

Private religious space in Hungary based on an adaptation of a school to a social care home in Szécsény, Hungary

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Abstract

This article presents two examples of contemporary private religious spaces against the background of the small-town architecture of the typical, largely unknown town of Szécsény, Hungary, using projects by the Hungarian architect Csanády Gábor Mátyás, DLA, as an example. It discusses the ideas that defined the adaptive reuse of a former school, located in an existing complex adjacent to a monastery of the Order of St. Francis, which was converted into a social care home, and a chapel in the architect's own house.

Keywords: private religious space, school building adaptation, social care home, Szécsény

1. Introduction

Usually, when we think about the problem of religious spaces in cities, we have in our minds large public spaces, magnificent basilicas and churches, temples or necropolises. However, there are completely different, unexposed spaces, which undoubtedly are religious spaces, only they are not accessible to the public. They are either semi-private or fully private (Podhalański, 2019), serving microcommunities or only families. The tradition of private religious spaces reaches back to the beginnings of Christianity.

2. The hungarian town of Szécsény. The cultural context

One example of private religious spaces is a project of the adaptive reuse of a school building, located near the medieval church and monastery of the Order of St. Francis in the centre of the town of Szécsény, Hungary. Typically, academic papers reference very large and well-known structures, and there is few that discuss smaller and less-known ones that might otherwise be significant to local communities. The building of former school that has been converted into

