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***ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN ROLES AND LOCATION OF OPERA HOUSES AND  
THEIR FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS: THE NATIONAL OPERA OF BUCHAREST  
AND WIENER STAATSOPER***

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*Abstract: My paper sets out to examine two major European opera houses, the Bucharest National Opera and Wiener Staatsoper, from the viewpoint of their architectural design roles and locations. The inspired location and design features of the two lyrical theatres are apt to elucidate several financing and cultural management issues that both institutions are currently undergoing all the while trying to maximize on their outreach and cultural productions.*

**Keywords:** *opera house, architecture, location, design, costs*

Very few attempts have so far been made at explaining present cultural management issues from the viewpoint of traditionally established locations and architectures of opera houses. In what follows, two major European opera houses, the Bucharest National Opera and Wiener Staatsoper, are brought together to the fore in an attempt premised on the fact that "usually things that are constructed have some sort of logical history and when this is known it is easier to take the right decisions at any one time" (Utzton 2000). Indeed, architecture, as many other concepts in the economics of an institution, remains an important factor related to the idea of saving that may turn out to be beneficial at its initial point of establishment but may however end up to be more costly in the long run, affecting the overall building maintenance budget. Likewise, part of our considerations about the architecture of the two lyrical theatres examines the inherent danger in large, "popular" buildings when they manifest the tendency to fill too many functions and rooms into those buildings (Ryding and Pechefsky 2001).

Size and reliability are the main design traits of the National Opera of Bucharest (NOB). The building looks majestic and is enhanced by the greenery that surrounds the lake. Its fairly new architecture represents the urban footprint to the communist beginnings of the 1950s. The first show staged in the new building was "The Queen of Spades" by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and was played on January 9, 1954. The foyer welcomes guests during performances and intervals and spans a fairly generous area, one that yet intimately allows for casual dialogues and quiet retreats. The inner elegance enhances a subtle balance arising from the simplicity of the walls and decorations of the ceilings and staircases. Of the two big halls, the Great Hall has a beauty of its own that contributes to the grandeur of the opera and ballet performances born from its womb, however the smaller performance hall is equally impressive with its rich ceiling decoration. The National Opera House of Bucharest is an emblematic construction for Romania's capital city being classified with the B-II-mA-19003 code on the historical monuments list. The National Opera's artistic-cultural activity takes place in the building located on the Mihail Kogălniceanu Boulevard nr. 70-72 (District 5) and was built between 1950 and 1952 based on the architectural plans drawn up by architect

Octav Doicescu. The emplacement allows building and outdoor performances in the green area outside the building in the Park Opera and the Opera has a total capacity of about 950 seats in the Main Hall and an estimated 200 seats in the Yellow Foyer. Beginning 2008, the upper floor Yellow Foyer and the ground floor Large Foyer have been changed into concert halls, being successfully used for Opera and Ballet Experimental Studio performances.

The building itself is made up of spaces designed for performances (stage, auditorium, foyer, storage for costumes and cabins), preparatory work and/or administration (ballet and singing rehearsal rooms, warehouses, heating section, offices, production workshops for scenery and costumes, etc). The Great Hall is built in the shape of a horseshoe and its performance stage is 30 meters high, 20 meters deep and 24 meters wide. The top floor of the building hosts the Opera Museum, whose collection includes photographs, letters, stage costumes, programs, posters and busts of great musicians and opera artists whose permanent exhibition is open to the public on the Opera second floor. The functional and architectural solutions provided by a multidisciplinary team led by Octav Doicescu illustrate not only a sober, decent, yet monumental architecture but also a sense of clear and defined volumes. With pilasters and arcades on two levels, with statues on pilasters and a moldings separation of registers profiled by a retired pediment over the main entrance, the building is flanked by sculptural compositions displaying a clear, bold theme. Instead of two smaller arches which initially rested on the three arcades, two representative bas-reliefs were placed on the facade, one depicting an opera scene (made by the sculptors Zoe and Boris Baicoianu Caragea) and the other illustrating a flight dancing scene (imagined so by the sculptor Ion Vlad). The side facades continue the lines of the volume register with rigorous rhythms and vertically grouped cavities. Other important design elements remain the ornamental architectural sculptures located in the front park of the building itself, such as the statue of the great composer George Enescu, a bronze sculpture made by Ion Jalea and the bust of Gheorghe Ștefănescu (1843-1925), the founder of the Romanian Opera, as well as the 100 crystal gilded armed chandelier located in the Performance Hall.

