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Home boom in Hungary: report of a nationwide design competition for 9-18 year old children

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Abstract
Design education is not yet prevalent in Hungary. Pedagogical innovations, however, have been taking place in several areas: in the development of the subject areas of art and technology, in legislation where the principles of a National Core Curriculum have been adopted (1994), in teacher training at the Academy of Craft and Design (since 1986), and in a nationwide design competition.

The Let’s Design Objects! 1994 competition resulted in a real break through in Hungarian Art and Design education. The unexpectedly high number of entries, the high standard of work, and the lively and new approaches to solving design problems have convinced many art educators of the importance of design education.

The report lists proven methods and richly illustrates them with photographs of works entered in the subcategories of the 1994 competition’s overall theme, Our Home; Robinson’s Shelter; How We Live Now; and My Home in 2014.

The context

Hungary: school system, design education, innovation.

A small country in Central Europe, Hungary serves as both frontier to the East and the West and as a buffer zone between opposing powers. Its school system had been highly centralized since World War II and it is only recently that change has begun. Eight years of general school was compulsory for all children from 6 to 14, curricula and text-books were standardized. From 14 to 18, children had the option of studying in a vocational school, a vocational secondary school, or in a general academic secondary school known as the “gimnázium.” In art classes primarily academic painting was taught whereas in technology classes fundamental principles and theories were emphasized, although often without practical workshop experience. Both subject areas received 1-2 hours instruction per week. Design education was virtually nonexistent.

In the early Nineties, along with the political changes, modernization of the school system was accelerated. The first milestone was Parliament’s approval of the principles of the National Core Curriculum in 1994, establishing a democratic and flexible framework of regulation in accordance with international practice. This document includes design education as a part of art and technology education.

The renewal of art and technology education in this field is a result of research on and subsequent developments in the subject during the Eighties, the revival of art and design teacher training at the Academy of Craft and Design, and the influence of the nationwide youth competition entitled: Let’s Design Objects!

The competition

This section covers the background, topic, invitation, entries, evaluation, awards and publicity.

Let’s Design Objects! was first launched in 1985 by the Design Centre and Hungarian Television with the aim of wakening the interest of young people in objects and the made environment, of developing their creativity and sensitivity to quality and their problem solving ability. The competition was open to anyone who could come up with designs for functional objects. The rules
specified that the work entered had to be novel in that it was better or nicer or cheaper or more effective than the existing one. In the first year 815 entries were received and in later years between one and two thousand works per year.

The competition, now nearly ten years old, has survived the period of difficult finance and currently has the support of several foundations and businesses. In 1993, a new topic Our Home was introduced. Submissions were invited in three categories:

1. How We Live Now
2. My Home in 2014
3. Robinson’s Shelter

The competition was announced on television and in several journals, and more than 300 individuals, study circles, or groups of schoolmates sent their drawings, descriptions, and photographs, and often brought in person their heavy and voluminous models of houses or flats.

Most of the designs were for the Robinson’s Shelter category, which called for designs of homes for their favourite hero in a tale or novel. There were models made of straw, twigs, plaster and wire, and the best really succeeded in bringing alive the hut, cave, or castle of Matyi Ludas, Peter Pan, or Toldi and the Bohemian warriors.

Many children answered the question about how he or she will live twenty years from now. Besides the many inflated versions of presently fashionable houses were designs for fully automated electronic science-fiction dreams together with some profoundly realistic approaches.

Relatively few entries arrived for the category How We Live Now. Some sociological investigations mercilessly exposed our current housing situation, while others contained proposals for improving it.

This year many more entries dealt with appearance, and visual communication, than the question of use or function.

The rate of participation among the counties and the capital was proportional to population and the ratio of girls to boys was equal. The greatest number of entries came from the 11-14 age group. The entries by 9- and 10-year-olds freshened the competition with bright, colourful ideas, while the few older participants tried to achieve competence.

