

Hungarian University of Fine Art, Doctoral School

METASCAN

The phenomenology of etched pebbledash

In my dissertation I present the results and methodology of our joint research based on the aesthetically-inspired photo-typology created by Katharina Roters. The subject of our study was the pebbledash ornamentation of the hip-roofed cube houses of the Kádár era. In keeping with the spirit of the age, this post-folklore language of form superseded, as a form of social compulsion, a substantial part of the older housing stock that preceded it. As a representative cultural technique of the era, however, it drifted unnoticed between the extant and the perceived until it caught the eye of a “foreigner”. The German photographer arrived among the natives at the last moment, to overturn the officially sanctioned image of socialist folk culture with her new typology.

DLA dissertation theses

József Szolnoki

2018

Supervisor: Dr. habil. Miklós Peternák CSc.

The "etched pebbledash" ornamentation technology can trace its lineage back to the Renaissance genre of sgraffito, the name of which is derived from the Italian verb sgraffiare or graffiare, meaning *to scratch*. For centuries, this technique was a widespread means of decorating buildings constructed for the upper echelons of society. In keeping with the trickle-down theory of cultural assets, it started to appear on the facades of Hungarian agricultural proletariat homes in the second half of the twentieth century. (1st thesis)

This period was defined by expropriative nationalisation, forced industrialisation and the formation of cooperatives. The single-party state was incapable of fulfilling its commitments made in the 15-year home construction plan, and left the rural population to resolve their own housing arrangements. For this, however, to honour the living-standards deal made after the crushing of the 1956 revolution, it was also necessary to tolerate the ideologically paradoxical institution of private agriculture. Thus, the peasant proletarian who had set out on the path of collective farming became a capitalist by nature, using capital from the "shadow economy" to build his new home, the hip-roofed cube house. This was when the role of inheritable land wealth was usurped, in rural settlements, by the residential house. In the 'sixties and 'seventies, around half a million prefabricated apartment blocks were built in the provinces. It is a persistent misconception that the hip-roofed cube houses were propagated on the basis of a standard design. In connection with our research, Endre Prakfalvi has demonstrated that the standard design was only conceived once everyone had already built their cube. The myriad of facades built in a relatively short period, all of a similar size and shape were transformed into a gigantic projection screen. The post-folklore ornamentations of the "happiest barrack" of the communist bloc were simultaneously folksy and modern, both socialised and individualised at the same time. Indeed, in keeping with the spirit of the age, this post-folklore language of form superseded, as a form of social compulsion, a substantial part of the older housing stock that preceded it. As a representative cultural technique of the era, however, it drifted unnoticed between the extant and the perceived until it caught the eye of a foreigner. (2nd thesis) It was Roters's aesthetically abstracted typology that first drew our attention to the central event playing out on the façades. The cultural assets that had trickled down into the realm of the mundane, losing their value in the process, were returned to high culture and visual art. In order to discuss them, we need to abandon the natives' narrative, which although relevant has effectively remained unchanged since the 1970s. In doing so, we have ventured into uncharted territory, marked only as white patches by the patient cartographers of old. We proceeded with the greatest caution, as an unwary observer can easily fall into emotional or theoretical traps in the more secluded nooks and crannies of the field of meaning.

We enlisted the help of philosophy to assign concepts to the phenomena revealed through perception. Starting out from these, we used a comparative technique to create our scientific theses. Every comparison, every pair of images, is also potentially an archive in itself. The stricter the typology, the fewer words are needed to describe the phenomenon or viewpoint that it presents. It speaks for itself. The semantic flywheel that was set in motion through the series of building portraits, each of which can also be interpreted as a standalone symbol, generated an entirely new interpretive domain. The words and images formed associative patterns. The pebbledash document corpus took on meanings that exceed the sum of its parts. To borrow Carlo Ginzburg's analogy, rather than achieving insignificant results by adopting a strong scientific standard, we achieved significant results with a weak scientific standard. Stepping out of the cycle of trauma, suppression and blind spot inertia, we took up the story of the bottom run of society at precisely the point where shame, helplessness and guilt had silenced the literate. The tattooed houses of *homo kádáricus* are symbols not only of an era, but also of our relationship with it. In the volume entitled *Hungarian Cubes* (published, in typical fashion, in Switzerland in 2014), and with the help of the presentations and publications that build on its content, we

succeeded in breaking up the monopoly on definitions held by official ethnographic science. Thus, through the creation of truth, in accordance with Foucault's concept of "gouvernementalité", we also took over certain functions of government. The presentation and interpretation of pebbledash ornamentation has also led to a transformation of the world that serves as the arena for scientific work aiming to understand and document the era. (3rd thesis)