


The Symbolism of a Modern Church Space Composed with Light. The Case Study of Hodász Catholic Church Construction from the Bottom Up (1971-77)

El simbolismo de un espacio eclesial moderno compuesto con luz. El caso de la construcción de la iglesia católica de Hodász desde la base (1971-77)

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ABSTRACT

Architect László Csaba (1924-95) built churches during a period of political repression – the modern works provoked opposition from the church communities, while they received professional acclaim (the latter being internationally renowned). St Paul church in Hodász was built with the participation of the members of the community thanks to the simpler construction techniques commonly used in the era. Using documents preserved by the architect's heirs, such as plans, written documents and the architect's own photographs, the presentation reveals the creation of the church, built during the period of state-controlled ecclesiastical activity. The struggle and ingenuity of an architect who was always committed to modern architectural design are revealed in the creative will of a small community that wanted to build despite the atheist political power. Through the story of the church in Hodász, designed and built between 1971-76, we see a clearer acceptance of modern architecture at both ecclesiastical and secular levels – in a very specific religious environment. The abstract modern space, created with a symbolic composition of light and high quality artwork, still bears the memory of its era.

KEYWORDS

Hungary, László Csaba, Light, Longitudinal Plan, Modernity

RESUMEN

El arquitecto László Csaba (1924-95) construyó iglesias durante un periodo de represión política. Sus obras modernas suscitaron la oposición de las comunidades eclesíásticas, si bien recibieron reconocimiento profesional (este último a nivel internacional). La iglesia de San Pablo en Hodász fue construida con la participación de los miembros de la comunidad gracias a las técnicas de construcción más sencillas propias de la época. Utilizando documentos conservados por los herederos del arquitecto, como planos, escritos y fotografías del propio arquitecto, la presentación revela la creación de la iglesia, construida durante el período de actividad eclesíástica controlada por el Estado. La lucha y el ingenio de un arquitecto siempre comprometido con el diseño arquitectónico moderno se manifiestan en la voluntad creativa de una pequeña comunidad que deseaba construir a pesar del poder político ateo. A través de la historia de la iglesia de Hodász, diseñada y construida entre 1971 y 1976, observamos una mayor aceptación de la arquitectura moderna tanto a nivel eclesiástico como secular, en un entorno religioso muy particular. El espacio moderno y abstracto, creado con una composición simbólica de luz y obras de arte de alta calidad, aún conserva la memoria de su época.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Hungría, László Csaba, luz, planta longitudinal, modernidad

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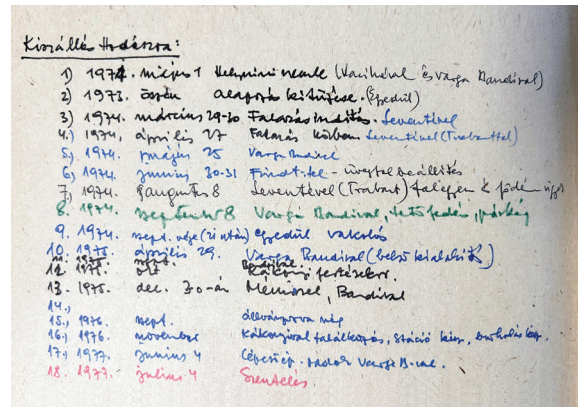
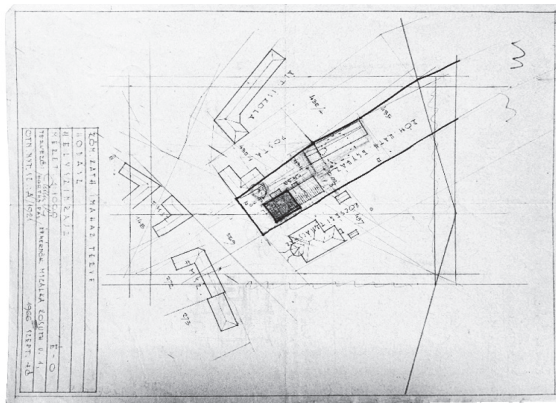


Fig. 01. Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary); not realized site plan by Pál Horváth, dated 1966.

Fig. 02. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; timeline notes on construction phases.

Modern architecture has its own unique characteristics associated with the great periods of 20th century history. Modernisation created a changing economic environment, which resulted in technical and intellectual innovation, and social changes led to a new worldview. The renewal movements of the Christian churches were closely linked to modern architectural aesthetics: it became a feature of the progressive movements between the two world wars, and in the second half of the 20th century it was used in almost direct continuity by the Catholic Church, which was renewed in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council (Fernández-Cobián 2005; Fernández-Cobián 2006; Della Longa 2007; Zahner 2007; Longhi 2018). During the 1950s, however, significant political changes took place in Eastern Europe: the Church was shaken in its foundations, and a return to tradition was a way of resisting drastic changes.