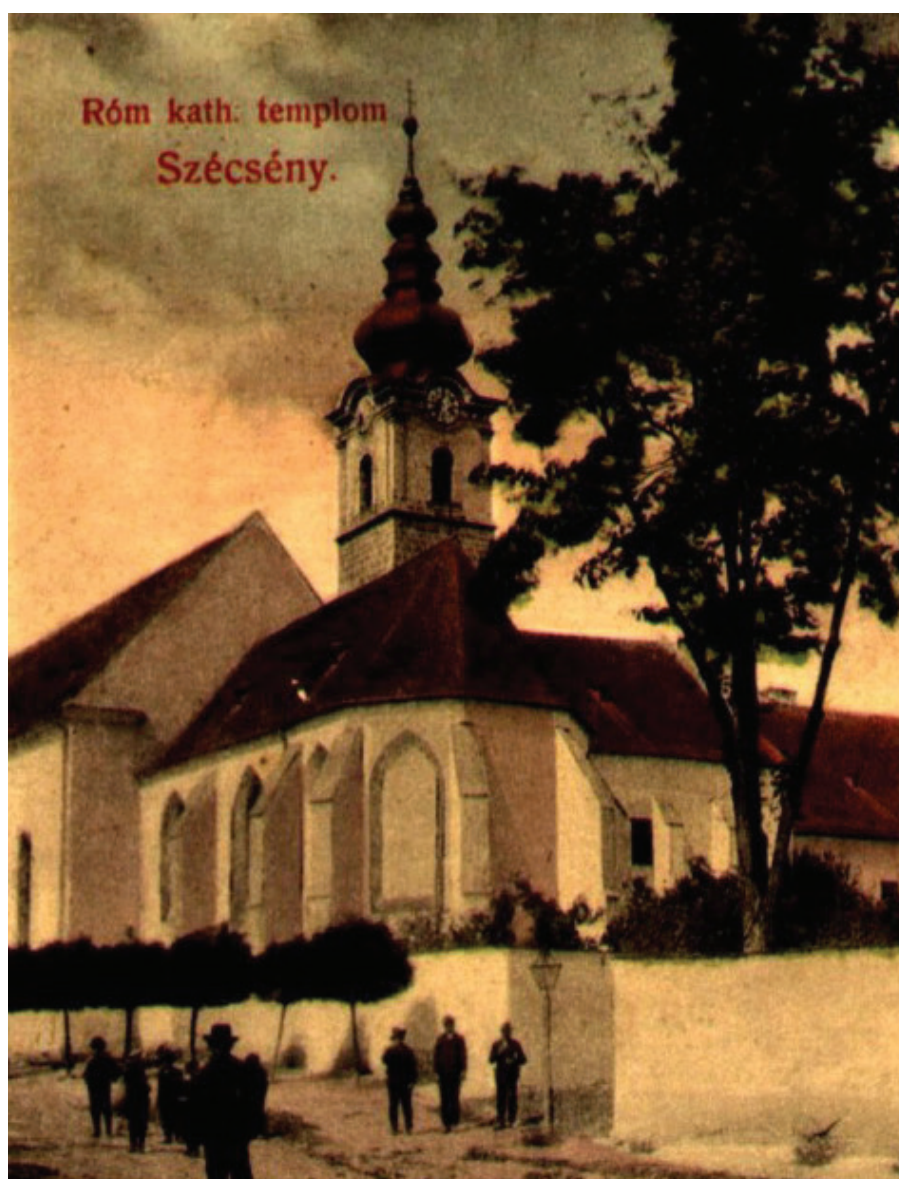


Fig. 1. Monastery of the Order of St. Francis in the 1920s. On the first plane we can see the wall, where the first building of the complex would be built (source: Csanády és Csanády Építész Stúdió Kft)

a social care home is one of such building. Its design was prepared by Hungarian architect Csanády Gábor Mátyás. If we look at a map of Hungary, we will see that it is a small town. It is not too well-known in Hungary itself, let alone in Europe. Szécsény once had a parliament¹, whose presence was noted in the local history of the town. The Franciscan church, which was built in the Gothic style, affects the local architectural climate of the part of the town in which it is located. At the heart of the town is Forgách castle, whose Baroque massing and bastions, which used to be a part of the fortifications of the castle itself, fulfil a role similar to that of the Franciscan church and create a peculiar type of small-town, historical atmosphere. The social care home in question is located between two distinct places, dominated by the town's major historical buildings. The town of Szécsény reached the pinnacle of its development during the period



Figs. 2, 3. Aerial view of the site (source: Csanády és Csanády Építész Stúdió Kft)

¹ It was held in Szécsény for 310 years, between 12 September and 3 October 1705, in the first parliamentary relationship of the Rákóczi War of Independence, which is considered to be the peak of the War of Independence. Cultura Magazine article (Cultura-MTI, 2015).



Fig. 4. The monastery of the Order of St. Francis in the 1940s. The object of the extension design is visible on the photograph (source: Csanády és Csanády Építész Stúdió Kft)

of the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century, which means that its dominant architectural style is Eclecticism. Many buildings in the town, as well as those located along Lajos Hajnald Street, were built in this style. One of these buildings became the object of the design discussed in the article. This site, and particularly the fact that the Franciscan church is directly adjacent to it, along with the fact that the distance to Forgách castle is not that large and both can be seen in the town's panorama, resulted in specific requirements as to the architectural form of the extension of the building – an old school, which was to undergo adaptation into a social care home and a chapel.

The old school building was probably built in the period between the 1920s and 40s, with a U-shaped plan and two wings: a northern wing, which ended in an open, yet covered semicircular terrace, and a southern wing. Throughout its life, it was used as a school and then as a kindergarten. Its architectural form references the small-town architecture of the first half of the twentieth century.

Covered with a gabled roof, it has facades that can be considered typical of the town of Szécsény, yet similar ones can be encountered in other Hungarian towns near Budapest.

3. The history of the building

The site of the complex in question is located at the centre of the historical medieval part of the town. The specific history of this area remains unknown, although reportedly this long-inhabited area remained constantly developed. The building itself was probably built in the 1920s, as this was the period when the complex's first structure was built and housed a primary school for boys.

