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Preliminary report

THE MINERAL BATH BUILDING IN BANKYA - SYNTHESIS OF ARTS AND PRESERVATION OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Alexandra Ivanova[1], Blagovesta Ivanova[2], Stanislav Georgiev[3]

Abstract

One of the architectural jewels of the 20th century in Bulgaria - the Mineral Bath in Bankya - is located in the immediate vicinity of Sofia. It was designed by the Bavarian architect Karl (Carl) Hocheder and opened for visitors in 1911. The architect's overall intention to merge the function of a spa, equipped with the most modern technical facilities of its time, and to achieve a unique aesthetic consonance of artistic and architectural ingredients, ranked the building among the first of its type in terms of beauty and facilities in Europe. The study examines in parallel the historical background to the origin and functioning of the Mineral Bath in Bankya, the synthesis of artistic and architectural elements with the functional qualities and the social significance of the building. The focus of the study is on the ceramic wall coverings, in which hand-painted tiles are applied, the floor coverings with decorative ornaments and the sculptural layouts that give the building its unique character. Comparative art analysis is used to clarify the reception of the European influences. The subject matter is particularly relevant given the restoration of the building in the period 2018-2022. The Mineral Bath in Bankya won the Grand Prize in the Bulgarian Architecture Awards 2022 competition and is a current example of a comprehensive restoration of an important site for the preservation of Bulgaria's architectural heritage. For this part, the methods of conservation research, adaptation and transformation of the spaces were used in order to preserve its functions and to bring it into line with contemporary trends for "Sanus Per Aquam" and Wellness. The topic's popularization is linked to the revival of many valuable buildings of similar purpose in Sofia, such as the Central Mineral Bath, the Bath in Gorna Banya, the Bath in Ovcha Kupel, the Bath in Knyazhevo and many others, which are about to regain their splendour through the implementation of urgent and vital restoration works.

Key words: *preservation of the architectural heritage, synthesis between architecture and the arts, spa and wellness*

[1] Assoc. Prof., USEA “Lyuben Karavelov”, Bulgaria, alexivanova@yahoo.com, ORCID 0009-0000-6730-1500
[2] Prof. DSc., USEA “Lyuben Karavelov”, Bulgaria, bg_fineart@abv.bg, ORCID 0000-0003-2994-2037
[3] Architect, Postgraduate student, USEA “Lyuben Karavelov”, Bulgaria, stivi1504@abv.bg, ORCID N/A

1. INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the 20th century, the Bavarian architect prof. Karl (Carl) Hocheder (1854-1917) designed the public baths in Munich (Müller'sche Volksbad, Germany, 1901) [1], which became the model for bathing establishments after 1900, in Sibiu (Baia Populară Sibiu, Romania, 1904) [2] and Bankya (Mineral Bath in Bankya, 1907, Bulgaria) [3]. The public baths were built in the Art Nouveau style and were inspired by the ancient themed baths of the Roman Empire, the lavish Baroque buildings of Europe and oriental hammams with a unique architectural synthesis.

The design of Hocheder's first bath, the Müller'sche Volksbad, was the result of a donation by the Munich engineer Karl Müller to the city of Munich with the stipulation that a bath be built for the poor (Standl, 2001). With its architecture and interior, the Volksbad became one of the most beautiful buildings with this purpose in Europe. In terms of its architectural structure, the Baia Populară Sibiu is almost a verbatim copy of the Müller'sche Volksbad in Munich.

The method of empirical work is used - description and analysis of architecture and synthesis with fine art as the leading one. The principles of observation of synergy, architecture and art, were introduced as part of the elements of the method due to the nature of the period. Synergy refers to the analysis of the architectural plan in terms of the purpose of the building and the placement of the artistic decoration within it. The analysis and the applied method with its elements were attributed to its restoration due to its status as a cultural monument. It is a mandatory part of the principle of the general methodology in the evaluation of the building.

2. THE BATHS OF KARL HOCHEDER

The three baths were designed by Hocheder with one male and one female pool, as a result of the gender segregation that was common in early 20th century society. Unlike the baths in Munich and Sibiu, which were designed with a smaller female pool, the Bath in Bankya has two symmetrical pools that are also separated by gender but are equal in area. The pools are structurally arranged in symmetry along the central axis of the building. They include areas with wooden cabins and showers that provide direct access to the bathing area.

