



HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY...MOSTLY

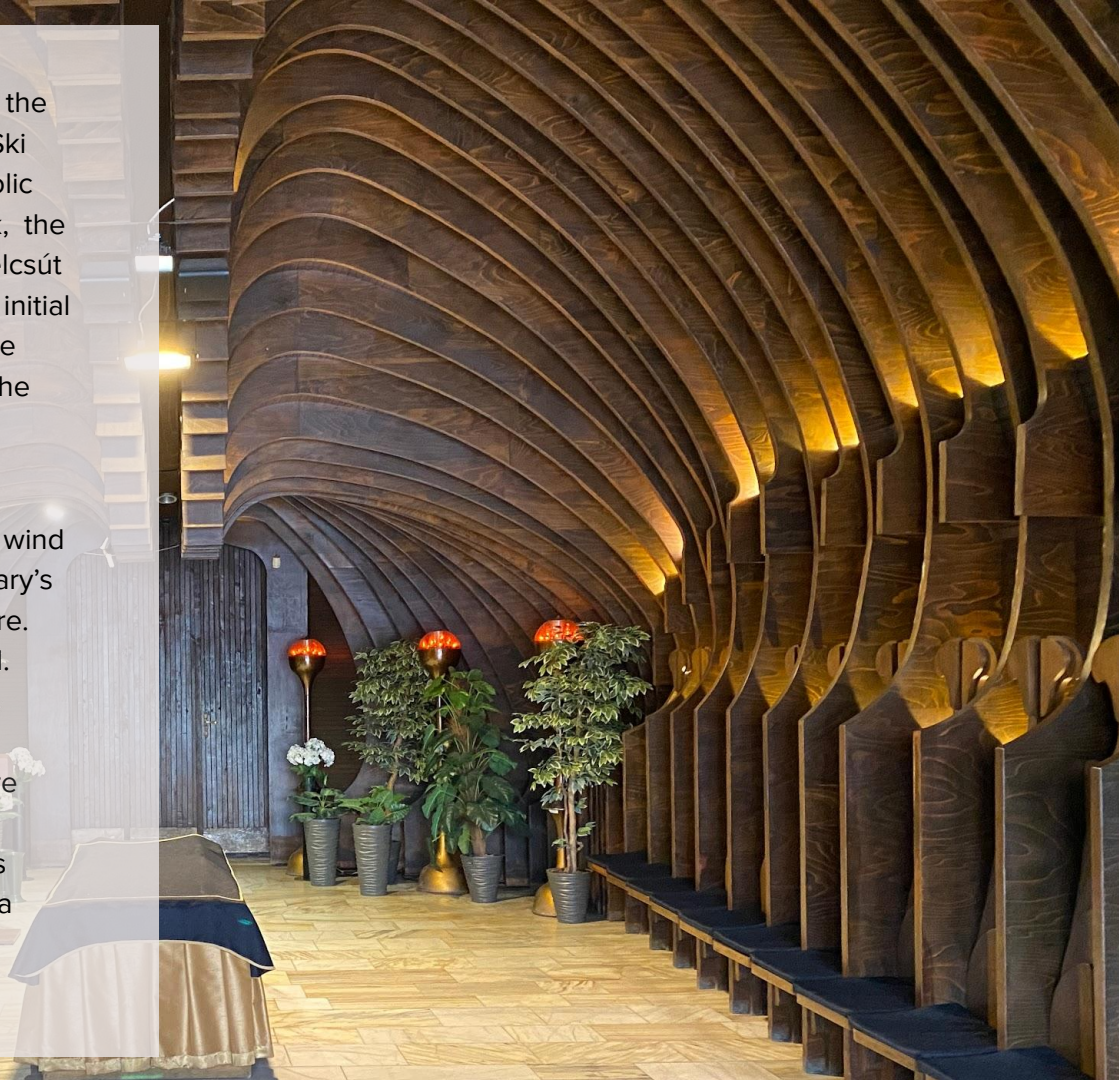
Narrative by John Rogers, Co-Producer

Off the coast of Greenland In the middle of the night on a flight to Frankfurt and on to Budapest, leaving behind all that I hold dear in San Francisco, I admit to some trepidation about the trip: proximity to the war in Ukraine, the looming invasion of Gaza, friends coming home from Europe with Covid, and Trump's friendship with Victor Orban. And, most importantly for our film, despite promising indications from some solid pre-production on the ground this summer, how compelling was the idiosyncratic "living architecture" of Imre Makovecz going to be; and was the connection to the Prairie House viable enough for us to have committed to a 6 day shoot in Hungary?