Unfortunately, as the building meets the criteria of architectural and technological functionality of its early construction times, it needs careful and occasional restoring improvements. Statically, even if the construction is stable, in some of its areas, in the event of potential earthquake shakings, severe dislocations may occur which could jeopardize both the heritage and people's safety. Likewise, the basement is severely damaged by occasional strong water infiltrations hence one of the main problems of the building remains the high moisture level. Currently, the building still requires extensive restoration works, redevelopment and functional improvement, all of which have been slowed down and made difficult by the heritage preservation regulations in force. The National Opera is considered a heritage building therefore any intervention requires a long and cumbersome process and steps.

On the other hand, viewed from any angle, the present building of the Vienna State Opera stands out as a remarkable preservation of every single historic facade built since 1869. Its Renaissance designed facades with lateral loggia underscore at its finest the solemn and public character of the building. The two main decorative elements of the facade are two winged horses driven by the muse of poetry (Erato) and Harmony, made in 1876 by Ernst

Julius Hähnel. The renowned artist also designed the five bronze statues placed on the pedestal in the loggia arches (statues representing Heroism, Melpomene, Fantasy, Thalia and Love). Both sides of the building are marked by two old fountains by Josef Gasser, which represent two antagonistic worlds, the one on the left side bespeaks *music, dance, joy and ease*, while the other one evokes the image of *Loreley, suffering, love and hate*. The back of the building is visibly wider and includes the stage with adjacent spaces, whereas the front part of the building comprises the auditorium and the side rooms giving access to the public. Remarkable are also the distinctive room types, the French styled roofs above the corner towers and the saddle-type rooftops connecting the two bi-storey constructions. The transversal wings perpendicular to the main wing were originally used as carriage access road and in the immediate vicinity there are the flags of the monarchy. The building's inner space has been preserved largely in its original form, the main front area with a main vestibule, central staircase, foyer, loggia and tea room on the first floor retaining the historical spirit of monumental size and construction. The first segment of the staircase, located on the side of the main entrance that leads to the ground floor lodges, is marked by the founders' portraits of the Viennese opera, August Sicard von Sicardsburg and Eduard van der Null, designed as two medallions by sculptor Josef Cesar. Just above these ornamental medallions two elements are carved in relief that symbolizes the *opera ballet*. A special artistic imprint is achieved by the painting on the ceiling above the staircase that depicts *Fortuna*, a painting made by a refined artist, Franz Dobiaschovsky. Additionally, the seven allegorical statues created by Josef Gasser are representative of the seven independent art forms, architecture, sculpture, poetry, dance, music, theater and painting.

Undoubtedly, the most impressive historical highlights constitute the tea room (the former royal lounge of Franz Joseph I), located between the stairs and the middle lodge whose walls are beautifully decorated with 22 carat gold, the impressive paintings (*Die Musik auf painting Adlerschwingen*-by Karl Madjera), the majestic sculptures (*August from Ligne*), the wall decoration from the renowned Giani workshops and the exquisite tapestries with the initials of King Franz Joseph I.

The opera interval rooms surround the main staircase with a chain of about 120 square meters of rooms linked together. The *Gustav Mahler Room*, located on the right side of the staircase, is the most representative of them all and up until 1944 was the chancellery for all directors from *Dingelstedt* to *Karl Böhm*. On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Gustav Mahler's* debut as conductor of the Opera (11 May 1897), the room was given his name and his workroom is celebrated with his portrait made by *R.B. Kitaj*.

