Authorship, Architecture, Anonymity: The Impossible Career of Petra Andrejova-Molnár

a project by Katarina Burin

Usdan Gallery, Bennington College
September 10–October 13, 2019
In 2006, Katarina Burin felt the urge to design a monogram—but not for a PA. An artist whose practice had long explored the social instincts of European twentieth-century modernist design, Burin imagined a female architect from the interwar years and conjured the fictional Petra Andjewa-Munari, known as PA. Burin spent a decade developing an entire career for PA, conducting meticulous historical research to aid her production of models and drawings; decor such as furniture, ceramics, textiles, and wallpaper; and documents such as photographs, stationery and catalogs.

It is important to note that all visual artifacts of this fictional archive are made by Burin. These include original works “by PA.” as well as re-makes of existing models and drawings by historical designers who—like Burin’s imagination—influenced PA, or with whom she collaborated. This fictive-historical mix serves to anchor PA within celebrated design circles that rarely included women despite their utopian goals. In this way, PA becomes an amalgam of the marginalized or anonymous women who contributed to the modernist program and, at the same time, represents a personification of creative longing and ghostly absence.

“Authorship, Architecture, Anonymity” marks the completion of Burin’s production as PA, and is the first exhibit to survey the work in its entirety. As a whole, the project is a complex enterprise that embraces the collectivist zeal of modernism while noting the erasure of women designers from the modernist canon. Prior exhibits have leaned toward presenting PA as a forgotten or recently discovered figure. By acknowledging Burin as author, we consider her strategies and reasons for subverting historiographical norms. As researcher, producer, and draftsperson, she inhabits bygone models as a means of discovering their bearing on the present.

Burin’s effort is a multilayered engagement with the slippery nature of collaboration, as something intrinsic to architecture and of philosophical value to the socialist spirit of interwar Eastern Europe and modernism overall. Many architectural collaborators—women in particular—have been and continue to be overlooked in favor of a single architectural voice or personality. In her manifestation of PA., Burin performs a feminist correction of these histories and injustices. At the same time, she is a collaborator with the very history she critiques. Her maneuvers into the past point to propositions for the future—about visual culture, collaborative practice, and theories of collectivity.
Works on the main gallery wall, keyed to the map on the following pages:

1. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Wall screen, 1930
2. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud north and south elevation drawings, 1932-34
3. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud sign, 1932-34
4. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud stationary, 1932-34
5. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud stationary, 1932-34
6. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud showcase, 1932-34
7. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud night table (blue and yellow), 1930
8. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud drawing for night table with drawer, 1930
9. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud model, 1932-34
10. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Hotel Nord-Sud lobby interior perspective drawing, 1932-34
11-12. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Wall screens (vertical stripes), 1927
13. Jaromír Krejčíř, First project for a villa for Dr. Vlasta Novotná in Zbraslav, near Prague, perspective view, 1924
14. Jaromír Krejčíř, First project for a villa for Dr. Vlasta Novotná in Zbraslav, near Prague, model, 1924
15. Jan Víšek, Project for Silku Savaritum, perspective view, Brno-Vysočany, 1929-33
16. Jaromír Krejčíř, Competition entry (first prize) for a sanatorium, Trenčianské Teplice, 1929
17. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Project for Modern Apartment, elevation drawing, for Czechoslovak Werkbund, 1927
20. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Bedroom for Studio Efficiency, axonometric view, 1938-39
23. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Mahogany wall screen with back, 1934
24. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Weekend Home, Fehlnig, perspective, 1932
26. Bohuslav Fuchs, Competition project for the Pavilion of the G.C.A. in Brno, 1936
27. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Competitive project for the Pavilion of the G.C.A. in Brno, 1937
29. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Brass wall screen, 1948
30. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Design for Knauer 21 shop front, first and second drawing, Brno, 1933
31-37. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Merchandise from Žilina, Brno, 1928-31
38. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Žilina store sign, Brno, 1928-31
39. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Brass wall screen for Studio Efficiency, 1948
40-42. Petra Androjšová-Mohnář, Wallpaper from Žilina, 1928-31

Other works in the exhibit include two P.A. monograms, cover designs for periodicals, P.A.'s designs for the Czechoslovakian Pavilion in Paris, 1935, and photographs of P.A. and her contemporaries.
Biography of Petra Andrejova-Molnár, b. 1898, date of death unknown

P.A., as she was known professionally, was at the center of a vibrant architectural community working between the World Wars in the newly established Czechoslovak and Hungarian People’s Republics. She and those in her circle, including Józef Fischer, Bohuslav Fuchs, Jaroslav Krejcar, and Farkas Molnár, came of age with the countries that rose from the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s demise in October 1918. In the shifting political arena of redrawn boundaries, these architects were emboldened by the utopian spirit of the age. They embraced an architecture that championed modernity, efficiency, functionality, and a commitment to human progress and innovation.