In the anti-clerical environment, churches could only be built in exceptional cases (for example, if a sacred site was demolished or destroyed by other state construction). At the same time, state contributions were small, the church that built the church had to face a shortage of building materials, and the bureaucracy also created obstacles to the construction – for example, the use of tower shapes was prohibited (Lantos 2009; Urbán and Vukoszávlyev 2016). However, amidst all the hardships, the construction

of the church became an act of community unity: the use of local materials and the contribution of local manual labourers built a church in Cserépváralfa, a small rural village very far from the centre of state power. But confidence in the process was shattered when the faithful had been confronted with the modern creation. (Kovács and Vukoszávlyev 2025) (The architect had adapted his expressive modern vision to the possibilities offered by the vernacular tradition – and indeed risked his own career by participating in the church’s construction.)

But it was no different with the church in Hollóháza, which was built a few years later. Although the community of believers working in the village’s modern state-owned factory was more open to the new design, and the architect was able to work under better conditions, with high-quality construction supported by the state, they still could not identify with the highly abstract geometrical composition (Lantos 2015).

By the mid-1960s, the conflict between the State and the Catholic Church had reached a compromise, a process characterized by a structured framework – though certainly not free of compromises – (which was primarily reflected in the state’s supervisory role). In line with the agreement that became official, spectacular results emerged in a form that could be communicated to international platforms, clear-



Fig. 03-06. László Csaba, Hodász
Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77;
phases of construction on images taken
by the architect during site visits.

ly identifiable through contemporary architectural solutions. The church supported the creation of these modern works, but they still provoked opposition from church communities, while at the same time receiving recognition in professional circles (the latter being an internationally renowned work).¹

It was only around this time, at the end of the 1960s, that the atheistic political oppression began to ease (Vukoszávlyev and Urbán 2016; Lantos 2018). Parallel to the ongoing process of church renewal, the construction of church buildings created through collective cooperation became somehow compatible with the worldview of Hungary's modernizing society, now uniformly in the late modern style supported by cultural policy.

The designer of these works, architect László Csaba (1924-95), was committed to modern architectural design, characterized by conceptual compositions that modulate interior spaces using natural light: the space, which is clearly directed from the entrance, the layout rising towards the altar, and the dramatic use of immaterial light as a building material all support spiritual focus (Vukoszávlyev 2017). This generous composition is also evident in the Church of St. Paul in Hodász, which will be described in detail below and which, thanks to the simplified construction techniques commonly used at the time, was built together with members of the community.

Drawing on documents preserved by the architect's heirs and utilizing the plans and written memoirs found in the private archive—which has been organized in recent years—² this study traces the construction of the church, built during a period when church operations were controlled by the state, a narrative fully illustrated by photographs taken by the architect himself. The study also examines the relationship between the architect and his client, the processes of acceptance of contemporary ecclesiastical art, and evaluates the building's place within the contemporary international and national architectural context.

Hodász is a small village located near the eastern border of the country in the Carpathian Basin. The church was built in the center of this agricultural

village, between public buildings (town hall, post office, school). The construction was subject to certain restrictions: according to a 1966 plan (by architect Pál Horváth), the new parish house was built next to the street, and the site for the church was created inside the plot by demolishing a converted farm building behind it, which had been used as a temporary chapel (Fig. 01). Within the modest financial constraints of the diocese, the new building was intended to strengthen pastoral care – the priest counted on the cooperation of the 400-person community in its realisation. From the architect's recollections, we know how important the parish priest's attitude was: Sándor Szabó, the enthusiastic and understanding leader of the community, won over the entire village not only for the construction, but also for understanding the contemporary architectural message.

László Csaba, who had been politically compromised by his previous church designs, received an invitation from the Diocese of Eger – with Archbishop Pál Brezanóczy's recommendation – in April 1971 to prepare sketches for a *chapel*. A month and a half later, the architect was already conducting a site inspection, but it was not until two years later that the permit application was submitted. The plans, registered as those of a private designer, received a building permit dated August 2, 1973. The foundations were laid in the fall, and by the following spring, the walls began to rise. By fall of '74, the building was under roof (Fig. 02).

During 1975, interior work progressed slowly. In October, the artist began work on the altar wall secco, but the complete liturgical furnishings would not be ready for another year. The church was probably consecrated at the end of June 1977 (according to a less credible engineering record, on Monday, July 4) by Archbishop József Bánk of Eger (Fig. 03-06).