This first small school had three classrooms with exits leading directly onto the street, as evidenced by the layout of its windows. The long, western wing could have included a larger classroom, or perhaps the space served a different purpose. The short, eastern wing either featured a different, larger classroom along with a smaller classroom, a toilet, or some other space, a teachers' room, toilets, etc. The exact purpose and changes that each function underwent are impossible to retrace today. The building's cellar, located at the end of the short, eastern wing and featuring a ceiling supported by steel beams, is currently used as a boiler room.

During this period (the 1940s), a lower, elongated middle section was added to the building's western wing. As there had been no internal connection with the room, external storage space or toilet (or perhaps an apartment?), this space could have been an apartment – used by the headmaster, teacher or perhaps a groundskeeper. The windows from the rooms to the west of the new part of the building could have been the eastern windows of the former apartment. The new function introduced later (a kindergarten and a nursery, or perhaps a larger school?) would require two larger group rooms and new sanitation blocs from the side of the street. Some windows in the attic were removed from the roof of the building, as one could easily get hurt there during war.

When the schools became state property (in 1950), the building was expropriated from the church. Initially, it might have been used as a school or simply stood empty, but over time its technical condition deteriorated and it required renovation. It was finally converted into a kindergarten. This could have been done towards the end of the 1960s or at the beginning of the 70s. During its renovation, a kitchen was added to the building's western wing, its third bay. It was then that a corridor was added to the eastern side of the western wing, perhaps in place of a veranda. During this time, the building's facade was renovated, its brick walls were preserved and even expanded, but the metal elements of the overhang near the entrance and the decorative paintwork of its walls would disappear. The timber structure of the western wing was renovated and expanded at this time. Unfortunately, parts of the new buildings would be relocated later, perhaps due to problems with statics, which had most probably arisen because of errors in building the foundations. In May 1994, as a result of the entry of Act XXXIII of 1991 into force (Évi XXXIII, 1991), the property was transferred to the Hungarian Catholic Church, which in turn handed it over to the poor Franciscan nursing nuns. However, the building was fully transferred by the state as late as in 2010.

Demographic changes associated with decreasing birth rates that have been taking place in Hungary, and that have also been observed in all of Europe, have necessitated another conversion of the building's function and its adaptation to the needs of seniors. The pro-social policy implemented in Hungary resulted in the need to adapt the building to a nursing home for 30 seniors, among them persons with limited mobility. The designer proposed the preservation and conservation of the original form of the building and the transformation of a part of its facade. However, he introduced significant changes in the southern wing. The first floor of this wing was remodelled, introducing the necessary structural



Fig. 5. The architect's drawn impression (pastel), depicting the chapel in the building in question (source: Csanády és Csanády Építész Stúdió Kft)

