

# Vernacular Architecture As a Source for National Architectural Identity

Ion Mincu and Károly Kós

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*“Without knowing the old  
architecture of our neighbors  
it is impossible to characterize  
an architecture of our own.”*  
(Károly Kós)

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I N THE late nineteenth century, the search for national identity gave vernacular architecture a special place in the history of architecture. The phenomenon called Art Nouveau appeared in response to nineteenth-century historicism, sprinkled with plenty of cultural references, and included the attempts of the intellectuals of that time to find new ways for the nation to identify itself. Architects sought inspiration in their own roots, in the purest and the most unaltered forms of expression of a country, where patterns of material culture and non-material traditions are interwoven, where the liberating spirit is present—that is, in vernacular architecture. Such focus on the awareness of national values is a natural step in the development of a nation. This transformation was a time of critical thinking, intensely exploited by architects. The picturesque

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and authentic architectural image remains a constant element, regardless of their individual styles.

Vernacular architecture accounted for two great architects, Romanian Ion Mincu (1852–1912) and Hungarian Károly Kós (1883–1977), the sources of inspiration for the creation of a national architectural identity.

This movement, with an original character and with a theoretically coherent program, crystallized in modern Romanian national culture as “Neo-Romanian architecture.” It is part of the Romantic trend, where the sources of expression are inspired by the architecture of the past. In terms of the ideas translated into projects, it is an eclectic architecture, giving architects the freedom to choose motifs from the past. The interest in the vernacular and the traditional, combined with the spirit of innovation—the main concepts of Art Nouveau—can be found with the Romanian architects who created this new national style.

In general, it attempted to exploit the structural and decorative elements taken from the vernacular architecture of Romania (columns and wood railings, porches, roadside crosses), from the Balkans (bow-windows with wooden consoles, ribbed windows), and even from the Mediterranean area (loggias, pergolas); from the Moldavian and Wallachian church architecture (types of roofing, masonry paraments, wooden doors, girdles, frames, ceramic medallions), from Brancovian architecture (alternation of simple masonry with frames, railings, specific decorative intarsia in stone), as well as compositional themes selected from regional architecture that became specific compositional elements (themes like the keep, the small tower, the popular house with an elevated ground floor).

An important role in finding, creating, and promoting this style was played by the architect Ion Mincu. In 1871, he enrolled at the National School of Bridges and Roads in Bucharest, which he graduated in 1875, obtaining an engineering degree. Two years after graduating, Mincu went to France, where he studied at the National School of Beaux-Arts in Paris, until 1884. In 1883, his talents were recognized when he received the Award of the Central Society of French Architects.

One of the constant themes in Mincu’s work was the concern for creating a new style that would incorporate elements of Romanian peasant and religious architecture. After returning to Romania in 1884, he began designing his first works. The first application of the national style came in 1886, when Mincu was asked by Jacob Lahovary to refurbish his small residence. The building received new interior partitions and an exterior with modern decorations of various inspirations.

The beginning of the new style is best represented by Mincu’s 1889 work on the Romanian pavilion at the Universal Exhibition in Paris. The difference between the Romanian pavilion of architect Mincu and the other pavilions of

Romania, created over time, inspired by classical church architecture, is obvious. Since then, the Romanian pavilion, inspired by peasant life, has adopted the looks of a roadside inn. The pavilion, known as “Bufetul de la Șosea” (The roadside inn) was rebuilt in Bucharest in 1892. It functions as a restaurant, and its style includes all the important elements of the new national architectural style: a free composition of volumes, where the tower is a dominant element, carved wooden pillars with folk motifs, the twisted belt, semicircular openings, accolade arcs, buttons and medallions made out of glazed ceramics, the introduction of writing in architecture with its own calligraphy, which became a characteristic of the era, and the console roof. All these elements, interpreted in a modern style, represent the combination of peasant, Balkan, Oriental, Brancovian, and classicist inspiration.

Although Mincu’s accomplishments are widely recognized, the architect designed few public buildings. However, his works are important milestones in the Neo-Romanian style: the Central School for Girls, Monteoru House, Vernescu House, Nicolae Petrașcu House, and Mincu House (the headquarters of the Order of Architects in Romania). Besides architecture, the maestro made his mark in the fields of furniture and memorial design, in interior decoration and restoration, the most famous being the restoration of Stavropoleos church in Bucharest.

**A**T THE beginning of the twentieth century, the Hungarian architect Károly Kós was involved in the search for a national identity within the larger struggle for independence, social reform, and modernization.

Kós studied engineering at the Technical University of Budapest between 1902 and 1904. Afterwards, he transferred to the Department of Architecture, which he graduated in 1907. Kós was a central figure of the *Fiatalok* (The young ones) movement, founded in 1906, and an advocate of the creation of a national contemporary Hungarian architecture, whose model was model the national Romantic Finnish movement (Lars Sonck) and the ideas of “Art and Crafts.” Transylvania became the inspiration for the new Hungarian national style.