In times when personal hygiene is difficult to maintain in people's homes, the bathhouses designed by Karl Hocheder are public buildings equipped with modern bathing facilities. Their public role is a significant one and is rightly awarded with due architectural attention, through an imposing appearance inside and out. The construction of the Müller'sche Volksbad in Munich is a noteworthy fact in the architectural and social traditions of Western Europe, but we should pay particular attention to the appearance of similar buildings in the modern developing part of Eastern Europe and, in particular, in young countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, which for several decades have won their independence from the Ottoman Empire.

The interiors and exteriors of the three buildings contain characteristic sculptural Art Nouveau and Baroque elements, inspired by flora and fauna, combined with ceramic tiles and colourful floor mosaics that give a sacred feel to the architectural spaces. Visually, the functions of Karl Hocheder's three baths are emphasised by a common stylised sculptural element - the shell, which is associated with the water, but can also be seen as a reference to the art work of the great Florentine painter Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), "The Birth of

Venus from the Sea Foam", a symbol of love, birth and the energy with which the healing water charges the bathers. The common feature of the three buildings is undoubtedly the richly decoration of the facades and interiors, inspired by different historical periods. The bathe rooms' interiors are characterised by wide staircases, columns, high ceilings, round arches, domes, exquisite railings and artistically designed windows.

The Bath in Bankya is the most magnificent of Hocheder's three creations. It has not been clarified how the project was commissioned in the small village near Sofia. For now, we can only assume the intervention of the Bulgarian king Ferdinand von Sachsen-Coburg-Gotha (1861-1918), who maintained active relations with Western Europe and Germany in particular.

Hocheder was not among the popular architects in Bulgaria, in contrast the builder of the Bath arch. Nikola Neshov[4] (1869-1928). It is significant that only one year after the completing the construction, the settlement became famous and its mineral waters, thanks to the Bath, became especially appreciated. According to the Illustrated Pocket Guide of 1912, the spa village of Bankya was defined as the Bulgarian "Karlsbad", after the popular spa town in West Bohemia in the 19th century. At that time, it was 15 km north-west of Sofia in the publication we read: "The Baths are particularly curative for a certain kind of illness, which is why the village - a few years ago, a pile of dirty, half-collapsed houses, is today the most beautiful resort, on the settlement of which the state has spent nearly two million leva. Instead of the half-collapsed bathhouse, today there is a magnificent monumental building, surrounded on all sides by splendid villas and hotels. In summer there are many visitors, and therefore it is impossible to make a great pleasure with little money."[4]

3. WHO WAS THE ARCHITECT KARL HOCHEDER (1854-1917)

Karl Hocheder (Fig.1) was born in Weihammer near Weiden in the Upper Pfalz. He studied architecture at the Technical University of Munich from 1874 to 1878 under Gottfried von Neureuther (1811-1887) and graduated in 1881. Together with Theodor Fischer (1862-1938), Gabriel von Seidl (1848-1913), and Hans Grassel (1860-1939), they shaped Munich's cityscape in the early 20th century. Its distinctive architectural style became known as “Munich Baroque” (also known as “Hocheder Baroque”, which united Neo-Baroque and Art Nouveau) [5].

His field is social orientation in architecture. From 1886 he worked at the Office of Spatial Planning in Munich, in 1889 he became a municipal building official and designed schools, a hospital and a church [6]. From 1898 he was a professor at the Technical University of Munich, and in 1901 he designed the Müller’s Public Baths (Müller'sche Volksbad) (Fig.2-3).

[4] Nikola Neshov is known as the head of the construction of the bathhouse in Varshets in 1930 and the design of the bathhouse in Vidin.

Figure 1. Architect Karl Hocheder [7]

Figure 2. Müller's Public Baths (Müller'sches Volksbad). Perspective. [8]
Figure 3. A watercolour drawing of the Müller'sche Volksbad. [9]

4. THE SYNTHESIS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND THE ARTS

Research on the Bath in Bankya is scarce. Primarily, they are related to the natural features, the healing properties of water, medicine and health restoration [10].

In 2010, when the Bath was already in a bad state on the initiative of arch. Lyubinka Stoilova, a Jubilee exhibition was organized in the park in the front of the Bath, which introduces the history of the resort of Bankya, the personality and work of the architect and the builder. The aim of the exhibition is to promote the cultural heritage at risk. [11]

After the successful restoration in 2018-2022, the synthesis between architecture and arts can be analysed, as all details have been restored.