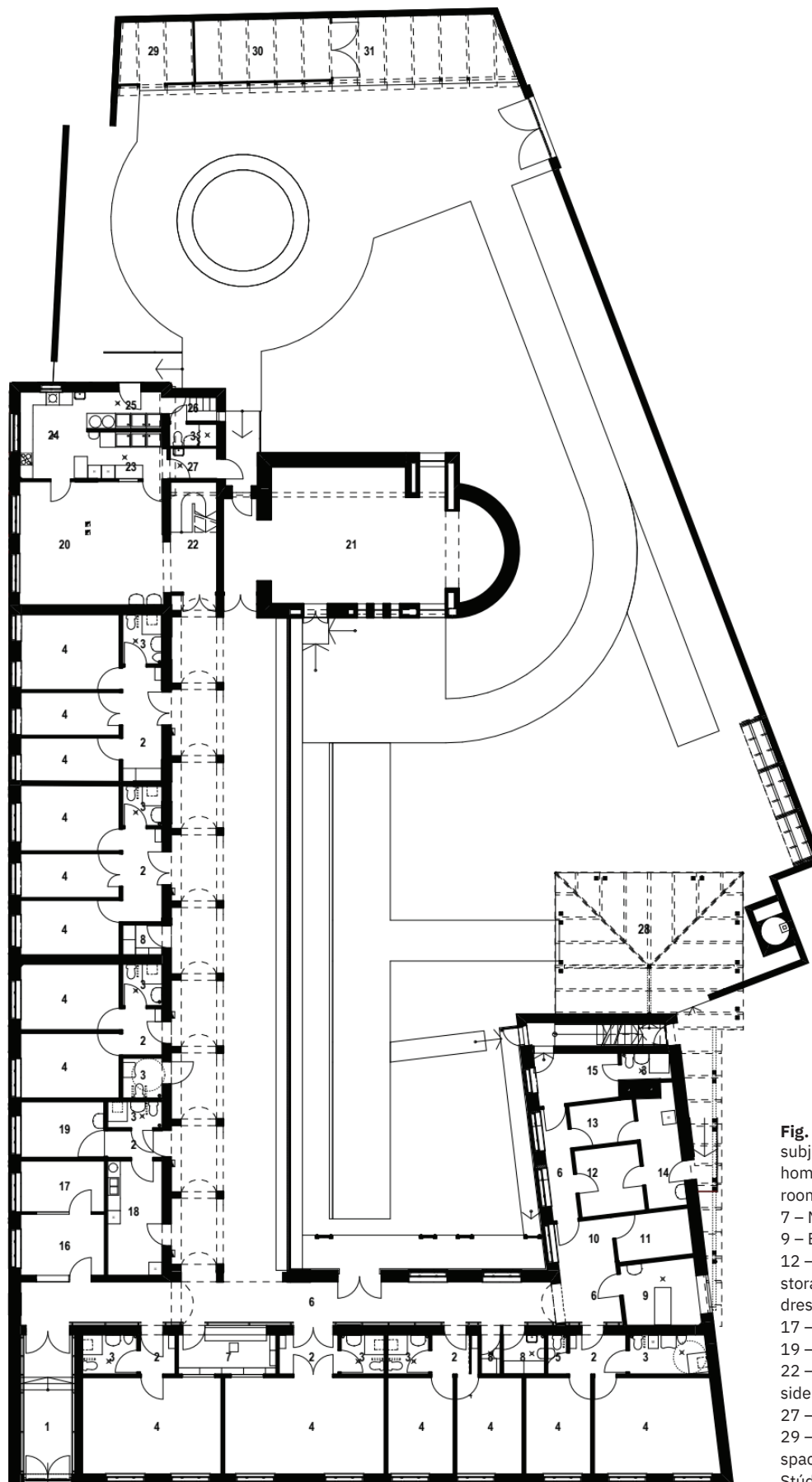


Fig. 6. Ground floor plan of the school building subjected to adaptive reuse as a social care home. 1 – Foreground; 2 – Ante-room; 3 – Bath room; 4 – Room; 5 – Toilet; 6 – Traffic zone; 7 – Nurse stand; 8 – Cleaning storage; 9 – Bathing; 10 – Smoking; 11 – Tool storage; 12 – Clean clothes storage; 13 – Laundry storage; 14 – Laundry, Iron; 15 – Staff dressing room; 16 – Administration office; 17 – Management office; 18 – Kitchenette; 19 – Isolation room; 20 – Diner; 21 – Chapel; 22 – Stairs; 23 – White sink; 24 – Kitchen sideboard; 25 – Reciver; 26 – Dressing room; 27 – Trash container; 28 – Garden house; 29 – Storage; 30 – Garage; 31 – Covered open space (source: Csanády és Csanády Építész Stúdió Kft)

changes, which did not alter the character of the building. On the contrary, the designer introduced references to the traditional “atmosphere” of the Franciscan church’s surroundings, using panoramic glass to further open the view from the corridor linking the individual rooms with the entrance to the chapel near the internal courtyard, thus producing a space shielded from the elements that allows even persons with special needs to contemplate the building’s green interior.

