desolate in spite of their striking colours.

Of course, the reason why old peasant houses are more adequate from both functional and esthetical points of view is not their being unhealthy, and new ones unproportional and poorish because of being spacious and light. Anyhow, the question: "why" presents itself.

The reasons are very serious, and divergent, and have unfortunately been so far placed in the background of interest. Yet, I do not believe that the solution of the question would be uninteresting or useless for either architectural art and science or sociology. I should like to outline the process that has made as to see the problem more clearly.

First of all let us see how the village houses of today have developed their shape. It is known that in the traditional peasant houses rooms of different purposes - living room, kitchen (porch, eaves, shed), and most frequently pantry, stable, summer kitchen, etc. too - were placed one behind the other, and formed together an oblong rectangular building. Now, if we imagine the dwelling part of the building as separated from sheds, stables, etc. we get a far less long, and rather squat rectangular dwelling house. This separation is justified in most places, because the future of the two parts was settled as early as after

the first world war, first of all in regions where industrialization began to play such an important role in the income of the rural population that it reduced the proportion originating from agricultural work. The relative shortage of land too had an increasing influence on the way of living. The result was that those who had a more substantial income (this refers to any place in the country, at any time in this century) and could not purchase land, began to build: began a new building or reconstructed the old one.

When reconstructing, they enlarged the first room facing the street, or built another one or two. In this case, it is a matter of a relative increase in the living quarters compared to the part of building used for farming purposes. New houses were usually built with more rooms for dwelling purposes, and this part of the house became much larger than that used for farming purposes. Thus it happened that L-shaped village houses parallel with the street came into being all over the country between the two world wars.

With this, in fact, the uniformity of traditional peasant house was overthrown, since lengths of the two legs of the L-shaped house and their ratio were not prescribed by any rules. From this time on a chaotic change took place in the shape of the peasant house; the ground-plan consists practically of different variations of the L-shape, the bulk of the house is even more rhapsodic, but the shapes of roofs are of the greatest irregularity. The building took on more and more lateral branches and the roof did its best to follow them.

Before the first world war every villager was an expert of peasant house building. By the second half of the 19. century a system developed; and as it is characteristic of the periods of art history: those who created - in present

case built - could think only in the style of that time; their way of life justified them to do so, and their taste developed under the given conditions considered that style to be pretty. It did not even occurred to them to build houses otherwise.

After the disintegration of the old life this security ceased. When planning and building houses after the first world war the peasants could not rely on the clear rules of tradition, everybody had to construct his house himself - according to requirements changing rapidly though in different degrees -, and its beauty and practicability depended exclusively on the builder or constructor.

Thus, while in the earlier period the shape of buildings was characteristic of a peasant community, houses built after the first world war were characteristic of the taste, sense of beauty - or even bad taste of individual village inhabitants.

After reviewing the changes in the shape of houses, let us see how the use of the rooms has changed. In the traditional Hungarian peasant house - especially in the house types of the Great Hungarian Plain and Transdanubia - separate rooms served for living and cooking. The fireplace was in the porch, cooking took place there and rooms were heated by stoves or ovens from there. Almost the whole life of the family - day-time occupations, eating and sleeping - was concentrated in the room; except baking and cooking which took place in the porch.

After the first world war the stove - or oven respectively - was removed from the living room. It happened not so much because they were unnecessary, but rather because of fashion and lack of space: room had to be found for the new furniture, especially for the wardrobe.^{5/} In many parts of

the country the increasing difficulty of obtaining fuel was the reason that forced the village inhabitants to do away with stoves and ovens without air suction which consumed much fuel, and cook and heat with one fire.

With this step a fundamental change took place in the use of the peasant house. The traditional way of life, the use of living quarters resembles a supporting chain where - if one link breaks - the whole structure falls down. The earlier use of peasant living quarters was - in spite of all its poverty - relatively the most practical^{6/} not because each individual shaped it with his own capacity, but because faults were eliminated with time and an order was established in which the most awkward man could settle down. It is only natural that with a single environmental factor changed, the order of life within the house of the peasant family collapsed and lost its meaning like a vine when deprived of its stake.