The architect's decision to best express the ideas of the time about European public architecture for healing and restorative purposes is significant. The Bath in Bankya is a symmetrical building in which the two wings with pools are arranged in a semi-arc around the main foyer. (Fig. 4) A similar planning scheme (with a central axial solution) has the Central Mineral Bath of Sofia, which was designed by the architects Petko Momchilov (1864-1923) and Yordan Milanov (1967-1932) in 1913. The Bath designed by them is now transformed for the Historical Museum and due to the change of use has lost the elements of the authentic author's solution of the interiors. The façade is decorated in Neo-Byzantine style, which is an expression of the national romanticism in the architecture of the first decade of the 20th century.

The Bath in Bankya has all the advantages of a fully preserved authentic decoration. In terms of European trends in architecture, and because it was designed by a foreigner, it has the imposing quality of a synthesis of Neo-Classicism with finely presented baroque details and non-intrusively hinted elements of Secession. The combination of different materials, such as marble for the floor layout, stucco for the architectural artistic decoration, wood for the framing of the wooden partitions and rich ceramic finishes, is carried out in a measured colourful unity. The arched Neo-Baroque pediment of the portico in the front of the entrance is resolved with Ionic capitals set at a 45º angle. Its stucco decoration consists of shells which enhance the impression of the also shell-like central window opening. The protruding fronts of the facades of the two wings complement the impression of Baroque architecture without dominating it.

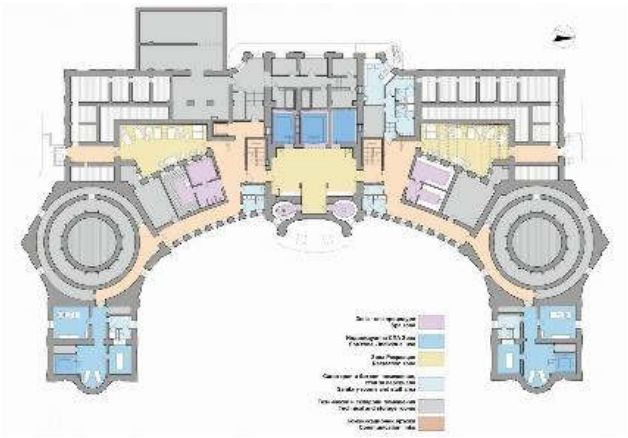

Figure 4. Plan of the Bath in Bankya. Basement. [12]

In the modest solution of the façade layout, the decoration in the interiors is developed to a considerable extent. The use of gilding to frame the stucco decoration in the foyer is impressive. The lavish ornamentation in the basins and its detailed precision is evident in the shaping of the ceilings with moulded coffers and the exquisite balustrades with intricately profiled balusters. The wooden obituaries also impress with their high artistic value. Wooden panelling, wooden partition elements made of Slavonian oak, sculpturally shaped with ornaments characteristic for the whole building are used. The materials for the interior design, including the glass bricks, were sourced specifically for the Bath from Belgium, France and Vienna. All basins and baths are lined with Italian marble and terracotta [3].

5. AESTHETIC ANALYSIS OF THE INTERIOR OF BATHROOMS

In September 2020, professors and students from the USEA “L. Karavelov” met with part of the team of the Bankya Bathhouse Restoration Project and had the opportunity to get acquainted with the site before it was put into operation. The aesthetic analysis of the interior of the bathing rooms in the Bath was made thanks to the photographic material documented during the site visit.

During the visit, architect Chavdar Georgiev shared interesting facts and details from the history of the Bath and the specifics of Karl Hocheder’s architectural solution, partially presented in his publication in the architectural magazine “Gradat” [12]. He defines the

spaces around the two round pools as a remarkable architectural solution: in plan they represent a hexagon with separate niches with showers and sinks.

Special attention here deserves to be paid to the domes above them, airy and lightened by openwork cassettes, which become smaller in proportion to the closure of the dome. On the second level, it is worth noting the gallery with a marble parapet with balustrades, as well as the round windows, which have an elegant elliptical inner opening, following the round shape of the dome. We pay special attention to the plastic design of the dome spaces, since they are in the zone of the dominant perspective of the bathers in the pool and are accordingly developed in precise architectural details. (Fig.5).