The first sketches featured an organically shaped church interior enclosed by walls set back into the plot. The designer depicted the process of passing along the walls, beneath canopies and under low-height vestibules, as the dramaturgy of preparation (Fig. 07-08). Upon entering the space, the designer organized the space with dynamically unfolding,

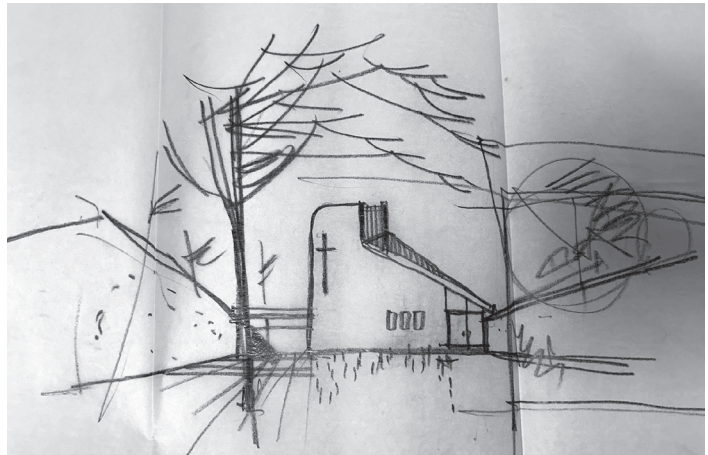
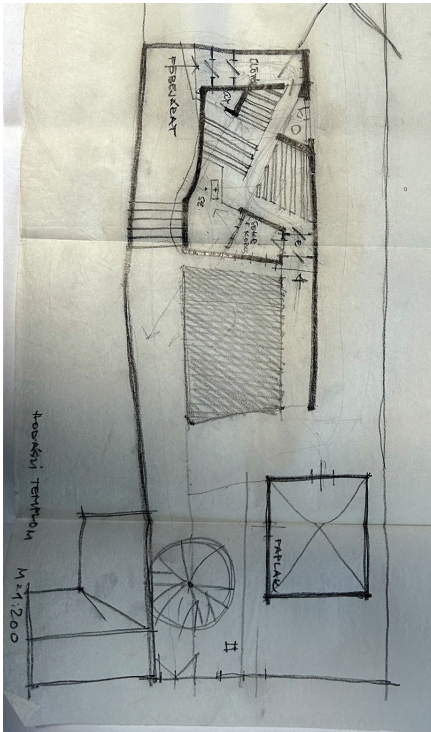
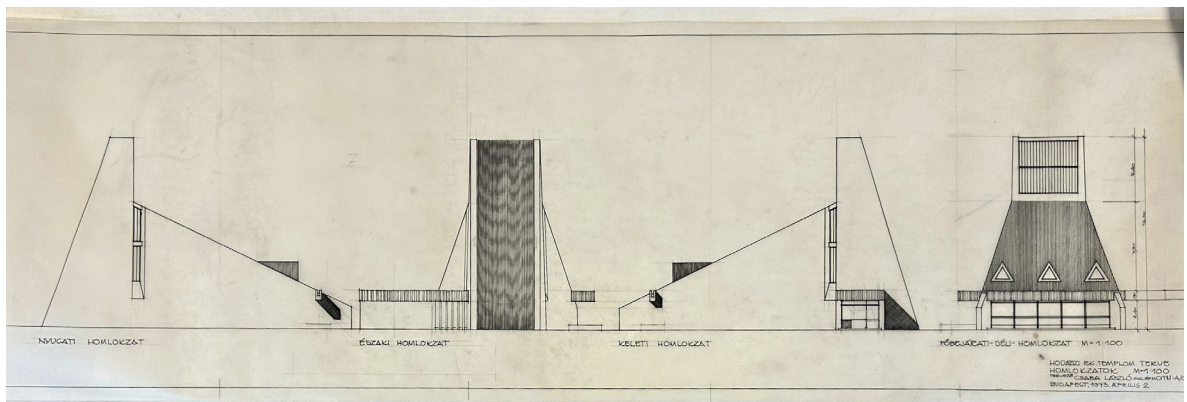
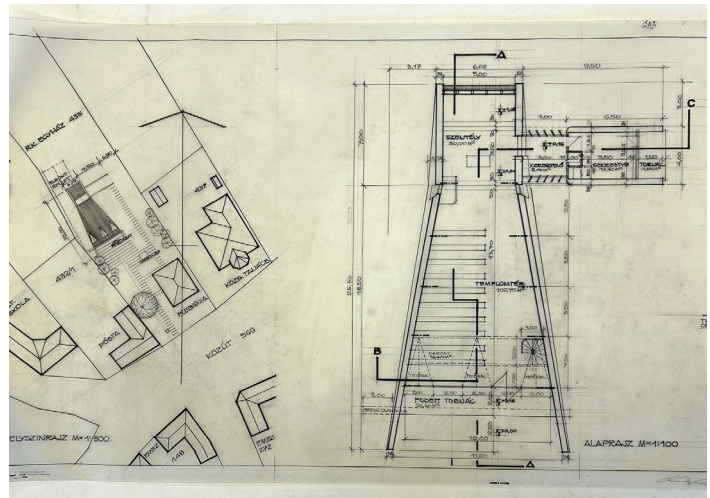


Fig. 07-08. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; first sketches dated 1971.

