

Barcelona - VI 2011

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THE FIRST WALKING-TOUR GUIDE-BOOK TO RIJEKA'S ART NOUVEAU ARCHITECTURE

Abstract

Rijeka (Croatia) is a very important port and industrial town in Croatia, but from the year 2000 its production decreased, so that the city is now trying to convert itself into a tourist centre with an emphasis on local historical and architectural values. Determined by the needs of as yet modest, but emerging urban tourism, a small guidebook was published, featuring a selection of 27 buildings aimed to show citizens and tourists the Art Nouveau (Secession) heritage in Rijeka which, until recently, was little known and insufficiently promoted. The guidebook is organized to show longer or shorter walking tours through the city centre.

Introduction

Rijeka is very important seaside and riverside port-city in Kvarner Bay on the north-east coast of the Adriatic Sea. In its long history, Rijeka has belonged to various administrations and states (Venetian, French, Austro-Hungarian, Italian, and Yugoslavian), sometimes to two of them at the same time, which occurred for example in the period between WWI and WWII, when the city was divided between Italy and Yugoslavia with a border-wall.

Situated at a natural and convenient crossroads of various routes between its hinterland and the Adriatic, Rijeka has been an important international harbour with a long industrial tradition since the mid-18th century. Unfortunately, after the year 2000 its production, traffic, and trade decreased as a consequence of the recent war. The dark period of industrial pollution is now mostly behind us, and the negative side-effects of that method of production have been eliminated. With the new millennium, most highly industrialized countries in Europe have switched to other forms of profitable, environmentally-aware business, located in pleasant, nature-friendly surroundings, and the city of Rijeka is also trying to convert itself into a commercial, trade and tourist centre, with an emphasis on local historical and architectural values.

Rijeka boasts a very rich industrial heritage, with buildings which stand as monumental examples of industrial architecture (mainly seaport and railway warehouses and factories), which were designed and built by the best civil engineers in Hungary. Hungary ruled Rijeka at the turn of the century. In compliance with the Hungarian state's decree, all public buildings, schools, business and administrative buildings of Rijeka had to be designed and constructed by Hungarian state architects and civil engineers. In their projects, they used the most innovative iron constructions and reinforced concrete building techniques of the day. . They were convinced they were building for the future, for the progress of the new century and the development of Rijeka, their only seaport under the rule of the Hungarian crown.

Barcelona - VI 2011

Modern structures together with rich floral decoration taken from the Viennese Secession on the one hand and with a nod to Italian Liberty influence on the other, make Rijeka's Art Nouveau notably different from other cities in the area.

Latterly more and more tourists make short visits to Rijeka. In order to provide them with the necessary information on the city's Art Nouveau heritage, a tourist guidebook was produced, the first to focus on this specific topic. It was written for professionals and for the general public and suggests a two-hour walking tour through the city centre.

From 1996 to 2001 the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art organized three exhibitions on Rijeka's architecture: Historicism, Art Nouveau, and Modern Architecture. It contributed considerably to awakening interest in architecture among the general public as well as professionals and tourists. The publication of the guide was a great success for Rijeka, especially if we consider that Rijeka was not part of Croatian territory for a considerable time and that consequently it was also excluded from art historians' research. It was more than a fortunate coincidence that the Art Nouveau exhibition took place in 1997 – on the centenary of the establishment of the Vienna Secession in 1897. This contribution to the anniversary has demonstrated that Rijeka quickly responded to new ideas which originated from important cultural Middle-European centres; it was under various influences, especially from Budapest or Vienna. When planning a stroll through the city, the main criteria regarding the selection of buildings for the guidebook were determined by highlighting the *existing* Art Nouveau buildings and elements of facade ornamentation, i.e. the current state of things suggesting the

nature of Art Nouveau decorative intentions in its outer morphological configuration.



1. Emilio Ambrosini, ex Hotel Royal, Rijeka (Photo Željko Stojanović)

The work on the guidebook included the study of archives; project documentation and some material containing other Art Nouveau elements or innovations were also encompassed. In this case, the emphasis was not on external ornamentation, but rather on an inner approach, which revealed the Art Nouveau appreciation for composition of volume, as well as the manner in which interior space was organized.

Therefore, the guidebook also highlights some examples of architecture showing a trend towards Proto-Rationalism, heralding more recent and modern styles. The early application of new materials and constructions was significant, this being already in evidence in the 1880's. The ceilings of some Hungarian harbour warehouses were made of reinforced concrete between steel I-beams. In 1905, engineer Szilárd Zielinski built the Hotel for Emigrants using reinforced concrete between 1906

Barcelona - VI 2011

/1909 Ferenc Pfaff implemented reinforced concrete in the complete construction of port
warehouses.



**2.Szilard Zielinski, ex hotel Emigranti,
detail of roof cornice (Photo Željko
Stojanović)**

Theodor Traxler and Eugenio Celliogi used reinforced concrete for the Teatro Fenice (1911-1914); its project and construction were contemporary to that of August Perret's Theatre des Champs Elysées in Paris. The process of acquiring Art Nouveau characteristics in Rijeka was gradual as far as turn-of-the-century residential architecture was concerned.

It first started in ornamental segments of private, individual buildings which were still basically conceived traditionally, following the principles of Historicism, to relate to 19th century architecture. The typical bourgeois house had only changed its "outfit", so new, formally different ornamentation was simply attached to the previous volume, and this was often done according to the needs or wishes of commissioners and purchased by catalogue order from Austrian or Italian cities.

The buildings for our guide-booklet were selected for their importance, but also for the importance of their investors, owners or users, their overall appearance, composition of volume, the manner in which the interior space is organized and for typical elements in the ornamentation of their façades, suggesting the Nouveau decorative nature in its outer morphological configuration.

The historical criterion encompasses the early 20th century, i.e. the first two decades, also including proto-rationalist architecture, which announced more recent modern styles (1900-1920). As during this period Rijeka was ruled by Hungarian governors, many of the projects were created in Budapest by the architects educated there or in Vienna so that they demonstrate specific shapes under various Art Nouveau Middle European influences.



**3.Emilio Ambrosini, ex Hotel Bristol,
decorative detail (Photo Željko
Stojanović)**

Barcelona - VI 2011



4. Emilio Ambrosini, ex Hotel Royal, detail balkona (Photo Željko Stojanović)



5. Emilio Ambrosini, ex Hotel Royal, detail of handrail (1)

The composition of the guidebook includes a general introduction and a list of 27 buildings shown on the city map suggesting a two-hour walk from the eastern to the western part of

Rijeka. Each building is represented with a black and white photograph showing its entirety as well as certain details, bearing its current and former name, the names of its architect and commissioner, the year of its construction, and its actual address marked on a segment of the city map. On the attached book-mark for the general public there are short pieces of information relating to typical elements of style. The texts tend to be informative; they are enriched by some interesting details from the past and have already received positive feedback from the readers.

Selected bibliography

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