Petra Jozefina Andrejova was born in Zlín (Moravian Czechoslovakia) to an educated bourgeois family with connections to the thriving Czech textile industry. She studied at the School of Decorative Arts in Prague and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. While traveling extensively in the early 1920s, spending time in Brno, Budapest, Prague, Vienna, and Berlin, she sought out like-minded architects, designers, typographers and artists and developed a broad regional network. It was in these years that P.A. encountered the Hungarian architect Farkas Molnár who would become her husband and sometime collaborator.

P.A.’s early work comprised drawings, models and unrealized projects for exhibits of the Avion Hotel in Brno (1927-29) and with Krejcar on his Machináé Sanatorium, in Trencianske Teplice (1928-30). This training proved influential when, in 1932, she began designing her first solo project, the Weekend House, a simple rectilinear structure dominated by a recessed glass wall.

Andrejova-Molnár played an editorial and design role in several architectural and design journals of the 1920s and ‘30s in Prague and Brno. In 1928, in Brno, she established Žijime—roughly translated as “living”—a small shop and meeting place for which she designed the storefront, signage and interior. Run by fellow architect Hana Kačerová-Záveská, Žijime sold decorative objects and furniture by Czech designers but, more significantly, served as a hub for an international design community that would gather there for readings, lectures and political discussions.

Her signature interwar project was the Hotel Nord-Sud (1932-34), on the Adriatic near the Yugoslav coastal town of Zadar. Notable for its sense of intimacy, it contained fourteen cabin-like bedrooms and two suites, all with balconies; a third-floor lookout café; a second-floor restaurant and bar; and glass-walled terraces. Extensive use of glass allowed constant views of the sea. Destroyed during the Second World War, the Hotel Nord-Sud synthesized architectural trends of the day, and, like the structure itself, defined a design era of hopeful internationalism and youthful idealism now lost to us.

After attempting and failing to open her own architecture practice in Brno, P.A. left the city in the mid-1930s for Budapest and Vienna. She fled Austria after the Nazi annexation and settled in France, where she remained until the liberation of Paris by Allied Forces in 1944. Her precise activities in France remain unknown—there is little concrete evidence for suggestions that she was involved in leftist politics, but it appears likely she was in contact with artists and designers including Robert and Sonia Delaunay. By 1945, she had relocated permanently to the United States, where she began once again to design. One of the few known details about her life in the United States: she oversaw construction of her minimal Studio Efficiency countryside retreat, designed in 1938 and redesigned in 1950 for an American client.

As a rare female participant in the male-dominated dialogues of the period, P.A. not only found establishing her own architectural practice to be a challenge but also was neglected by historians who considered her work marginal. In recent years, especially since the fall of Communism, archival material has become more available and the breadth of P.A.’s contributions and influence have become apparent.

Excerpted from:
Katarina Burin was born in Bratislava, Slovakia, and fled with her family at the age of six via Yugoslavia to Toronto, where she grew up. She received her BA from the University of Georgia and her MFA from Yale University. She is a lecturer in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. Recent exhibitions include Zijene, at ViPor (Prague); Open Sessions residency and exhibitions at the Drawing Center, New York; Netuhauer Collequium for Culture and Society (University of Chicago); Kunsthalle Langenhagen; the Aspen Art Museum; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; and shows at Ratio 3 (San Francisco), M29 Richter & Brückner (Cologne), and Lucile Curyt (Paris). Her awards include fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute and the Graham Foundation; the 2013 James and Audrey Foster prize from the ICA Boston; and residencies at MuseumsQuartier (Vienna), Skowhegan, Yaddo, and the MacDowell Colony.

Special thanks for help with exhibition installation:

Zen Beattie, River Castaneda, Julianna Davis, Frances Erlandson, Tamar Giligasvili, Richard MacPike, Melih Meric, Emily O’Donnell, Valeria Silbrian Quijada, Rachel Shilouch, and John Umphlett