Fig. 9-10. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; original plans of the church for permission, dated April 1973.



upward-breaking walls and a high ceiling, highlighting the focal point of the liturgical space with light. The organic, eccentric composition was combined with a solution bearing vernacular features, a house growing out of the ground, and the unique placement of the altar under the flowing light – all of which are characteristic features of the diagonal spatial organization of liturgical spaces of the era.

We are witnessing a transformation of the plans for the coming year, but we are unable to uncover the reasons for the changes due to a lack of documentation. (Only the expert opinion of the engineers of the county planning company from August 1972 is known, which examines the soil at test points corresponding to the geometry close to the new plans.) Based on the surviving drawings, we can witness the development of a much more distinctive composition (Fig. 09-10). The series of plans dated April 2, 1973, demonstrates an approach along a direct axis, positioning a low and wide opening at the entrance and forming a space that narrows slightly from the entrance towards the altar area, but is directed by walls that rise very dynamically. The walls, which become parallel at the altar, define a vertically elevated space, with the rear wall leaning slightly inward, creating a light-filled space illuminated by a high lateral glass wall. The mass composition, which honestly reveals the striking spatial form, creates a monumental effect in the relatively small sacral building (25 meters long and 13 to 6 meters wide). The model photos clearly show the rawness of the composition, which is counterbalanced by the low sacristy connected to the transitional space and a bell tower remaining in the background (Fig. 11). Based on the detailed geometric plans, construction could begin with the official permit in hand – the series of plans provided precise solutions for the details. With the plans approved, the construction was entrusted to the expertise of local builders.

At the end of March 1974, construction of the walls began. The small brick wall structure with varying geometry, ranging from 50 cm to 1 meter in width, was built with the devoted expertise of local and regional craftsmen. The designer and his colleagues only visited the construction site once every

month or month and a half, which was far from the capital (appr. 300 kilometers away, which at that time could only be covered by a 5-6-hour drive). Levente Thoma's plans for reinforced concrete structures date from May 1974 – with the help of community members, the walls were already half-built by that time.

It is clear that the work was in a difficult phase, and the detailed plans (floor slab, roof drawing with windows, steel doors and windows, and the gallery stairs) were probably only prepared on a scheduled basis for the less frequent site visits, but their complete completion and documentation in a single package is unknown.

Their technical content leaves nothing to be desired, but there are also clearly work-in-progress and fully developed drawings in the plans accompanying this construction phase (Fig. 12).

In his memoirs, László Csaba speaks with great admiration of the dedication and native knowledge of the workers involved in the construction process. The engineer found himself in a good position of balance here. Given the scale of the building, the solutions did not require particularly unique structures, and everything was completed with the help of local craftsmen and in small-scale methods (Fig. 13-14).

At the same time, the professional requirements could not have been met by the drawings and the rare site visits alone, had it not been for an enthusiastic, all-engaging parish priest who oversaw the construction and took the lead in the organization. Sometimes resorting to reluctant pressure and, when necessary, relying on the opinions of recognized individuals, he also exercised control over the designer's work.

The pastor's striving for perfection is also evident in correspondence concerning the interior design. In the spring of 1975, Sándor Szabó engaged in lively discussions with the designer and the artist he wanted to commission to paint the altar wall. He sent the designer's layout proposals, which were still only in draft form at the time, to the Franciscan monk and painter Asztrik Kákonyi. In doing so, he sought to position the sacred space at the highest level of ecclesiastical art, while also ensuring the correctness of his decisions, which were intended to determine the careful design of the liturgical furnishings and

