

Cladding as homage.

Oradea's Art Nouveau Buildings Paying Tribute to Otto Wagner, and Ödön Lechner

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The Art Nouveau building stock of Oradea (Nagyvárad) offers outstanding examples of cladded structures. These buildings illustrate the theory of dressing that had crystallized more than half a century earlier and clearly demonstrate how much the new art of the late nineteenth century drew from the theoretical foundations of historicism. What made the turn of the century exceptional was not this fact itself, but rather that the diverse functions of the theory of dressing came into effect in one single spot and within a very short period of time. Thanks to the first-rate designers of these houses and their still-provincial location, these qualities come much more prominently to the fore than they do in a visually more crowded metropolitan environment.

The “dress” most often protects, conceals, and keeps at a distance, while also conveying meanings and, frequently, making historical references while assuming an identity-mediating role. Besides a host of other examples, the many buildings erected here by Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab (between 1903-1909), through their evocation of folk embroidery and other sewn textiles, were not only mediators of Hungarian identity at the turn of the century. They also made tangible the *textile reference* that is so emphatically present at the Semperian core of the theory of dressing. Their façades are not merely transposed carpets and tablecloths, but elements of folk costume that wrap historical building forms, or evoke the specificities of a modern planar façade.

Evocation, however, turns into *homage* when it can be shown that certain formal solutions – also used by the source of inspiration – have no practical function whatsoever, serving solely to pay tribute to their architectonic predecessors. The Darvas House (1910) by László Vágó and József Vágó, which reuses cladding patterns and decorative elements from a Budapest apartment building (the Késmárky and Illés multifunctional tenement) constructed a year and a half earlier, clearly does not simply follow Otto Wagner's riveted façade claddings, but rather expresses the fellow designer's utmost respect for them. Since the ceramic buttons evoking rivets are placed at the corners of the cement tiles, it is evident that they have no structural role, as they fix nothing. This effect is further reinforced by the ridge tile that closes the roof structure like a kind of metaphorical seam, reviving one of the orientalizing models used on Ödön Lechner's Budapest Museum of Applied Arts, but employing it with a new emerald-green glaze.

As a result, in several of its elements the house never continues a well-established form, but explicitly pays tribute to two proto-modern reference architects of the Dual Monarchy. The “clothed” building thus becomes clearly not only a tool of commemoration, but also one of homage and quasi-sacral reverence.

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