

When Nations Are Ready for Their Own Architecture

Introduction to a Journal Bloc on National Styles

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The positive, almost poetic metaphor of “nation-building” has held among the stiff, rational keywords of nationalism studies since the 1950s. This concept was introduced into the field’s discourse by the social scientists who first argued that nations were not created by God but by people themselves. These scholars named the process “nation-building.” According to them, nations had to be built through language standardisation, social mobility, mass education, and mass media. Thus, the concept was initially used in the sense of a general, socio-cultural, top-down process led by the elite, with the aim of unifying states.¹

Over the past decades, the thesis about the constructed nature of nations has become a premise of the field of nationalism studies, whilst—in parallel—the metaphor’s frame of reference has been narrowed down to the domain of culture. Today, when coming across the concept of “nation-building” in an academic publication, the reader would most probably be thinking about a national culture, rather than state formation, politics, or social mobility. Currently, “nation-building” means, above all, the program of the completion and normativisation of national culture, with the aim of fostering national identity through culture.²

Karl W. Deutsch (1912–1992)—a pioneer among social scientists who began to investigate nation formation as a socio-historical and communicational phenomenon—wrote an overview in 1963 on the state of the art of the emerging field of nationalism studies. He believed that three concepts were competing for the central position in this emerging discourse: “national growth,” “national development,” and “nation-building.” Deutsch positioned the three concepts in a triad in which the extreme opposite points were “national growth” and “nation-building,” while “national development” was between the other two. In this discursive context,

1 Smith, “State-Making and Nation-Building,” 231–32.

2 Kaufmann, “Nation-Building,” 208.

“national growth” implied imagining the establishment of nations as an organic process; by contrast, those who preferred the concept of “nation-building” intended to stress the planned and top-down nature of nations; whilst the verbiage focusing on “national development” mirrored an understanding that social principles partly determine nation-formation processes, but at the same time, they can also be designed or manipulated by the elite. If we look at the titles and table of contents of the works written and edited by Deutsch, it is striking that he did not commit himself to any of the concepts in question and used them alternately. We know that the Czech social scientist used “nation-building” when he found it important to emphasise the planned character of nation-formation processes, as well as the multifarious possibilities that are potentially encoded in them. That is to say, the plans and constructions of a nation are similar to those of an actual building; they can be done by using various materials, forms, and different timings.³

Thus, from the establishment of this discourse, the notion of “nation-building” had competitors within the terminology of nationalism studies. In fact, it is indeed reasonable to ask: Why do we use an architectural metaphor for the identification of the process of nation formation? Why has “nation-building” gained more popularity than “national growth” or other synonyms? Scholars of nationalism usually study literacy and education rather more than architecture. Correspondingly, we could have coined similarly expressive metaphors with the vocabulary of book culture, family, or school, and it is not impossible to imagine the terms “nation-edition” or “nation-education” instead of the tried and trusted “nation-building.”

Honestly, we do not see a clear-cut reason for the long-lasting success of this concept. But it definitely has something to do with the semantic advantages highlighted by Deutsch and with the fact that architecture is intrinsic to mankind. This intrinsicity means that architecture is an indispensable but special part of the life of human communities. Due to this intrinsicity, the nineteenth-century formation of national identities and cultures—processes that are coincidentally named “nation-building” by twentieth-century historians—expanded to the practice of planning, constructing and living in houses. The patriots, who were occupied with the building of their nation (in a metaphorical sense), had to concern themselves with buildings (in a tangible sense) because architecture provides characteristic ways of expressing power and worldview. Public buildings, like monuments, bear witness to the strength, ideas, and peculiarity of those who erected them, and assure that the building community is not mistaken for another community. Elites have been aware of this representational power of architecture since the age of the pyramids.

In Central Europe and the Balkans, intellectual and political leaders of national movements as well as patriotic architects discovered the same kind of power in the

3 Deutsch, “Nation-Building and National Development,” 3.

nineteenth century—thousands of years after the pharaohs, but for pretty similar reasons—, and started their attempts at nationalising architecture for themselves. Accordingly, the national idea had a decisive role in the architecture of the long nineteenth century. Architects planned edifices to commemorate their nation's heroes and outstanding personalities. Later, in the second half of the century, nationalism left its stamp on increasing numbers of public and residential buildings, that is, on spaces used by the communities and families that made up the nation. This phenomenon prevailed all over the continent, but only in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe did large numbers of patriotic architects try to establish distinct styles and regear architecture on a national basis.

In these regions, architects made efforts to elaborate about two dozen national architectural styles—from scratch or by reviving historic styles. In the latter cases, the architects who reapplied historic styles—for example, the Romanesque of medieval Bohemian churches or the Renaissance of seventeenth-century Upper Hungarian mansions—claimed that they were not nationalising but rather re-nationalising bygone ways of building, since they had served as the nation's style several centuries before. The patriotic architects, architectural historians, and critics who pledged such aims wanted to offer a formal architectural language to their greater community. Accordingly, their efforts were comparable to the attempts of those intellectuals who had established a standard language and national literature a few decades earlier. They intended their national style to spread all over the country's townscapes, mark facades as well as interiors, and continuously announce that the nation owns a peculiar and precious culture. National styles were supposed to express the national character through architectural means, enrich the symbolic paraphernalia, help compatriots and foreigners to distinguish the nation, and attract the communities also living in the country but not assimilated into the core nation.

Thus, by investigating national architectural styles, we can better understand how Czechs, Poles, Croats, Romanians, Hungarians, and other neighbouring nations fancied themselves in the age of nationalism. The authors of the following thematic bloc of *HSCE*, published in two parts in this and the next issue of the journal, would like to contribute to the understanding of such wishful self-representations. Among our articles, the reader will find comparative and discursive analyses as well as case studies of outstanding monuments and simpler buildings executed according to standard designs. Following the significant literature on the national scale and the trailblazing macro-scale overviews,⁴ these writings provide more detailed insights into the history of national architecture and mirror many colours of our region's multifarious culture.

4 Chevallier, "Les architectures nationales;" Hajdu, "The Search for National Architectural Styles;" Moravánszky, *Competing Visions*, 217–83; Popescu, "Un patrimoine de l'identité."

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