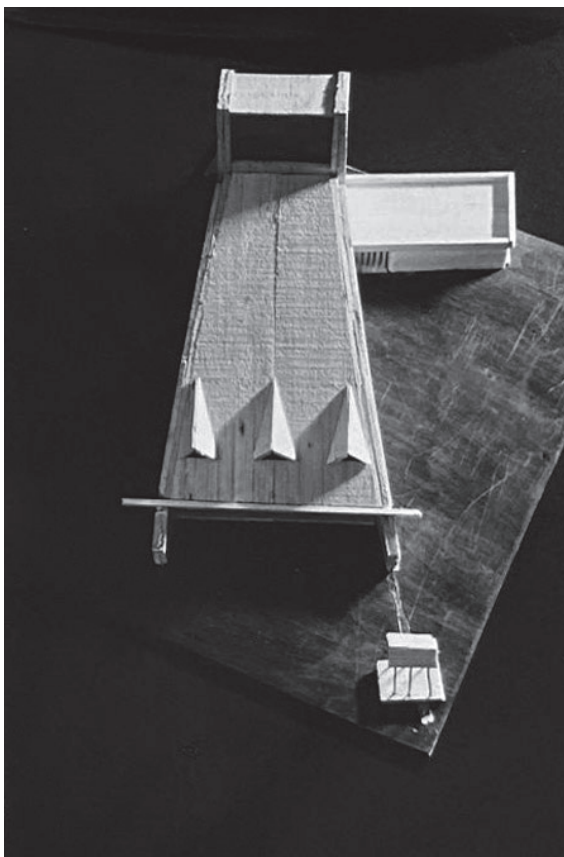
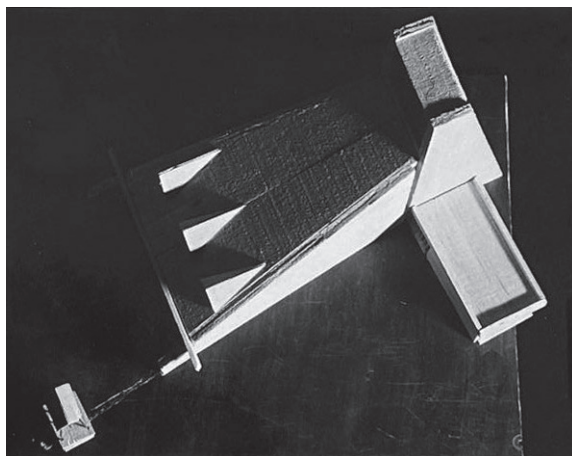
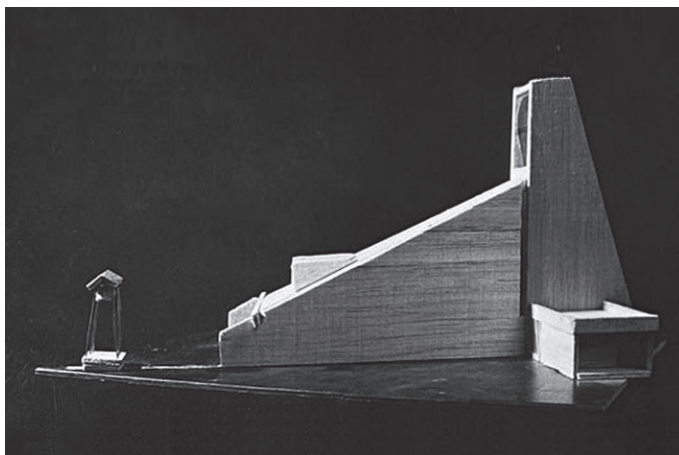


Fig. 11. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; photos of the model of the church (model preserved).

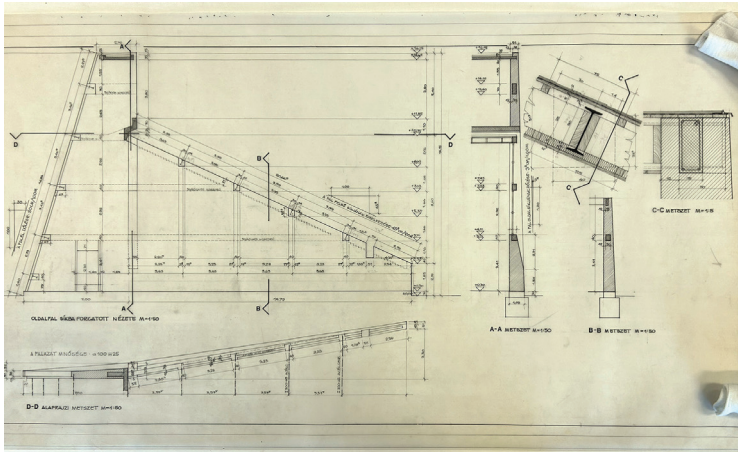


Fig. 12. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; structural plan without dating.

the modern world of contemporary ecclesiastical symbolism. The monk-painter assesses the architectural plans as follows: he considers it very important to respect the creative freedom of the designer, as he sees the whole vision and clearly wants to create something original in the interior as well. He therefore recommends that the parish priest show great respect for the architect's ideas—while the pastor seeks practicality in the formulation of the plans, the architect intends to shape them for the sake of the beauty and order of the space. A functionality-based debate would have broken out between the priest and the designer over the arrangement of the pews, but in the end, it was much more important in the correspondence to develop the concept of wall painting that reinforced the spatial concept and to define the symbolism in harmony with the architecture.