The entries were evaluated by a jury consisting of architects, interior designers, and art teachers according to the graded criteria given below:

1. Importance of the problems identified.
2. Ability to evaluate the situation.
3. Originality of the idea.
5. Level of workmanship.
6. Clarity of presentation.

On 21 May 1994, the jury announced their selections: five parties including both individual and groups of designers shared first, second and third prize. Twenty-two competitors won extra prizes and ten more in each age group received honourable mentions.

The best entries were first displayed in the Tölgyfa Galéria (Academy of Craft and Design), and were then exhibited throughout the country. Hungarian television broadcast a fifteen-minute-long programme about the young prize winners and their work 6, and several newspaper articles appeared suggesting the public’s interest in the competition.

The contribution of the competition to public education.

Although the competition was not organized as a school event, it nevertheless provides many useful lessons for public schools on teaching art and technology. Because of the nature of the competition, the emphasis is on the communicative side of design education; it is thus more orientated toward art than technology.

In the following section the most important findings will be listed and illustrated. They may not appear to be new in other countries or even in other subject areas, but in Hungary it
took this competition to demonstrate to Hungarian art teachers that the results are valid and acceptable in Hungary too.

1 Three dimensional models are a valid form of visual expression equal to other means of representation
In traditional art education drawing, painting, and graphic techniques receive high priority. Despite the magisterial declaration that drawing is the basis of everything in art, no one has ever proven that visual eloquence requires a lot of drawing practice. Following the competition countless art teachers began to encourage their pupils to build scale models. The results of the competition convinced others that not only is modeling a wonderful tool of expression, but in certain cases it is the best...

How could we describe the Hill-House more easily than with a plaster model of it? How can we create, control, and modify sophisticated spatial relations at all? The appropriate way is to build three dimensional models, as the young creators of the Snail-Horn-House did.

2 The objective recording of things as they are is a valid task for art
Artistic expression and geometrical drawing have both had deservedly long-standing traditions in art education, but these skills have not been related to the world as it is today. The Suburban Detached House is a good example of a project striving to meet the demands of modern times. You can see the building’s exterior and the different materials used to build it, and even have a look inside, because of the folding roof. The faithfulness of formulation is amazing: you can find every piece and detail as it conveys the taste (or tastelessness) of lower middle class life.

In the scale model called Our Laundry every piece of equipment is represented from the pail to the poker, as in an ethnographic inventory. The white wall and white painted water pipes determined the style; thus everything is made of white paper.

3 Real life problems are the most interesting
Most problems facing mankind are not visual, but rather concern satisfying basic needs and meeting the requirements of society. In coping with these fundamental challenges, our visual abilities also play a role in recognizing situations and in discerning quality. In the category My Home in 2014 imagining the future inspired fantasy.

The Skylab Luxury Dwelling is a mixture of Wonder Castle and an orbital-satellite, which does not introduce a new style, but demonstrates a high quality interpretation of science-fiction literature and comics.

The Rainbow-building and the Bastion-building recall the Dogon’s rich decorative world, and remind us of African mud walls. As we know adobe is a kind of reinvented environmental-friendly building material, which gives us more freedom in forming, and allows personal expression, for example in making intimate curves.

4 The visualization of tales, stories and legends
It is well known, that ‘The Tale’ as an archetypical model of eternity is the favourite reading material of small children. Although adolescents prefer romances, we as grown ups cannot live without myths. We imagine the whole of our earthly and unearthly existence in a humanized form, from cigarette advertisements to Angels. The tale is ideal as a starting point, because it stimulates children and provides a certain frame, but at the same time it does not give a pattern to follow. It is therefore not surprising that most of the entries came in the Robinson’s Shelter category, and the award winning designs depicted the fairy-tale worlds of Hungarian heroes.

