



↑ The third wing added to the existing 19th-century building and 1950s annex ↓ Entrance area with terrace



↓ Courtyard with 3-metre high border guards poking through ↓ Red room



↓ The eternally waving red flags



↓ Cross symbolizing religious suppression



Museum, Hódmezővásárhely

Attila F. Kovács' designed a futuristic building for a museum about the communist past.

HUNGARY — TEXT: EMIEL LAMERS

In southern Hungary, not far from the Serbian and Romanian borders, Emlékpont (Remembrance Point), a museum devoted to the communist past of the provincial city of Hódmezővásárhely, recently opened its doors. The museum's genesis dates back to 2002, the year in which the single-minded local mayor, János Lázár, asked Attila F. Kovács (the architect of the only other Hungarian communist museum, the House of Terror in Budapest) to design a new provincial holocaust museum in a mere two weeks. The following week, with a stupendous effort, that (interior) design was realized, just in time for the reopening of the renovated local synagogue. Three years later, the same mayor asked Kovács to think about possibilities for a communist museum.

The city council owned a fine 19th-century building with a simple 1950s annex, right in the centre of the city. Kovács suggested preserving both buildings and adding a third wing to represent the 21st century. The latter is a long, metal-clad volume that overhangs the 1950s building, creating a covered space conveniently located at a major intersection. To the museum programme, the architect added a bookshop and a café as a meeting place for the many students who pass by this spot every day.

Between the grand villa and the annex is a courtyard, open to the street, containing the entrance to the museum. The walls of this courtyard are faced with weathered red frescoes from a former Russian barracks in the nearby city of Szeged. The heads of six border guards gaze at visitors, a foretaste of the three-metre-tall copies of 1950s sculptures that await them in the gallery below.

In the foyer, beneath the ticket counter, residents of the city relate their own story on ten flat black-and-white screens. The first gallery, entitled 'the lost tradition', is devoted to life on the land before the communist era. The floor, walls and ceiling are covered with photographs of ploughed earth. The next room is similarly disorientating – here Second World War bombers, filmed from above, are projected onto the floor. The third gallery tells the story of the 'white guard', a local resistance movement in the early years of communist rule. The floor is coated with a transparent epoxy incorporating ears of corn. Suspended from the ceiling of the next room is a Christian cross made up of eight TV screens which tell the story of the suppression of religion under communism. After this, visitors negotiate a rather narrow staircase down into the basement where the six larger-than-life border guards stand on plinths inside square glass shafts which penetrate the ceiling, allowing natural light to enter the space below and making the figures inside these display cases look as if they have been beheaded by the high-gloss ceiling. The walls here are covered with a wallpaper depicting soldiers and communist slogans. The route then proceeds up to the first floor. Here, in front of the windows in a bright red room, red flags flutter eternally, wafted by air from the ventilators. The next room is surprisingly high and light. In the middle is a five-metre-tall Russian soldier around which this new gallery was built. On the walls hang paintings in social-realistic style. A window in the corner overlooks a copy of a sculpture of a sitting (nicknamed 'shitting') Lenin. Adjoining this room is a raked space accommodating 85 visitors, which is used for conferences and occasional showings of communist films. After the last museum room, containing a computer information table, the route ends on a more cheerful note in a 1950s-style café. In fine weather visitors can return to the entrance courtyard via an outdoor steel stair.

Architecturally speaking, the museum is well worth the three-and-a-half hour train trip from Budapest. Unfortunately, all the explanatory texts are in Hungarian and the colour brochure provides some fine photos but little additional information. One wonders how the museum is going to persuade people to come back for a second visit, for there is no space at present for temporary exhibitions. The architect has already given this some thought and is considering the possibility of building another gallery next to the museum on a site now temporarily occupied by a pizzeria. In any event, he has another commission to design a small communist sculpture park on this spot, complete with a new 1956 memorial. Reason enough to visit Hódmezővásárhely some time soon. ←

EMLÉKPONT COMMUNIST MUSEUM, 2006

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