



MÁTÉ TAMÁSKA
ÖRMÉNY VÁROSÉPÍTÉSZET ERDÉLYBEN
(L'HAMATTAN PÁZMÁNY PÉTER KATOLIKUS
EGYETEM, 2020, 194 PAGES)

If we look for examples of positive survival strategies in the history of peoples subjected to extraordinary challenges, Armenians undoubtedly stand out in this respect, and Armenians in Transylvania are no exception of it either. When in 1719 the Saxons expelled the Armenians, who were considered unwanted competitors, from Bistrita under the pretext of spreading a plague epidemic, they responded to this unfairness against them by settling after the expulsion in Szamosújvár on the site of a goose pasture, where they created practically out of scratch Armenopolis, the "Armenian metropolis," which became the only planned city in Transylvania at that time.

Trade and city building are mentioned in the literature as the basis of the well-known image of this minority of Transylvania, the Armenians, who for a long time used the romantic and myth-creating historiographical material of the turn of the century as a basis, relying primarily on the sources of Kristóf Szongott¹. This has only been reassessed in recent decades. An important stage of this process is the book by Máté Tamáska entitled *Armenian Urban Architecture in Transylvania. From Living Tradition to Cultural Heritage* (in Hungarian), which is the first to compare the development of urban architects in Szamosújvár (Gherla), Erzsébetváros (Dumbraveni), Gyergyószentmiklós (Gheorgheni) and Csíkszép (Frumoasa), home to the four great Armenian-Hungarian colonies of Transylvania, in the 18th century.

The author formulates several theses in the preface to his book. According to him, when talking about urban architecture, several approaches are conceivable: on the one hand, starting from the specific conditions of Transylvania as a region, and on the other hand, in the context of the

¹ Kristóf Szongott (1893): Szamosújvár, the Hungarian-Armenian metropolis in writing and in pictures, Aurora, Szamosújvár; Szongott Kristóf (1901-1903): The Hungarian Armenian metropolis, volumes 1-3, Aurora, Szamosújvár.

architectural discourse of Armenians. He finds the latter approach ineffective because by the beginning of the 19th century the Armenians of Transylvania, which entered into union with the Roman Catholic Church, had practically lost their cultural ties with their native land, which resulted in a loss of language on the one hand and a fall within the competence of Catholic culture in Central Europe on the other. This process took place earlier there, so Armenian architecture in Transylvania from the 18th and 19th centuries bears no relation to the traditions of Armenia. The oriental style that developed from Byzantine architecture, which accompanied Armenians as far as neighbouring Moldova, was interrupted when it crossed the Carpathians. Based on this fact, Tamáska makes the first thesis of the introductory chapter to his book, according to which, if there is no influence in religious Armenian architecture between the Caucasus, the Crimea, Moldova and Transylvania, then even less can be expected in the field of secular monuments, especially urban architecture. Accepting this basic thesis, the author unfolds his topic primarily starting from the conditions of Transylvania.

The other fundamental thesis is that the author considers urban architecture as a cultural product that can be analyzed, using sociological methods of architecture, so unlike classical architectural examination, he does not consider the form itself as the object of investigation, but aims to understand the content that the form expresses and carries, i.e. understanding the cultural content conveyed by a given architectural pattern. According to this view, Armenian architecture should be understood as a cultural-social process, not as a work of architecture. In this case, the cultural process should be understood as the history of the integration and assimilation of the Armenian colony, as well as the spatiality and architectural imprint of this story.

The author seeks answers to questions such as who the Armenian colony considered to be a model group, how its tastes changed, how it related to the local architectural traditions. Because of these questions, "cultural integration," "assimilation," "pattern following" become keywords throughout the book.

In terms of structure, the volume contains four major thematic units, where the author first clarifies questions of the history of science and methodology, and then discusses the changing patterns of cultural identity. The section dealing with the identity of Armenians, builds on a rich literary apparatus, while outlining a four-step assimilation process, primarily referring to the example of

Szamosújvár (Gherla). When discussing the identity of Armenians, the author points out that, in addition to loyalty to the host society and limited ecclesiastical autonomy, the third pillar of the 19th-century Armenian image is the emphasis on civilizational achievement. Tamáska highlights the issue of civilizational achievement because, according to him, the theme of city building fits into this topos from two aspects: on the one hand, because of the inclusion of the ancient Armenian capital, Ani, from the collective memory, and on the other hand, because of the prominent role of Szamosújvár (Gherla). Although local history works emphasize the urban design performance of the settling Armenian diaspora in the case of Gyergyószentmiklós (Gheorgheni), Erzsébetváros (Dumbraveni) and Csíkszép (Frumoasa), they also emphasize the regional embeddedness. However, only in respect of Szamosújvár is it customary to refer to “pure” Armenian architecture, where the Armenian character and architectural excellence together created the basis for the development of the special status of the city. Tamáska puts it this way: “Szamosújvár is the Transylvanian equivalent of the saintly and mythicized Ani, the place of memory of Hungarian-Armenian identity” (Tamáska 2020:42).