In separate areas of the first floor foyers, the richly ornamented floor coverings with predominant floral and geometric motifs have been preserved. The terracotta pattern is composed mainly of stylized flowers and leaves in pleasant combinations of ochre, orange and turquoise. The appropriately selected light shades of the tiles are characterized by a non-dominant presence and fit delicately into the interior (Fig.6). The floor coverings around the pools are consciously developed in simpler solutions of hexagonal tiles (honeycomb type), which are in unison with the hexagonal shape of the room and are coloured in the warm and saturated range of brown. In this way, the sky-earth-water zones are spatially highlighted. Overall, a colourful effect of contrast with the light and dark blue tiles lining the walls and pools has been achieved. Here, we should note the white accents of the wall plaster ornaments and the balustrades in the upper register of the room, the white faience of the sinks and the white marble, which contrast with the prevailing colours in the interior and create the much-needed air space in the bathrooms. In the decorative-plastic decoration of the halls, the symbol of the bathroom visually dominates – the shell, with which the niches of the sinks and showers are vaulted (Fig.7-8).

Figure 5. The plastic design of the dome spaces (personal photo archive).
Figure 6. The ornamented floor coverings (personal photo archive).

Each of the sections (male and female) had 10 bathtubs. Two of them were designed as individual bathtubs, which were called "royal bathtubs" and were intended for members of the family of King Ferdinand, who was one of the regular visitors to the Bath. We will pay more detailed attention to the floor and wall ceramic tiles in the royal compartments, since they are individual interior solutions and probably express the personal preferences of the royal family (Fig.9-10).

Figure 7. View from the pool room (personal photo archive).
Figure 8. The shell, symbol of the Bath (personal photo archive).

Figure 9. The queen's bathtub (personal photo archive).
Figure 10. The bathtub of the king (personal photo archive).

The queen's bathtub has a slope for leaning on the left and is covered with white faience. It is decorated in its upper part with a row of cobalt blue square tiles, and at the bottom it is lined with white relief tiles, probably for security reasons. It is accessed by two steps and is framed by brass railings. The floor in the room is decorated with white and cobalt blue terracotta, arranged in a geometric motif. The walls are lined with cream tiles. The king's bathtub is more richly decorated. It has a slope for leaning on the right and is covered with light blue (Zöllingblau) faience. Its decoration consists of a row of white-green-red square tiles at the top, which symbolize the Bulgarian flag. It is also accessed by two steps and is framed by brass railings, but there are no relief tiles at the bottom. The floor in the room is covered with light cream and light blue terracotta tiles arranged in a geometric pattern. The walls are lined with white tiles.

Figure 11. The hand-painted tile 1 (personal photo archive).
Figure 12. The hand-painted tile 2 (personal photo archive).
Figure 13. The hand-painted tile 3 (personal photo archive).

Perhaps the most interesting part of the wall decoration here are the hand-painted tiles, applied to the white background (Fig.11-13). They represent figurative compositions with marine elements. In the foreground are depicted bathing sea deities, some of which are characterized by hairstyles from ancient Greek vase painting, but with regard to the bodies, more anatomical plasticity is used. In the background is depicted the sea, with flashes of light and sea vessels sailing in the distance. The tiles are colourfully designed in several colours - light and dark blue, black, cream and white. In their plots and style, the signs of the modern Secession style for the beginning of the century are clearly visible, which was often used in the decoration of ceramic interiors and was probably preferred by King Ferdinand and his family.

6. CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION ACTIVITIES

The conservation and restoration activities of the Mineral Bath building in Bankya are an emblematic example of the preservation and adaptation of the cultural heritage in Bulgaria.

The restoration of the bath was necessitated by the advanced process of physical and aesthetic deterioration, resulting from prolonged abandonment and lack of maintenance, despite its status as a national treasure [13]. After years of disuse, the building faced serious risks as moisture infiltration, destruction of decorative and structural elements, corrosion of metal parts, partial collapse of the roof structure, and compromised domes. All this threatens not only its authenticity and artistic value, but also its integrity as a cultural monument. The emerging danger of irreversible losses called for urgent conservation and restoration measures to prevent the complete destruction of the building.

The main damages included:

- Structural deformations caused by moisture and lack of maintenance, leading to cracks in masonry and corrosion of metal elements [14].
- Degradation of the decorative elements: disintegration of ceramic tiles, wooden partitions, and dormer windows [12].
- Functional obsolescence, inconsistent with contemporary hygiene and safety standards [12].

The risks to the site included the irreversible loss of authentic details and potential collapse of load-bearing structures, necessitating immediate conservation efforts.

