

Horia Moldovan

*Johann Schlatter.*

*Western Culture and Romanian Architecture (1831-1866)*

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Starting from the activity of the Swiss-born architect Johann Schlatter (1808-1865), the book sheds light on the architecture of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While thoroughly discussing his work, Horia Moldovan draws an insightful picture of the period in question against the local and international background. The volume abounds in information on Johann Schlatter's life, work, and his milieu. Therefore it can be read on different layers, since it follows different traces and opens up new perspectives on the subject.

The book covers a significant timespan, from the period of the Organic Regulations (1831) to the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza (1866). In fact, it was precisely then that the Romanian Principalities underwent momentous changes and became part of the European modernity. In architecture, this period coincides with a transition from Eastern influences to the assimilation of Western ideas, being characterised by a somewhat hazy and multifarious set of models and rules. This is one of the reasons why, despite its importance in the course of history, the Wallachian architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been scarcely documented and, to some extent, even disregarded. Having said that, the book is a crucial contribution to the historiography of 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture.

Horia Moldovan has carried out an extremely vast and thorough archival research and combined it with *in situ* observations and secondary sources. In this way many original documents have been brought to light for the first time. His detective-like skills help him reconstruct from bits and pieces the life and work of Johann Schlatter, and also offer an insightful perspective into the architectural practice of his time. His minute work of research, doubled by a strong critical thinking, lead Horia Moldovan to original connections, suppositions, and new ways of looking at both Johann Schlatter's work and the architecture of his time as a whole.

If, so far, most architectural historians have described 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture as being part of a certain style or movement, Horia Moldovan argues that, due to its "bewildering complexity" (p. 27), one cannot apply a single reading formula. Instead he documents each and every example in detail and delineates the rich context, tracing back the stories of each individual project.

The author divided his book into three main parts. The first part contains some biographical notes and sources of Schlatter's architecture. Little is known about his education, but most likely he was apprenticed to Friedrich von Gärtner (1791-1847) in Munich. Gärtner was an important figure of the Bavarian architecture of that period, with whom Schlatter worked on the project for the Royal Palace in Athens (1836-1840). After arriving in Wallachia, under quite obscure circumstances, Schlatter joined the State Technical Service. The earliest record of his name dates back to 1843, when he was "town architect" of Ploiești. He then moved to Bucharest, where he remained until his death in 1865. After his arrival in Wallachia, he was employed as an architect in the Department of Internal Affairs, and then, from 1844 to 1865, as a "monastery architect" at the Department of Cults.

Schlatter worked in Romania for more than two decades, leaving behind an extensive and variegated work. The author approaches it in the second part of the book, and sets it against the backdrop of Wallachian architecture.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was governed by the national ideals, and we should not be surprised that the Romanians were willing to become part of the European modernity, which implied the affiliation with Western values and culture. At first, the European ideas in architecture were brought by the foreign practitioners who worked in the Principalities, and afterwards by Romanian architects that studied abroad. Since there was no proper architecture school established in Romania at that time, they studied in French or German speaking countries. In this respect, Horia Moldovan gives an outline of the early days of architectural education, starting with the first notions of architecture that were included in the manual of drawing and architecture authored by Karl Wahlstein, and ending with the moment when the National School of Architecture was set up, in 1897. This part is followed by a comprehensive and original research on the institutionalisation of the architectural practice and the role the architect working in public administration would play.

Another significant aspect of the modernization process that the author examines is related to urban planning which, in the modern sense, was rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century along with the first regulations and plans. Likewise, urban *embellissement* becomes a constant preoccupation at that time as indicated by the appointment of committees responsible for the aesthetic matters in the major towns.

The last chapter of this second part is dedicated to the practice of Johann Schlatter discussed within the Wallachian context, along with the different architectural programmes of his works: princely residences, cultural and religious buildings. Rich and insightful observations are made on some representative projects in Bucharest, where Schlatter collaborated with renowned specialists of that time such as Vladimir Blaremburg and Rudolf von Borroczy (for the Kiseleff Park) or Alexandru Orăscu and Karl Benisch (for the building of today's University of Bucharest). Schlatter's work is influenced by Romanticism and the ideas already experienced in the West. Although stylistically his work uses on a variety of elements, it can be unmistakably referred to as historicist architecture. It is dominated by *Rundbogenstil* motifs, but there are also some isolated projects featuring classicist or neo-gothic elements. *Rundbogenstil* was familiar to him from his training, and also from the Western architects with whom he remained in contact. The contextualisation of his work, on a national and international level, contributes to a deeper understanding of the architectural phenomena and enriches the existent historiography, where most information was not set in a broader context.

A separate part, the third one, is dedicated to interventions on historical monuments. If before the 19<sup>th</sup> century the interventions on what we call today monuments were justified by practical reasons, after this moment, their historical value was also considered. By appealing to past values, the period rulers created the national ideal and thus legitimize their own endeavours. In this context, Schlatter's activity was a significant step forward in the coagulation of an attitude towards the built heritage. Schlatter's appointment as a "monastery architect" coincided with the creation of the first institutions dedicated to the protection and restoration of historical monuments in Europe.

Most of Schlatter's interventions were made in this field and, at the same time, they were subject of his contemporaries' criticism. He was in charge with the surveillance and coordination of the repairs and rebuilding of many monasteries from Wallachia. According to Horia Moldovan, the interventions undertaken to these historical monuments would fall into three categories. The first one refers to the complete reconstructions, which the critics considered as "mutilations" of monuments by foreign architects (Bistrița monastery from the Vâlcea County, Chindia Tower from Târgoviște). The second category includes partial reconstructions, where existing elements are maintained and combined with Schlatter's additions (monasteries from Tismana, Arnota, Mărcuța, Dealu, Antim, Negoești, etc.). In this sense, an interesting example mentioned by Horia Moldovan is the rose window of the western façade from the Antim Monastery, which is very similar with the one from Chartres. The third category consists in minor interventions and unbuilt projects (Snagov Monastery, the Old Patriarchy from Târgoviște). Furthermore, the author meticulously describes the interventions on the monasteries of Bistrița and Tismana (used as temporary residences for the prince), as well as on Arnota monastery (used as a prison).

The above chapters are followed by valuable annexes: transcriptions of documents written in the Cyrillic transitional alphabet (official documents, reports and correspondence that provide insightful information about the conception of the projects and the work on the building sites); an index of architects contemporary to Schlatter; a list of his works and projects.

Due to his restoration methods, Schlatter has been presented in the profession literature until now rather as a heritage destroyer. However, the methods he employed were quite similar to those of his Western peers. It is important to know that the critique of his work was not based on a serious research; thus, he was a victim of “hearsay”. With this book Horia Moldovan does justice to Johann Schlatter, presenting him with both his valuable and questionable contributions, but insisting on his undeniable overall positive role for Romanian modernity. Horia Moldovan does not claim to be exhaustive in this work, but rather he points to subjects and directions of further research. Finally, this book is not only a valuable contribution to Romanian architectural historiography, but also a thrilling and enjoyable reading experience.