The overarching idea behind the remodelling project, as proposed by the designer (Csanády, n.d.), is as follows:

We wanted to preserve the existing building. Although it is not under legal protection, we are speaking of a building that is worth preserving, and which should be preserved in its original form due to historical considerations. However, in places where new functions have appeared, such as the chapel or the extension of internal spaces, we boldly used the tools of the present and applied modern design, which fits existing elements. This does not apply to the northern wall of the long, west wing of the existing building, which is dated to a later period relative to the previous extension of the building and which, with its small windows, is not deserving of southern, street-side exposition or the western facade, as it disrupts the building’s appearance. We redesigned the building there, but we also tried to maintain its original style.

When preparing the remodelling design, the architect had to take another factor into consideration. It was a personal factor, referring to the experiences of those residents of Szécsény who attended the former school in their youth. Their experiences and a certain manner of thinking about the world were associated with this building and their colleagues. Those former students, when standing in front of the building, would say: I attended this school, and this school, and other memories of mine, are associated with it. If the building had been fully remodelled and they had not known about it, they would have only been able to say that it was the site of a former school they had attended, and the memories of their past would not be as vivid. A full remodelling would have taken away a part of their past, just like destroying old photographs would have. Space and buildings are, in a sense, the witnesses of their lives, a part of their personalities and identities. It is a third personal layer, which – historically – has played a role in defining the memory of a given place. It is an irrational layer, as it is not measurable, nor objective, meaning something completely different to each student, yet it undoubtedly enriches Space. It also enriches the spirit of the place, adding to it a memory of matter, as argued by Bartkowiak (2009), a subject which would require a completely separate discussion, for which there is not enough room here.

Of course, one can still argue that the subject is a part or is associated with the history of this place, or that one should strive to preserve the character of the building at this address, and in this sense we should discuss the significance of the building to the local community, although it is not particularly important.

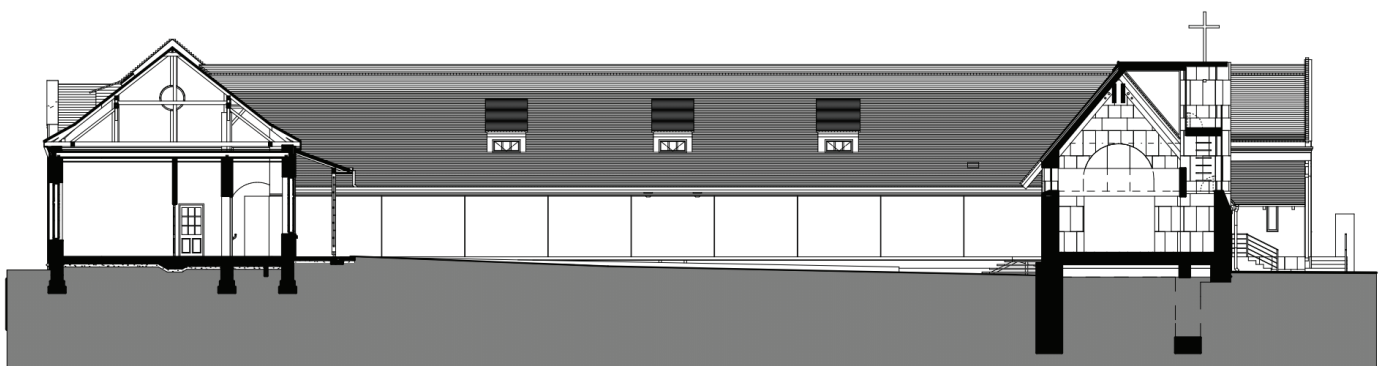


Fig. 7. Widthwise cross-section through the building’s wing and its chapel, with a view of the courtyard’s facade (source: Csanády és Csanády Építész Stúdió Kft)



Fig. 8. View of the facade of the former school building after performing renovation work (source: Csanády és Csanády Építész Stúdió Kft)

Based on this idea, the architect decided to preserve the building's original facade, or rather to return to the previous one, as the appearance of an earlier facade has been depicted on a photograph from the 1940s, which proves that it had been remodelled. However, it should be added that the difference in appearance between the facades lies in its wall panels. There used to be ornamentation between the building's windows, but it was destroyed, either by Puritanism or a lack of money during the socialist period.