Studying Hungarian folk and medieval architecture, weaving it within a modern building technique and elements of Art Nouveau, Kós managed to create his own style. The first important works of Kós, from the Roman-Catholic church in Zebegény to the culmination of his style in the Szekler National Museum of Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy) (1914) or the Crow Castle (Varjúvár) (1910) at Stana, constituted a step forward in crystallizing the statement about a “conscious” national architecture.

The emblematic representation of the new national style was the building of the Szekler National Museum, where the unique elements of Transylvanian

architecture were skillfully combined in a new and contemporary language. The synthesis of medieval elements begins with the entrance to the courtyard. A wooden gate, set in a stone wall and covered with glazed ceramic tiles just like the museum, provides access to the stairs of the central tower of the building, where the main entrance can be found. The latter is a testament to the influence of medieval architecture, with a semicircular arch made of stone. The roof, in the architecture of Kós Károly, is a central element; the artist considered it as merging with the universe. The high roof features simple shapes made in a traditional way, with references to the vernacular, namely to the appearance of a church. Here, at the museum, we find the same dominant tower with four small corner towers, seen at the archetypal Protestant churches in the region of Călata (Kalotaszeg). Other references to secular Transylvanian architecture can be seen from the outside, as he took up and adapted the concept of space and courtyard entry, a model taken from the fortified churches in the area.

The museum impresses even at first sight by its exquisite outwardly appearance, and its choice of colors: the strong white of the façades contrasts with the variously colored roof tiles. Uniformity is interrupted by strategically placed windows piercing the façade, creating an interesting effect. The same principle is repeated inside the building, where the walls are combined with the arches and with the material used for the floor. The interior decorations feature patterns taken from folklore, just like the structural principles. In the main staircase railing decoration we can see some images from the life of ordinary people from the countryside, that is, of their crafts. Other subtle folk motifs can be discovered in the ironware of the door handles, molded into symbols of birds.

The architect always insisted that his works use local materials (stone, wood) and local craftsmen, to keep the tradition handed down from generation to generation. Except for the ceramic tiles made in Pécs, all other materials were produced locally.

The national recognition of the architect led, in 1908, to his inclusion as the Hungarian representative at the International Exhibition of Architecture in Vienna.

The Romanian national style, neo-Byzantine, was carefully studied by Kós. He did not reject the idea, especially since he had personally studied the Byzantine style in Istanbul. Kós was interested in Eastern architecture and wanted to further study in Russia, but as a result of World War I he was able to spend only two years at the Turkish-Hungarian University in Istanbul. During this period, he studied the Byzantine architecture of Istanbul and published a monograph titled *Istanbul: An Architectural History*.

He discovered the possibility of an interpretation of the Byzantine cultural heritage in Transylvanian culture with the project for the Orthodox cathedral

in Cluj, which came second in the competition. He designed several Romanian churches (Greek-Catholic) in the Călata area: the Greek-Catholic church of Stana, designed in 1924 and built in 1927, the Greek-Catholic church of Petrinzel, designed between 1924 and 1927 and built in 1927, the Greek-Catholic church of Ardeova, designed in 1928 and built in 1930. The church of Feiurdeni (1927–1928) is the smaller-scale version of his design for the Orthodox cathedral in Cluj, with which he participated in the contest. He restored a medieval edifice in Feleac (Cluj county), expanding it and also designing a tower.

Drawing directly on the structural and functional logic of peasant houses, Kós gave great importance to the regional cultural heritage, in which he integrated his projects, mostly churches. For the preservation and restoration of significant historical architecture, they took account of the cultural landscape through direct reference to historical archetypes.

Károly Kós was a pioneer of the protection of built heritage in Transylvania, being a renowned specialist in recognizing and saving Transylvanian ethnographic assets. A good example of this is the wooden Romanian church in Turea. This eighteenth century church, now exhibited at Dimitrie Gusti Village Museum in Bucharest, is classified as the oldest in the wooden churches category. In fact, the church was saved because of the recognition of its value by Kós. The old Orthodox wooden building would have been destroyed, same as all the other wooden churches of Transylvania from the same period. In the inter-war period, the wooden church was moved to Bucharest by Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș, the director of the Museum of Ethnography and National Art, an acquaintance of Kós.

Returning to Károly Kós's interest in vernacular architecture, it should be noted that he published a study in architecture called "The Old Kalotaszeg" in 1911. This work, which had a major impact on the specialists in the field, may be considered Kós's architectural manifesto.

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## Abstract

Vernacular Architecture As a Source for National Architectural Identity:  
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The search for national identity led to a renewed interest in vernacular architecture starting with the late nineteenth century. Architects began to seek inspiration in their own roots, in the purest and the most unaltered forms of expression of a country. The new style attempted to exploit the structural and decorative elements taken from the vernacular architecture of Romania, the Balkans, and even of the Mediterranean, from Moldavian and Wallachian church architecture and from Brancovian architecture. The paper presents the manner in which two great architects, Romanian Ion Mincu (1852–1912) and Hungarian Károly Kós (1883–1977), contributed to the creation of a national architectural identity drawing on vernacular models.

## Keywords

vernacular architecture, national architecture, Ion Mincu, Károly Kós, Neo-Romanian style