



OUT OF OBSCURITY

Buildings
from the
margins
of modern
history

Reformed parish church, Budapest

 HUNGARY — TEXT: EMIEL LAMERS, PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER SÁGESSER, OSTARCHITEKTUR.COM

From a distance, it is not easy to decipher the exact function of this peculiar building in Budapest. Is it a transformer building, or maybe a climbing gym? During its construction in the late 1970s, local residents even supposed that a satellite launch platform was being built in their neighbourhood. The modest sign above the front door betrays the building's actual function: *Külső-Kelenföldi Református Egyházközség Temploma*.

The remarkable church, completed in 1981, is somewhat tucked away in a residential area in the south of Buda, near the Kelenföld metro and train station. The church was designed by architect István Szabó (1914–1988). Szabó is otherwise known for a 1973 office building located on Szervita Square in the centre of Pest. Zaha Hadid had designed a blob-shaped, multi-functional building for this exact spot in 2006, but the project fell through and KÉK (Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre) temporarily moved into the still standing office building two years later. At its opening, a retrospective of Szabó's work was shown by architectural historian Dániel Kovács, whose graduation research had taken Szabó as the subject.

Following his retirement in 1974, Szabó designed nine churches, eight of which were actually realized. The first and most famous was his Farkasrét Church (1977), the first new Catholic church built in Budapest since the communists took over the Hungarian regime in 1947. To build the church on Ildikó Square in Kelenföld, the community raised one million forints (equivalent to about 3.2 million euros today) over five years. Ultimately, the building cost five times more, and its construction was repeatedly put on hold.

The architect refused to make budget cuts during the building process, and held to his initial futuristic design.

The church is built with a steel space frame and an aluminium crimp facade. During his career, Szabó had designed several exhibition pavilions, by which he gained a great amount of experience with light steel structures. For a Catholic church on Táltos Street in Budapest, he had already used a similar space frame. This church from 1979 still exists, but renovations in 2004 replaced its facade with mirrored glass. Contrary to this, the reformed parish church has barely changed since opening in 1981, despite the uninsulated building's poor climate regulation. Temperatures can climb quite high in summer, while in winter it gets very chilly and draughty.

Next to the church is a conspicuous abstract bell tower designed by artist Zsuzsa Bartha. Its three linked stainless steel tubes depict the Trinity. It does not contain real bells, but in their place are built-in speakers. The altar, located on the east side of the church, is made of blue ribbed tiles. Thus the pastor, not the congregation, looks towards the large hexagonal lighted plane of polycarbonate sheeting on the west side. According to the architect, the curved connecting plates of the space frame, which also extend to this lighted plane, depict one of the foremost symbols of the church: the star. Should the building be modernized in the future, it is hoped that this dated but charming futuristic detail from the 1980s will be preserved. ◀