4. The design's conceptual assumptions versus the spirit of the place

When we investigate the idea on which the architect based his solutions, we can discuss three aspects, assumptions or problems that are important in understanding it. They are references to the building's location, function and architectural form.

In order to produce the intended result, the architect decided to simultaneously work on solving matters accompanying these three problems. The architect refers to the place in the context of its spirit, its *genius loci* (broader discussion provides Gutowski) in (Gutowski, 2007). Csanády G. assumed, following Norberg-Schultz's argumentation (Norberg-Schulz, 1991), that to understand the spirit of a place one does not need to copy old forms, but rather define an identity through reinterpreting them. This approach once revolutionised the beliefs of architects who designed new buildings in historical complexes or the remodelling of old buildings. Interpreting a place should cover not only its topography or morphology, but also the local climate conditions, exposure, the main views, shapes, styles, the sizes of massings, shading and insolation. Relationships with other buildings located nearby, their historical and broader sociological environment are likewise important. This means that to properly define or identify the spirit of a place it is necessary to understand the principles by which the community that resides in its vicinity lives, its culture, customs, principles and legal system.

Concerning the building's function or the character of its occupancy, which can appear obvious at first sight – a social care home and a chapel – after we refer them to a specific, existing building, it may turn out that the design task is not as simple as it seems. The problem here was not merely addressing the basic functional layout within the outline of the available space. When we consider the conditions of blending the building into surroundings and factor in the spirit

of this place, it turns out that there are also secondary elements, such as the building's meaning its semiotics, which should express that which characterises a given microcommunity that inhabits it or the complex that it is a part of. Here we can use the example of a granite base of a bank building, which might as well have a cheap, rusticated gypsum plaster finish. However, it is obvious that the microcommunity forming the bank believes that if a bank is to be characterised by stability, then a granite base would produce the impression that the bank, with which the building is associated with, is more stable. This would carry over to the bank as an institution, and its financial stability will be expressed through the use of durable, expensive materials, proudly exhibited on its facades and in its interiors. In the context of function, the construction of a large building by a large company does not merely mean solving the problems of spaces for its administrative personnel. An appropriate building expresses the aspect of prestige through its architectural form and materials, which is significant from the point of view of the company's image, highlighting how successful it is in light of it being able to afford a presentable building. The function of the formality of buildings is likewise an element of the spirit of a place, building relationships with other places around the town that are similar in structure.

The third aspect is architectural form, or the character and shape of the building, which is the most difficult to grasp, but whose main value is the quality of architecture in relation to the individuality of the architect. Every architect who participates in design competitions knows the rules of comparing and selecting the best proposal. The idea is based on an individual interpretation of the same location and the same function. The manner of competing is based on confronting designs prepared by various individuals – designers who anonymously participate in the competition – with the judgement of other individuals – who are also designers, but who, as a rule, do not participate in the competition in which they play the role of jury. Of course, the programme is not identical, with the functions presented in the various competition projects not being precisely the same. It is the entirety of a building's originally designed architectural form and its relations with the local cultural context that are the most important. This is what is best at linking a given design or building with the period, reflecting whether what has been built is contemporary or is merely a mock-up and is not timeless, fashionable and good enough to elicit enthusiasm among contemporaries. The designer can, of course, design in any style, yet presently the reception of such a work can be entirely negative when referred to what we describe as current architectural fashion, turning out to be an action that is either difficult to understand or an aesthetic provocation.