After the war, the Viennese Opera House was integrally reconstructed, this time with a greater number of rehearsal rooms to match existing needs, a cafeteria and more management and administration spaces. Most areas, including cloakrooms, are video monitored and technically equipped with speakers, so that permanent work communication with the stage can be maintained. During 1991-1993, the Vienna State Opera building underwent a thorough modernization process upgraded to the highest technical level by equipping the stage with hydraulically operated mobile floors, complex electro-mechanical lifts, ventilation systems, and high performing heating and fire prevention equipment. In addition to the two large *Carlos Kleiber* and *Eduard Eberhard Waechter* rehearsal halls, there are three rehearsal

rooms available for choir and orchestra ensembles, an organ hall (the State Viennese Opera boasts the unique 2,500 pipes organ in the world), a hall for ballet and ten soundproof study rooms.

In what regards the auditorium, the median lodge offers breathtaking views over the horseshoe shaped auditorium that was completely rebuilt after the war. While *Erich Boltenstern*, professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts Academy in Vienna, was commissioned to build the auditorium, the third gallery, cloakrooms and break rooms on the upper floors, architects *Otto Prossinger*, *Ceno Kosak* and *Felix Cevela* took over the decoration of the first floor halls, retaining the basic concepts proposed by the initial architects *Sicardsburg* and *van der Null*. Auditorium capacity is currently 2284 seats, of which 1707 are berths, 567 standing places, 4 special wheelchairs places and 4 are passenger seats. Acoustics-wise, Vienna State Opera always boasted perfect acoustics, largely resulting from a long process of solid wood surface ornamentation. Some of the upper floor seats with a partial view were equipped with reading lights, keeping the already auditorium established colours - red, gold and ivory. The chandelier is a crystal glass crown, with a total weight of 3000 kg, a number of 1,100 light bulbs, having a 7m diameter and a 5m height. The stage delimiting element is the *Iron Curtain*, made by *Rudolf Eisenmenger*, which depicts a scene from *Gluck's* opera *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Another important moment in the architectural evolution of the Vienna State Opera was marked by the opening of a museum on the premises (Smith 2013), which reaffirms the traditional size of the building and the curatorial responsibility of the institution towards contemporary artistic creation. In 1998, the creation process of a series of large paintings was opened for the opera house (one painting per season), maximizing thematically on the artistic value and sophistication of the Iron Curtain (176 square meters). Thus, the series of iron curtain exhibitions (museum in progress, in collaboration with Vienna State Opera and Bundestheater-Holding), turned the season for a limited period of time into a very dynamic exhibition space of contemporary art that provided the illustrations for the book entitled *Die Vorhänge temporären Eisernen* (2012). The orchestra area spans 123 square meters being the place for artistic affirmation of about 110 musicians per show. Three iron curtains were built as anti-fire measures, a main one separating stage from auditorium and two more for side and rear protection of the stage. The architects' main aim since building reconstruction has been maximum security assurance therefore all wooden ceilings were replaced by steel and concrete finished ceilings. Roof tops were also replaced by terraces that serve both as evacuation passages and relaxing convenience spots during warm season performance breaks. Starting 1999, the terrace has housed a small children's theater called *Austria Mobilkom children's tent*.

Both architectural designs reviewed above display a certain equilibrium role, common to most opera houses in the world. What individualizes them, to various degrees, is not the design vs. non-design amenity characteristics and specific functional roles, but rather the managerial capacity to cover building maintenance costs and keep price-inelastic audience demands, more critical in the case of the National Opera of Bucharest. Complex engineering problems and escalating costs are as important today as they were at times when both opera houses were established, however in the case of the National Opera of Bucharest it seems that it was not the architectural planning and design that turned out to be costly in the long run,

affecting the overall building maintenance budget, but the lack of timely infrastructure investment that might have prevented the accumulation of basement water infiltration. In both cases, additional costs are incurred by the tendency to fill too many functions and rooms into the two opera house buildings but, operating on two funding models (Florea 2014) as these opera houses are, such costs are covered differently in the two countries. It remains to be seen in the distant future which of the two managerial paradigms are apt to faster and better solve the current problems (pertaining to their budgets, management, artistic performance, human resources, etc) both lyrical theatres are facing all the while trying to maximize on their outreach for larger audiences and better artistic productions.

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