When the oven (stove) came out of the room and latter was not heated, becoming thus in winter inhabitable, the scene of life was placed into the porch (which was mostly called kitchen at that time), or the fireplace put into the room; thus life was concentrated in one single place, household (baking, cooking) and dwelling (sleeping, eating, living) equally. Where there was only one living room it was reserved as a clean (guest) room; where there was another room at the back (on the other side of the porch) living and cooking took generally place in this room, or (mainly in summer) in the kitchen and the room was - at the most - used for sleeping by a part of the family.^{7/}

When examining the change resulting from the disintegration of the order of community we are confronted with a contradiction, and to understand it we have to look close at it. When visiting the oldest houses of the villages -

where we find only a few, strictly speaking outstayed old men - we remember that not very long ago three, sometimes four generations lived packed together. Sometimes one of the great-grand-parents, one or two grand-parents, the young married couple and four-five, sometimes eight children, altogether 9-13 people lived in the only 25-30 m² room in which three, at the very best four beds could be placed. One can imagine the physical and spiritual crowdedness in these houses, intolerable for the man of today.

It is quite clear that in those who lived like that the quick and more and more positive changes of surroundings gradually evoked first the desire, then the thought and finally the intention to get away.

Peasants possessed thus the desire to have a cleaner, more comfortable and airy home. From where could they get the suitable furniture, objects and the necessary knowledge of furnishing a house? Previously the owner of the house himself, or the craftsmen of the community made the necessary equipment of the house (tables, chairs, chests painted with tulips, benches, beds, ovens and stoves). This custom ceased at the beginning of the 20. century, all the above mentioned goods were to be bought in shops, on markets, from tradesmen and merchants. As to their shape and decoration these goods were the products of urban culture - or rather civilization. But taste and demands of the Hungarian towns were by then so far from the culture of the villages that, when the peasant attained the desired aim and threw out of the room the old fashioned bed, the worm eaten chest, the food stained and chopped table, the inherited embroidered pillows, and they were replaced by the varnished bed, mirror wardrobe, dressing table, and he hung up the gaudy splash-guard and looked round, he suddenly felt he was a stranger who did not fit in that environment. In fact, he

was a stranger. Therefore he went into the back room or kitchen, and took care not to dirt the fine, glittering, fragile town goods.

We are confronted with the typical case of an unhealthy gap between claims and possibilities. It was the contrast of laborous, dirty peasant work and furniture for the town. The peasant enjoyed the urban furniture but not in the same way he enjoyed the one he had made himself. The longer he looked at it the more he was happy, because he had a room like those in the town, and he strongly believed it was beautiful. But he never found it befitting enough to live in it, not even to this day.

The shape and inner order of village houses is thus changing. Let us see what has it become in our days. The shape of the house after the romantic period between the two world wars calmed down to the simple square-plan, tent-roof form. The fact that this very form came into being can be explained from three aspects:

1. The cause. As we have already mentioned, houses built after the first world war were separated into living quarters and farm buildings; either the former grew, or the latter decreased, in both cases the change happened to the advantage of the living quarters.

The farm building built to the house consisted first of all of a barn for grain storage and a stable for cattle. Nowadays only an unimportant amount of grain is stored at home, there is no horse and the private cattle is continually decreasing in number. Farm buildings attached to the houses have shrunk, have lost their importance as their role became limited.

2. The possibility. In the traditional peasant house the one or two rooms and kitchen were heated from the porch. This solution decided the possible number of premises and their arrangement: they could be built only beside the kitchen where the fireplace stood. However, when these premises became independent from heating, they could be built anywhere, no matter they had no walls in common with the kitchen. Thus the strict rules determining the location of premises expired, and so there was a possibility for variations.

3. Necessity. From the beginning of the fifties the rural population gradually gave up buying the cheap but partly unpractical, partly hardly obtainable traditional building material, and the use of bricks and concrete increasingly spread. Both are considerably more expensive than adobes and natural stone, and building has also been made more expensive by the high transport charges as well as by the fact that timber is now purchased mainly on the market. As a result, cost reduction became the dominant point of view.

There is no doubt that houses require the smallest surface of walls and roofs the least timber when the ground plan is a square.

Thus, old long buildings having partly become unnecessary, new arrangement of rooms made possible and the lowest amount of material and cost required for this form were the conditions causing the development of the present shape of village house.

We can draw the conclusion that the development of square, tent roofed houses was necessary and final, independent of the fact that this process can by no means be considered as completed, and independent of whether this form is esthetical and fits in the environment.

Now, let us see, how the rural population settled in the new houses, although to find system in the life of a dis-integrating community is not a rewarding task at all.

When studying the way village people live in the new houses we are astonished to find that the unhealthy custom of keeping "clean rooms" has become the general order of using a house.