The Hag’s-den is in the form of a witch, and the opening to the cave is a hole in the bottom of the witch’s skirt. Hags on brooms are landing on the thigh of the figure. The witches concocting brews in the devil’s kitchen seem to have crept out of her lap...
The Room of Jankó Borsszemis a 10 x 10 cm corner furnished with all the elements of the
folk tale, similar to the tale of Tom Thumb: his horse, a grasshopper, trophies on the wall, dragons heads, a songbook and eight-millimetre-long arrows with feather and head. The miniaturization acquires aesthetic value because it is so consistent.

The cruel stepmother’s fence in *Jancsi és Juliska* - in English Jack and Jill - are made of holipni (a tube like cake) instead of sausages as in the tale. The bench is made of finger-biscuit, the tiles are of crackers. Would we call this kitsch? If so then the fairy-tale is too! The creators of the *Gate of Fairyland* used not only the world of folk-tales, but the forms of Hungarian folk art, demonstrating a fashionable style in art education.

The first prize winner *Toldi and the Bohemian Warrior as I Imagine Them* was valued for its historically correct environment, good structural design, and high level of workmanship.

Very many Robinson’s Shelters and similarly looking Tarzan tents were entered. The range of designs includes Nature in an almost untamed state, the well equipped shelter and yard, and the fully furnished cottage with pottery and textiles. The rich and original ideas evidence children’s ability to relive the story and to reconstruct the buildings and tools. The broad variety of used and well selected material and the good composition demonstrates the visual talent of participants, and also the fact, that the Robinson theme is excellent.

Here are some examples:

**Robinson’s Room** is a Scandinavian-style cottage fit for occupation.

**The Dwelling of Robinson Crusoe on the Top of the Tree**

**Robinson’s Home** and court yard with fireplace, sheep-pen, fences and wonderful green grass.

The **Residence for a Woodpecker** built on the top of a lime tree in a garden. It is for those who desire a nomadic life.

5 The attitude among 14-18 year old designers

Secondary school pupils are mature enough to solve design problems for themselves, and some are skilled enough to carry out their ideas as well. A good example is *My Dream in a Prefabricated Flat*. The young boy designed the small room, his parents bought the bed and the glass-case, his brother and he made the shelves and the desk.

6 The project as a teaching method

A traditional class at best lasts one and a half hours, and pupils are expected to finish their task during this time. The participants in the competition were free from such constraints: Many spent weeks completing their projects. A lot of marvellous works show that education in art and technology are successful if the pupils’ energies are channeled into an activity that he or she likes and is interested in.

7. Complex communication

As we have seen from the entries, in order to communicate the ‘designers idea’, and all the necessary information, a drawing is not enough. A text is needed to clarify any misunderstandings and to provide special information (e.g. a description of the situation, technical instructions, conceptual formulations, etc.) In some cases we need 3-D models to show forms or operation. To design successfully one has to be experienced in several means of communication.

8 Teachers are ready to start

Exactly fifty entries arrived for the ‘teaching methods’ competition addressed to teachers. This is a much higher number than ever before, and shows that teachers like and understand the theme and that their attitude has shifted in a positive direction. The level and content of the papers vary, but one can find enough material in them to edit a teachers guide with selected methods and case studies.

Conclusion

I hope that the examples shown are convincing and demonstrate that children respond healthily and creatively to carefully selected, engaging tasks. I should add that response to our methodological competition shows that teachers are also seeking new innovative teaching techniques and are ready to broaden their activities to include design education.
Competent authorities have remarked that our design competition is a milestone in art and technology education: it seems Hungarian style design education has been born!

(It is regretted that not all the colour slides presented could be adequately reproduced for this book. Ed)

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge and thank Ilona Szép for her work in organizing the competition.

References


7 Color slide 4. Benedek Deák (17) # 231

8 Color slide 7. Adrienne Szemrédi, Gabriella Gavallér (10) # 207

9 Color slide 9. Annamária Müller, Rita Tóth (12, 13) # 296/a
Colour Slide 9 - Annamária Müller and Rita Tóth (12 & 13 years old)

Colour Slide 7 - Adrienne Szemrédi and Gabriella Gavallér (10 years old)

Colour Slide 4 - Benedek Deák (17 years old)