Fig. 9. Altar apse with an altar stone made from tuff, size: 1 x 1 x 1 m (source: Csanády és Csanády Építész Stúdió Kft)

Considering the needs and limited mobility of seniors, a contemporary chapel was added to the existing building at the western end of its southern wing. It is available both from inside the building and from outside, becoming a semi-private religious space. The designer justified this decision as follows:

If we want to ethically approach the task of designing a senior care home, then we are not allowed to use the bold and loud forms of fashionable architecture or build a “manifesto” for ourselves as architects. People aged sixty, eighty or even a hundred years old have seen many fashionable things in their lives and do not want to “wrestle” with reality, with today’s fleeting superficiality, as they prefer to enjoy the light of their souls. An older, tired person faces the pain of the body every day, which is why they want an elegant building, a cool, meticulously built environment that attracts nature to a much greater degree; where one can hear the birds singing and enjoy a sunny flower garden (Norberg-Schulz, 1991: 5).

Architecturally, the building is very interesting. It has been designed in a minimalist style, not only because of the available funds, but also by compositional intent. The use of natural materials, timber in the beams, stone to build walls and the highly formally interesting top-lit apse, which introduces a certain novelty to contemporary religious architecture, in addition to a pseudo-transsept “made of light”, provide proof of the great sensitivity and talent of the architect.

5. Private chapel in the social care home.

The architectural form of the chapel is clearly contemporary. The structure itself, similarly to the social care home, is maintained in a minimalist style, but one that is based on a school of design philosophy that is different to the one employed in the remodelling project, as it does not refer to Franciscan tradition. The design makes use of the ancient principle of adapting solutions to the heavenly order, not only in terms of orientation relative to the cardinal directions, but also the proportions of the altar (Csanády, 2007). The chapel’s orientation is also linked with the oriented Franciscan and Lutheran churches located to the east of the chapel. It also has a practical aspect, as it protects the courtyard from northern winds. The architectural form, although contemporary, features references to the architecture of medieval Hungarian churches, such as the church in Nagyörzsöny, located relatively close to Szécsény. The stone used to build the chapel’s walls is volcanic tuff from a quarry in Eger (Juhász, Csanády, 2016). This is how the design applies the idea of referencing the tradition of the local, Hungarian manner of building and continuing the cultural tradition of erecting temples.

The interior of the altar apse is lit with top and side light, which gives it an interesting, warm expression. The austere decoration magnifies the impression of the interior’s spaciousness, despite its modest dimensions.

Another local material was used in the chapel: timber, contrasted with the white surfaces of its side walls. This made it possible to once again reference the local tradition of shaping interior architecture and religious spaces.

6. Conclusions

The tradition of continuing the cultural line of shaping private religious spaces and interiors in newly-designed buildings in Hungary remains alive, as proven by the examples discussed herein, but they are not the only ones that do so. There are many other examples, for instance in the work of acclaimed architects like Imre Makovec, although they are based on different patterns and forms.

Contemporary religious spaces exist not only in public buildings, social care homes or monasteries, but also in private homes. They are an expression of cultural continuity, one that continues to exist despite many hardships not only in Hungary, but also in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

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Prywatna przestrzeń sakralna na Węgrzech na przykładzie adaptacji w mieście Szécsény budynku szkoły na dom opieki społecznej

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono na przykładzie zrealizowanych projektów węgierskiego architekta Csanádyego Gábora Mátyása, DLA, dwa przykłady współczesnych, prywatnych przestrzeni sakralnych na tle uwarunkowań małomiasteczkowej architektury typowego, szerzej nieznanego węgierskiego miasteczka Szécsény. Omówiono idee przyświecające przebudowie byłej szkoły w istniejącym zespole zabudowy przy klasztorze Franciszkanów na dom opieki społecznej oraz kaplicę w domu architekta.

Słowa kluczowe: prywatna przestrzeń sakralna, adaptacja budynku szkoły, dom opieki społecznej, Szécsény