There are generally two, three and sometimes even more rooms, furthermore, kitchen, larder and often bathroom in the new houses. Most frequently all rooms are considered "clean rooms", and in the majority of the cases members of the family do not - or only partly - live in them. In accordance with the increased wealth of rural population these rooms are richly furnished, curtains, carpets are not missing, but the family lives, sleeps and cooks in the kitchen.^{9/} This "living kitchen" is found in most cases in the house, but sometimes it is built beside the house like a summer kitchen. In the northern part of the country the "living kitchen" is placed in what can be considered as a raised cellar or sunken ground-floor. In summer in almost every house, but in many houses even in winter, cooking, living and generally sleeping too take place here.

In these "living kitchens" and "living cellars" conditions are - of course - very favourable compared to the old porches or even rooms. They generally are spacious, water-proof, with large windows and stone floor. Such "living kitchens" - even if they are in the cellar - are usually healthier than the old rooms with their tiny, curtained windows, even if they looked on the street. Thus, this form of life should be primarily considered unhealthy from a social point of view because the family, and nearly all functions of life are packed in a single room.

The fact that this custom developed between the two world wars exists even today, throws out the suggestion that a survival of causes producing the phenomenon has to be reckoned with, and we must realize that no such objective change as influencing the situation favourably has occurred. So, the problem has not ceased, on the contrary, it has become even greater, since it is now that the bulk of the rural population has opportunity to build new houses.

The present system of using the house is well reflected in the demands concerning the size of the various rooms. Disaccord between the builder and the building contractor who wants to avoid the prospective objections of the Professional County Committee is very frequent. The Professional County Committee generally forces villa-like houses with small rooms to be built, but village people do not like them. The difference is especially sharp concerning the size of the kitchen. Namely, builders want nearly always much larger kitchens than thought to be justified by the Professional County Committee. The building contractor usually tries to persuade the peasants to moderate their demands concerning the size of the kitchen, but - even if he succeeds - he rarely avoids the subsequent reproaches. Majority of the new owners would build larger kitchens if they could start a new.

We do not state that fulfilment of this demand would solve anything, although it is worth taken into consideration that most village people live in the kitchen even if it is built smaller than they would have liked it to be; and in the larger kitchen they would be more comfortable.^{10/} By reducing the size of the living kitchen we cannot force the rural population to use the "clean rooms". With the disintegration of the peasant community village people try to give up their old form of life and take over a new, urban culture still unknown for them. But they do not easily accept the ready-made,

new surroundings as a home. Numerous sociological surveys and well-disposed speculation are required for planning houses in which village people feel at home and do not run away to the kitchen or cellar which - though crowded, or dark - are at least familiar and cosy. Let us give them back their own homes - made clean, more comfortable, light and human -, so that at last they could live in them in a way they would like to for a long time.

It is up to the constructors of individual - and standard designs of village houses to develop - on the basis of a supposedly increasing activity of sociologists dealing with changes in rural life - really up-to-date house types which meet the requirements of the rural population on one hand, and favourably influence their way of using their houses on the other, and will be a worthy continuation of the peasant houses in forming an integrate part of Hungarian scenery.

Notes

1. Ferenc Erdei: Magyar falu (Hungarian village), n.d. 175.p.
2. Ferenc Erdei: op. cit. 188.p.
3. János Tóth: Népi építészetünk hagyományai (Traditions of Hungarian people's architecture). Budapest. 1961. 216 p.
4. Ferenc Erdei: op. cit. 44.p.
5. The spread of the wardrobe in the village is connected first of all with national dresses given up. Urban dresses cannot be stored in chests in the way traditional dresses consisting of skirt and top separately were kept. (Parasztok /Peasants/ n.d. 147)
6. According to Erdei the only living room of a standard peasant house was a "real bed-sitting room".

7. It must be noted that this solution was not exclusive. There were people who in summer, but there were also ones who all through the year, cooked - often even lived - in the summer kitchen, because they did not want to heat the house. There were houses - though not many - where the room was heated with an iron stove or new fashioned tile stove. However, majority of the peasants either cooked in the room, or lived in the kitchen.
8. From the point of view of our reasoning it is indifferent that in certain types of plot (e.g. in the northern and eastern part of the country) stables were built separately from the houses. Such houses were shorter than those in the Hungarian Great Plain and have similarly become square.
9. All these can be considered justified in summer resorts where the family or the owner lives in a single room because of a possibility of earning good money by letting rooms. It is not they that are spoken of at present.
10. Unfortunately this problem is not in the centre of interest of our sociological special groups and public opinion. Still, various publications and reports touch upon the subject, and the authors point out that in villages studied by them every room of the new houses is inhabited. Of course I myself saw such welcome phenomena, and hope that they will be even more frequent in the future, but in my practice the rural population's characteristic way of using their houses is to live in a single room.

