

THE ORIENT ON THE DANUBE

ORIENT NA DUNAJI

Katarína Haberlandová

KOMORA, PAVOL, 2021

MEDZINÁRODNÝ DUNAJSKÝ
VELTRH V BRATISLAVE 1921 – 1942
[THE INTERNATIONAL DANUBE
TRADE FAIR IN BRATISLAVA
1921 – 1941] BRATISLAVA: SLOVAK
NATIONAL MUSEUM – MUSEUM OF
HISTORY

In 2016, Pavol Komora published a study of trade and general-interest exhibitions internationally, as well as in the former Kingdom of Hungary and in post-1918 Slovakia. In subsequent years, his research has concentrated on the International Danube Trade Fair (Medzinárodný dunajský veľtrh / MDV) in Bratislava, held in the Slovak capitol each year from 1921 to 1942. This research has, as well, culminated with the issuing of an equally noteworthy publication. The main contribution of the book is its thorough and multidimensional evaluation of the historic significance of the MDV, even beyond the economic questions of interwar Czechoslovakia – though it has been usual to view the event primarily within its light.

The author successfully places the Bratislava trade fair into the international context of modern expositions initiated by the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. Massive quantities of products entering growing markets, and sharp competition in each individual economic sector, required specific forms of mass sales along with presentation of samples of the said goods. Only through mass exhibitions could it be possible for manufacturers to present their goods to the largest number of potential customers. Yet at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, large-scale marketplace retail was hardly an innovation, which is why the historical excursion in the book's first chapter is conceived so broadly. It was the modern trade fair with displayed samples that

implied a genuine revolution through its spatial extent and thus its associated demands for architectonic formation and urban layout. In this sense, the author specifically points to the Russian exhibition fairs in Nizhny Novgorod, which served as a kind of prefiguration for the trade fairs in central Europe. For the purposes of the fair, held in this city ever since 1817, an expansive complex was created on a rectangular grid of elongated pavilions and an imposing entrance through a Classicist palace, which still stands today.

In consequence, markets began to disappear from the historic spaces in cramped urban centres, or in palaces or burghers' houses. Indeed, this comparison in the introductory chapter, supplemented by historic photographs of the Leipzig trade fairs in 1905, still held in conventional urban blocks, and its modern open complex from 1913, illustrate not only the symbolic but also the tangible rebuilding of society into the modern era – though precisely this breakthrough moment linked to so many new architectural and urbanistic challenges could have been further developed in the book. Situating trade fairs within cities, addressing their transport accessibility (by sea or on a riverbank, yet also with rail access) and the best organisation of their inner structure as well as the formal vocabulary to reinforce their mission, were major texts for municipal governments and the architects shaping the conceptions for urban growth. To a great



extent, their solution determined the later growth of a city in a specific locality, often one of vital significance. The extent of organisation of trade fairs was, to be sure, exceeded only by the ambitions of bringing together merchants and customers, and imprinted itself on the shaping of the city image, not only for the duration of a few weeks in the year.

Though the importance of the Danube as a major waterway was clear once Czechoslovakia became a state in 1918 and hence the river ports in Bratislava and Komárno began to be expanded, the plan for the commercial use of the river in the direction of the Balkans, the Near East, or even southern Russia demanded a more complex vision. Such a vision was provided in 1920 by Kornel Stodola, then the government plenipotentiary at the ministry. He created a civic association, the “Oriental Market”, devoted to organising the first “Oriental”, later “Danube” international trade fairs. Stodola’s importance for the creation and development of trade fairs in Bratislava was essential, hence this biographical line runs through the entire publication, as well as having a separate chapter discussing him specifically.

The original fair plans had grandiose ambitions, yet gradually were reduced – the fate of a reduction or significant modification being characteristic for so many large-scale projects, both architectural and especially urbanistic, in interwar Bratislava. One of the most interesting moments in the preparation for the first year of the fair, as described by the author, was the plan to build the “Palace of the Oriental Market” on the site of the current Comenius University law faculty on Šafárikovo námestie. The plans for the palace are unsigned, though for several reasons we can justifiably assume their author to have been architect František Krupka. The nearby building of the Financial Office (now the Slovak Interior Ministry), a work of Krupka’s from 1931, is formally similar to the design for the commercial palace, though realised in reduced form (the raised central section of the building is reduced in height by over one-half). Furthermore, in 1925 Krupka completed the later-realised design for a “commercial palace” that is now the present university building, and hence it can be assumed took an interest in the task starting from the initial plans for the fair quarters. As the author notes, if the Palace of the Oriental Market had been realised in the original 1920 form, it would have been the highest building in the city – and indeed in all

of Czechoslovakia. For this honour, Bratislava had to wait until 1935, when it won this record with the “first skyscraper” of the commercial-residential Manderla building. (However, opposed to the originally planned eighteen floors, it only has eleven.)

The trade fair grounds subsequently were created in the winter port, which also lay close to the emerging “Dunajská štvrť” (Danube District) with modern office and residential buildings. The river port appeared to be an ideal site for such exhibitions, being close to the river, the railway, yet also in contact with the city centre. However, the long and relatively narrow space between the tracks and Prístavná ulica gradually showed itself to be confining. The original plan of building 8 – 10 pavilions shrank to a mere two, designed by architect Josef Marek. During the trade fairs themselves, the complex was supplemented with various stands or even small-format architectural works propagating various firms and their products, such as the unique pavilion for the Ladce cement works by architect Friedrich Weinwurm. Surprisingly, this structure even survived the bombing of the port and the nearby Apollo refinery in 1944, by which time no trade fairs were being held in Bratislava and plans for construction of a new exposition complex had come to naught.

The chapters on each of the individual years of the trade fairs are supplemented with a wide range of photographs, illustrating not only the atmosphere of the organisation of MDV, but equally the exceptional visual culture that emerged around this yearly event. It displays various artifacts from posters, some designed by Zdeněk Rossmann, Ester Šimerová, or other notable artists, through medals awarded to the most successful MDV participants, advertising placards, slides, or even the aesthetically valuable exhibition diplomas. Through this extensive pictorial record, Pavol Komora helps complete the still insufficiently evaluated cultural and social impact of the International Danube Trade Fairs.