The second thematic unit continues to examine the external relations of the Armenian colonies, but here the aspects of urban history come to the fore. The author emphasizes that at the beginning of the 18th century Armenian trading centres were “new cities” in a stable settlement system that had been operating for centuries, consequently independent Armenian urban development had to overcome the disadvantage that Armenians could not occupy the most advantageous positions geographically. At the same time, Székelyföld (Szeklerland), already in a peripheral position, formed a separate entity within Transylvania both in space and social consciousness, while Szamosújvár and Erzsébetváros had to compete with existing centers such as Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), Beszterce (Bistrita), Szeben (Sibiu) and Medgyes (Medias).

In the third thematic unit, the author discusses the structure of cities, street and land systems, and their cultural embeddedness. In fact, it is here that it becomes clear how decisive the status of Armenians was in shaping the settlement landscape. At the same time, the author also points out that the Armenian city was not built entirely separately, but loosely connected to an existing city or to the settlement core of Váralja. Thus, in the structure of Armenian cities, a kind of compulsion to adapt can always be detected. On the

fourth level of comparison, the author gives a description of the cityscapes of the early 20th century, building on the abundant source material: postcards, cadastral maps, the building statistical data series of the modern census of 1910, and the revival of homeland knowledge literature.

In Chapter 5, entitled *The Changing Relations between the City and the Country*, the author formulates several connections with regard to landscape environment. First, he mentions that the close relationship between cities and landscape explains the rapid architectural adaptation of the settled Armenians, but also how the relatively large differences in the architecture of the colonies could have developed. The most peculiar feature is how the distance from the landscape and primary landscape cultivation strengthened the similarity between the architects of the colonies, since Armenians initially had similar status in all four locations, being merchants and artisans, and accordingly reflected in their architecture the use of land independent of primary agricultural production or storage needs from basement to attic. The third aspect is that until the 17th century a new settlement could only be established in Transylvania by adapting to the already existing feudal framework. Tamáska also points out that urban architecture is not deterministic, since the natural environment offers a variety of building materials, and the kind of building materials the population uses depends on their habits and knowledge. In Transylvania, Armenians settled in two cultural regions: Saxony and Szeklerland. Both were autonomy areas of medieval origin created for defensive purposes. In the parts of Saxony they were built mainly of stone, while in the Szeklerland areas they were built mainly of wood, and the Armenian colonies settled here adapted to local traditions.

Tamáska sees one of the key moments in the spectacular development of the Armenian colonies in the fact that the Transylvanian city network showed unevenness and gaps. The absolute monarchy of the 18th century-maintained units, performing permanent administrative functions in the occupied manor areas and operated economic mechanisms across regions, but the urban network inherited from the Middle Ages was not suitable for this either in Northern Transylvania or in Szeklerland. Here, partly with the support of the Viennese court, a chain of medium- and small-town towns was created as part of the transformation of the urban network in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Tamáska, the spectacular development of Szamosújvár and Gyergyószentmiklós at different times, the ambivalent urbanisation of

Erzsébetváros and the situation of Csíkszépvíz become understandable in context of this process. In addition to the general tendencies of the cities of the Armenian colonies, the author also points out an important peculiarity, namely that while in the 18th century the commercial functions of urbanization predominated, by the end of the 19th century state-administrative functions came to the fore. Although these processes were characteristic of other cities as well, the dynamics that transformed the merchant city into an administrative city can already be considered a characteristic of Armenian feature.

Tamáška also points out that the adaptation of Armenians to settlement structures can also be seen in the internal structure of settlements, as they had to build their colonies outside the already existing real manor walls and symbolic social walls. As a characteristic feature of this process, during the 18th and 19th centuries the Armenian colonies became the new settlement centers, either as in Szamosújvár and Csíkszépvíz, where the centre of the whole settlement shifted compared to the former village core, or as in the case of Erzsébetváros and Gyergyószentmiklós, where the most valuable inner territories gradually became the property of the Armenians.