Contemporary clergymen relied heavily on the insights of the monk painter. Kákonyi, who proclaimed modern liturgical art with faith and conveyed an expressive world in his works, explains his insights step by step in relation to the design of the altar's back wall. He does not criticize the designer's desire for an empty composition featuring only a cross, but rather shapes his opinion in accordance with the Liturgical Constitution, finding its main element, the representation of the cross, and supports the symbolic use of a *Crux gemmata* depicted in a mural. Kákonyi adds to the architect's vision, which strives for a high degree of abstraction, the idea that

the cross has its place on the altar or on the wall in a smaller size, as the dramatic use of the symbol is in accordance with the story of St. Paul's conversion through suffering.

Kákonyi finally made sketch proposals for a 3x5.5-meter surface within the dimensions specified by the architect, naturally in a cross-shaped composition. The sketches preserved in the architect's estate (although not dedicated, but probably by the monk painter Kákonyi) highlight the figure of Christ appearing in a shaft of light against a cross-shaped background, with Saul fallen to the ground at his feet. Kákonyi emphasizes that the mural should start above human height, and the composition will almost merge with the sunlight streaming in through the high lantern (Fig. 15).

This effect is also evident in the completed mural, but its formal composition is different: the depictions of the saints rise high from the dark background, with the figures of Saints Peter and Paul in the center, above them the teacher Christ shining in a flood of light, holding an open Bible, surrounded by archangels already transfigured in the light. During the interior construction work, in May 1975, the parish priest sent the architect the results of his discussions with the sacred artist. Although construction was well underway, the plans were slow to be completed. According to the designer's recollections, Kákonyi had already begun plastering the secco that autumn, and it was



Fig. 13-14. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; construction phases with local craftsmen, images dated 1974.

already November, a year later, when the liturgical furnishings and other works were installed with the completion of the pavement. In its final form, the artwork painted using the sgraffito technique covered the entire back wall of the altar, measuring approximately 5 by 15 meters; it began with deeper tones at the lower level and gradually lightened toward the top, creating a sense of lightening as it rose, with a smooth transition beginning at a height of nearly 2 meters (Fig. 16).

The design of the tabernacle in the early plans was a closed block standing on pedestals and appearing to float; in its final form, the tabernacle was placed on a console protruding from the side wall of the altar. Its copper embossed door depicts the scene of Paul's conversion. Miklós Borsos's work thus brought to life the drama of conversion, with all the tension of that moment of commitment (Fig. 17). The corbels on the right wall of the church feature Aurélia Németh's evocative series of 14 stations. No plans

have survived for the block-like liturgical furniture, but we can describe its design based on its actual appearance: the altar table (*mensa*), the sedes, and the ambo are made of marble. The pews are light-looking pieces of carpentry. At the entrance, the steps of the deep, bridge-like gallery, which crosses the square, continue this lightness (Fig. 18).

In the triangular skylights above the choir, colored glass breaks up the abstract forms and colors of the space, while the colored glass windows in the vertically split walls at the turning point of the sharply converging composition somewhat contradict the perception of the light-controlled space. The former feature biblical quotations in a freer composition, while the latter feature Biblical and Hungarian (female and male) saints. High above the altar, in a position hidden from the congregation, is a large skylight made of copilit glass, with an stylized figurative representation of Christ on the cross in a cross-shaped division (Fig. 19).

«While the space narrows inwards in terms of floor plan, it rises strongly upwards and opens up, while at the same time the illumination of the space gradually decreases inwards, then in the line of the sanctuary its illumination suddenly becomes powerful due to the light flowing in through the hidden, large-sized skylight that is not visible from the nave» – describes the architect the main principle of the architectural composition, the symbolic spatial treatment of light (Csaba 1978). The formal approach emphasized by László Csaba is characteristic of modern churches built in the second half of the 20th century: rather than the use of direct visual elements, it is characterized by more abstract forms and highlights the role of natural light in defining the focal point of the liturgical space. The architectural solutions of the Hodász church show no

direct connections to the international sacred buildings of the era, but the spatial verticality (St. Rita, Harelbeke, 1962, Arch. Léon Stynen), the space composition rising more gently toward the altar area (Bruderklau Church, Brüsfelden, 1959, Arch. Hermann Baur) or rising dramatically (St. Thomas, Helmstedt, Braunschweig, 1963-67, Arch. Dirk-Erik Kreuter and Ulrich Hausmann) reveal the symbolic system of spatial hierarchy. The composition of natural light, which predominantly highlights the altar area, bears a resemblance to Miguel Fisac's masterful use of light (Delgado 2009) – the flood of light inundating the altar area, compared to the darker nave of the churches of Santa Ana de Moratalaz (1965-71) or Santa Maria Magdalena (1966-68) in Madrid, directs attention to the scene of the liturgical events. In terms of floor plan composition, the common architec-