Well, happily, the answers are yes, yes, and yes. Makovevecz's buildings are extraordinary, and his debt to Greene and Goff, is palpable. From several accounts, seeing images of the Prairie House in the 1970's was a watershed moment for Makovecz. Here was an all-wooden building completely outside the confines of European Modernism, seemingly with its own inner life, and born of a free imagination.

We shot nine Makovecz buildings: the Kós Károly office, the Farkasrét Mortuary Chapel in Budapest, the Dobogókő Ski Lodge, the Forest Culture House in Visegrád, the Catholic University campus in Piliscsaba, the visitor center in Bak, the Zalaszentlászló Village Center, the football stadium in Felcsút (the stadium was the design of Tamas Dobrosi based on initial sketches by Makovecz), and the Makovecz Center. All are worth a visit, but for me, the chapel, the Ski Lodge, and the Bak village center, were revelatory.

We started shooting in the Farkasrét cemetery on the outskirts of Budapest on a rainy afternoon, with a strong wind sending fall leaves flying through the air. Some of Hungary's greatest artists, including Imre Makovecz, are buried here. Entering the mortuary chapel, feels like being swallowed. We are inside a "building being" as Makovecz called his works, encased by wooden ribs curving down from an overhead spine. During services, a coffin is placed where the heart would be. We are quite literally in a portal to another life. Along the walls, seating for mourners seems already occupied by the chapel's angels. How can such a small space be so transporting?



Seeing the Dobogókő Ski Lodge for the first time, with its skin of overlapping cedar planks, the building can easily be read as a homage to Herb Greene. Now crowded by several new buildings and yurts for vacationers, the Ski Lodge feels confined. It must have been wonderful surrounded by forest. I remember thinking the same thing at the Prairie House, now hemmed in by trees and roads.

Looking at side-by-side images of the Prairie House and the Ski Lodge one feels a kindred spirit in the buildings. I wondered if the indigenous people of what is now Hungary lived in something similar to the Navajo hogans that inspired Goff and Greene. Inside the lodge, the interior of blond wood is expansive, warm and welcoming. A great “eye” looks out to the forest, just as the eye of the Prairie House once looked out to the prairie. We learn that Hungarian language uses human traits for the vocabulary of a house: facade comes from the word “forehead,” the ridge of the roof from “spine,” the trim over a window from “eyebrow; windows are eyes, the door is a mouth.” The term “living architecture” is starting to make sense.





The Bak Village Center, from our drone camera, appears as a great wooden bird settling onto the land. Yet from the street the metaphor is more Japanese village architecture. The building is beyond eccentric, but with the big John Deere tractors rolling by, the scene is familiar small farm town. Inside, the feel is of a warm and bustling community center; a tray of coffee in small china cups appears from the kitchen for the film crew. Yet again, this building is unlike anything I have ever seen.

Like the village center in Zalaszentlászló, it was built by the community from local timber, and finds familiarity in collective cultural memory. These village center buildings are in small towns, but their aspirations feel grand. Makovecz believed architecture could make the world a better place, and his buildings connected people with nature, the earth and the cosmos.

A wonderful example is the Forest Culture House, on a high hill overlooking the town of Visegrád and the Danube. Partially covered with earth and brass scales, the building feels like it has pushed up from below ground. Inside the circular space, the furniture is child-sized, as the building serves as a nature education center for local children. Shelves are filled with acorns, bird nests, dried herbs, mushrooms, and feathers. The cupola is ringed with painted signs of the Zodiac, the entrance is oriented to the rising sun, and the oculus functions as a sundial. The psychological impact of the space is inescapable, and I envy the children who grow up with this building.

Similarly in the Makovecz-designed childcare center, recently added to the Zalaszentlászló Village Center, interlocking wooden cupolas manage to create simultaneous feelings of protection and aspiration. In the interview we shoot there, we are told in no uncertain terms that the objective of the architecture is to “make better people.” I think of Herb Greene’s “Armature” drawings, aspirational buildings that might never be built.



As Makovecz's anthropomorphic buildings can be seen as a reaction to the soul crushing architecture of Stalinism, Is it too far-fetched to call organic architecture, as envisioned by Wright, Goff, and Greene, a similar reaction to the "machine for living" conformity of the International Style. If "the box is fascist" as FLW famously said, can we ascribe similar political intentions to Makovecz and Greene? Of course, it's never so simple.

Makovecz has enjoyed enthusiastic support from the government including some controversial projects. Intended or not, his architecture, with its roots in folklore and Hungarian culture has become a symbol of Nationalism. According to our camera crew, every person in Hungary knows Imre Makovecz, and he is viewed by many as a national hero. They ask us, does everyone in America know Herb Greene?

– John Rogers, Co-Producer