One of the characteristics of Tamáška's diverse and multidirectional approach is that in addition to macro level approaches, micro level analyses are also included in the presentation of comparative city structures, so we not only get a comprehensive picture of cities, but also the presentation of the buildings that give each city its specific character. He devotes a separate subsection to sacred architecture, then to public buildings, and finally outlines the process in which changes can be seen from Armenian houses to tenement palaces.

One of the exciting chapters of Tamáška's book is the interpretation of the visual connections of the Armenian settlement landscape, in which instead of analytical analyses, the relationships of urban architectural ensembles come to the fore. The author tries to show the effect that the cityscape has on the viewer. At the same time, he also takes into account the specific phenomenon that when interpreting the cityscapes of the early 20th century, contemporary experiences can only be reconstructed to a limited extent, while the general relationships of spatial structures have been preserved. Churches form such lasting accents, while with the change in the composition of the population at the turn of the century, significant Armenian building elements such as the promenade, cafés, skating rinks and casinos are no longer part of the cityscape. When describing

the cityscapes, however, the author does not rely solely on the conditions observed today, but also draws extensively from the collection of postcards of the time. In Chapter 8, Armenian Cityscapes, he devotes a subchapter to the silhouette of the city (The Silhouette), i.e. the skyline that it is considered the most important component of the landscape embeddedness of the settlement. Tamáska emphasizes that the landscape and city merged into a silhouette only in Szamosújvár, and concludes that while Armenian houses appear in an emphatically rural environment in Csíkszépvíz, in Gyergyószentmiklós, which is similarly located, the urban character becomes emphasized; and while in the less urban character of Erzsébetváros the urban character comes to the fore, Szamosújvár has survived in the public consciousness as a silhouette, fixing the harmony of the city and its surroundings.

With regard to streets and squares, the author draws attention to the fact that the streetscape of Armenian cities is primarily determined by two seemingly contradictory features, where the Armenian streetscape is on the one hand is an imprint of architecture using local traditions and raw materials, and on the other hand it has absorbed urban and metropolitan patterns. As an example, he mentions Szamosújvár, where the rural mansion architecture of the region was combined with the decorative art of masters from Kolozsvár, Austria and South Bohemia. The author considers the landscaping of public spaces belonging to the value system of the Armenian bourgeoisie to be an important element.

With regard to the architectural features of the residential houses, Tamáska points out that the 18th century was not the case. Armenian families of the 19th century formed a dynasty, and the townhouse as a miniature castle or mansion became a status symbol of the family. At the same time, the houses had to meet commercial needs, so the representative Baroque character of the city cores was mixed with the scenes of economic activity, where Armenians tried to reduce differences between the host population and their own values and way of life by adopting architectural patterns from the environment. However, the end of the 19th century brought about a significant change, when the former Armenian Baroque cityscape gradually gave way to new urban scales. This process was inseparable from the new role of the Armenians, who went from foreigners to privileged members of the order, and then to committed supporters of the Hungarian nation. The imposing office buildings and schools of the turn of the century represented this relationship of Armenians to the Hungarian state

nation in the cityscape. Sacred construction remained a key element of Armenian cityscapes, in which the loyalty of the newly connected population to the Church of Rome played a major role. According to Tamáska, "The segregation and the integration appearing simultaneously in cityscapes faithfully express the internal social movements of the early 20th century. For Armenians shrinking from majority to minority (Erzsébetváros, Szamosújvár) and from a significant minority to a diaspora (Gyergyószentmiklós, Csíkszépvíz), assimilation has become inevitable." The fact that a significant part of Transylvanian Armenians left the colonies and partly moved from Romania to Hungary was also reflected in the development of Armenian urban structures. This is why the author said in the introduction to his book that "Armenian architecture in Transylvania has become a cultural heritage from a living tradition in the 20th century". (Tamáska 2020: 13). In the closing part of his book, the author emphasizes that "The fundamental aim of the comparative study of Armenian urban architecture in Transylvania was not to describe the architectural form, but to explore the social content expressed in that form " (Tamáska 2020: 177).

Máté Tamáska's book *Armenian urban architecture in Transylvania* presents the urban design characteristics of Transylvanian Armenians in a modern, multidisciplinary approach. Its language is not burdened with unnecessary scientific jargon, and its vivid descriptions make its text enjoyable not only for the narrow profession. The present book can be regarded as a significant stage in presenting a new approach, but it is also noteworthy for the author's efforts to bring the landscape of settlements closer to both the profession dealing with architecture and the average reader and the introduction of sociology of architecture based on social history.

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