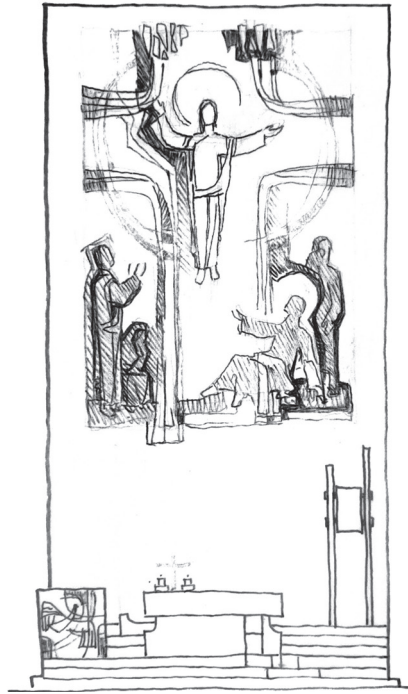


Fig. 15. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; sketches on altar design and wall painting by Asztrik Kákonyi, dated May 1975.

tural expressive tools are even more evident: the initial sketches of the Hodász church, with their softer forms, are similar to Fisac's Coronation of Our Lady in Vitoria (1957-60) and Hans Schädel's St. Joseph in Hasloch am Main (1958) churches, both handling the use of space more gently. Csaba's designs and realized works present solutions akin to the issues emerging in international practice of the era (Stock 2002). We can experience that for the church building practice of the 1970s, which was still based on modest possibilities, the play of light in buildings shaped with unique, carefully planned gestures served as a distinctive feature of high-quality ecclesiastical art (Rév 1984; Lantos 2018).³

At the same time, the church in Hodász refrained from adopting the progressive, centrally focused spatial design

trends that emerged following the Second Vatican Council (Longhi 2012); in its final form, it favored a typically traditional axial spatial layout (Garai and Vukoszávlyev 2017). The spatial form, treated with a generous gesture, soaring high above the altar space, has a dramatic effect: while its strong geometry from the outside is unusually direct, in the interior, the suggestive secco of the huge wall behind the altar is a spatial creation that contributes immensely to contemplation. The sacred space and the work of art serve as one for the prayer of the present believer and the upward-looking devotion of the liturgy experienced within the community (Fig. 20).

Csaba's churches were held in high regard – they were mostly appreciated for his always committed creative artistic stance, especially when dealing with the difficulties of the era, at a time when the archi-



Fig. 16. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; interior of the church towards the altar, image dated 1977.

Fig. 17. Liturgical equipment of the altarspace, image dated 1977.

Fig. 18. Interior of the church towards the entrance, image dated 1977.

Fig. 19. Main view of the church, image dated 1977.

tect who took on the task of building a church (due to political exposure) had to make many sacrifices. The hierarchical spatial organization of the Hodász church, achieved with a late modern toolkit, and the application of the direct axial spatial form, were already resolved in his subsequent works; in the case of the Nyírdersz church (1980-84), he formed an altar space with a similarly elevated space height and rows of benches surrounding the presbytery on three sides; while his last major churches (Kaposvár, 1983-88 and Békásmegyér, 1983-88) already demonstrated efforts to centralize and unify the space. His early church architectural works are decisive in assessing his oeuvre: the churches of Cserépváralja and Hollóháza are listed on the Hungarian national Heritage Register, and have recently been fully renovated, but its later churches are also well maintained, and the living congregations take care not only of the buildings but also of their works of religious art.

In addition to modern architectural design, the struggles and ingenuity of a committed architect are revealed in the desire of a small community to build despite the atheistic political power. Through the history of the church in Hodász, created between 1971 and 1977, we can see the clearer acceptance of modern architecture at both the ecclesiastical and secular levels. The abstract modern space, created with a symbolic composition of light, still carries the memory of a unique era with its high-quality works of art.

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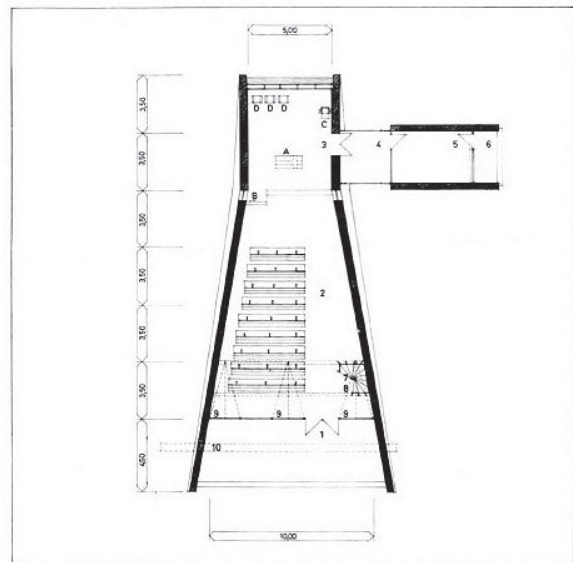
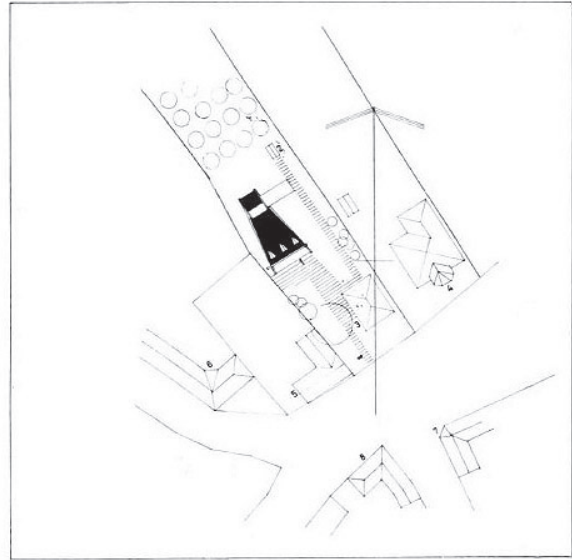
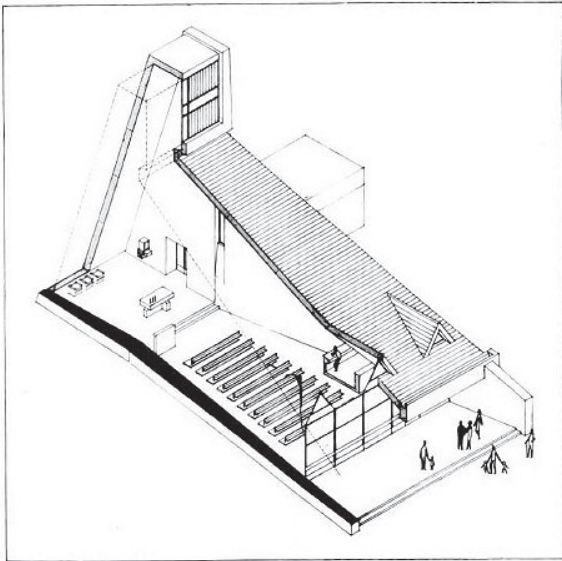


Fig. 20. László Csaba, Hodász Catholic Church (Hungary), 1971-77; presentation of the drawings in Magyar Építőművészet 27(3): 40.

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NOTES

1. St. Ladislaus Roman Catholic Church in Hollóháza is an internationally renowned work (Stock 2004: 312-313). The year 1997, which is listed as the date of construction, is clearly a printing error; the correct year is 1967.

2. The organization of the plans, photographs and manuscripts preserved in the family archive was carried out by Dániel Kovács, an art historian and research fellow at the MMA Hungarian Museum of Architecture and Monument Protection Documentation Center. Cataloging

has not yet been completed, so no public collection identification numbers can be assigned to these documents (state in October 2025). We would like to thank the heirs for their permission and the researcher for his support in making the original documents available for scholarly publication.

3. In her assessment of the church architecture of the period, Erzsébet Urbán articulates her observations with precision, going beyond mere material, physical, and aesthetic characteristics: «The role of light, and its architectural representation, has taken on a more prominent role. During the liturgy performed in the built space, the mysticism of sacredness is conveyed most effectively by elements beyond our control, perceptible only through their presence. Perception arises from the contrast between temporal constancy and momentary changes: the value of the ideal lies in transience and change. The liturgy changes according to the preparatory periods and feasts of the Christian calendar: everything has its appointed time, and anticipation brings about the joyful moment of the event. The liturgy of the Word and music adapts to this. The church interior, however, due to its physical immobility, can only adapt to this cyclical nature to a limited extent. Light, the physical yet intangible element of the world around us, reveals the visual perception of earthly transience and renewal within the built space. In contrast to the light symbolism traditionally used for a long time, modern church architecture focuses on change...» (Urbán 2019: 333).

SOURCE OF IMAGES

Fig. 01-19. Archive of László Csaba.

Fig. 20. Magyar Építőművészet 27(3): 40.