6.1. Changes and Adaptations

The architectural design retains the main function of the site as a spa, but introduces key interventions. During the restoration process, a complete adaptation of the building to contemporary operational requirements was carried out, while simultaneously preserving its historical identity. In various parts of the Bath, the following changes were implemented:

- Restoration of the main functional areas, maintaining the original spatial organization.
- Introduction of new technical systems (heating, ventilation, electrical installations) to meet current safety and comfort standards.
- Some rooms were repurposed for new functions, while preserving the character of the interiors.
- New interventions were implemented in a manner that ensures they are maximally reversible and distinguishable, in accordance with the contemporary principles of cultural heritage preservation.

Traditional techniques and materials, aligned with the building's original structure, were used during the restoration. Special attention was given to preserving the interior (flooring and wall decorations).

Technological adaptations included the integration of underfloor heating using the polymer additive ADIPLAST to prevent cracking, and the modernization of waterproofing systems in wet zones (pools, jacuzzis) [15].

The balance between authenticity and functionality was achieved by preserving the original façade decoration and the symmetrical floor plan composition, as well as through the use of reversible conservation techniques allowing for future interventions [12].

6.2. Modern Materials and Techniques for Conservation and Restoration

In the restoration process, modern conservation and restoration techniques were applied, including cleaning and stabilizing original surfaces with gentle agents and mechanical means, injecting special solutions to reinforce masonry and prevent further degradation, and restoring decorative elements through manual crafting based on authentic models [16].

- For the restoration of façades and decorative elements, materials as close as possible to the originals were used - natural stone, ceramics, and lime plasters.
- In areas where the original materials could not provide the necessary durability (e.g., waterproofing or foundations), modern products were selected for their compatibility with the historical fabric and their ability not to cause harmful reactions.

The compatibility of the new materials with the originals was carefully analysed through laboratory tests and consultations with restoration specialists. The introduction of vapor-permeable and water-repellent materials, such as the two-component elastic cement waterproofing AQUAMAT-ELASTIC and the grouting compound MULTIFILL SMALTO, ensured protection against moisture and long-term durability, particularly in wet areas (pools, baths, jacuzzis). The use of injection solutions for the conservation of damaged areas allowed stabilization of the original structure without replacing it with new elements.

The choice of modern materials was driven by the need for long-term durability and compatibility with the original structure, avoiding excessive intervention. In some cases, due

to the impossibility of finding identical materials or the requirements of modern operational standards (e.g., waterproofing and thermal insulation), modern materials were used that are not fully identical to historical ones but were carefully selected so as not to compromise the visual and physical integrity of the building [16].

Conservation techniques involved:

- Mechanical cleaning of façades using the agent CL–CLEAN based on formic acid for the precise restoration of details [15].
- Structural reinforcement of load-bearing walls with minimal intervention in the original masonry [12].

Table 1. Used materials

Type of Material	Example	Purpose	Compatibility with Original
Traditional	Wooden partitions, dormer windows	Restoration of authentic elements	Full
Modern hybrid	AQUAMAT-ELASTIC (waterproofing)	Protection against moisture	Vapor permeability similar to cement
Innovative	ALTO (grouting compound)	Zero absorption in wet areas	Visual integration into the historical context

The use of two-component cement systems was motivated by the lack of adequate historical analogues for resilience to modern loads [15].

6.3. Unforeseen Challenges

Among the main unforeseen difficulties encountered during implementation were:

- The discovery of hidden structural defects in the foundations and walls, which were not visible during preliminary investigations.
- Unexpected complications related to moisture infiltration in certain areas, requiring additional drainage and insulation measures.
- Lack of sufficient archival documentation for some decorative elements, which complicated their authentic restoration [14].
- Difficulties in reconciling the new functional solutions with the requirements for preserving the cultural value of the site.

The restoration process followed the legal framework of the Cultural Heritage Act (2009), requiring the participation of licensed restorers; a public-private partnership (approved by the Sofia Municipal Council in 2017, securing an investment of BGN 8 million); and the preparation of detailed documentation for each stage of intervention in accordance with the Spatial Planning Act [17], coordinated with the National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage.

The restoration adhered to the requirements of the basic ethics of scientific restoration enshrined in the Venice Charter (1964) [18], and Nara document on Authenticity (1994) [19] emphasizing a authenticity, minimal intervention, and respect for the site. In the context of the Bankya Bath restoration, requirements for thorough preliminary research and a scientific approach were met; documentation of each intervention stage was prepared; minimal interventions aimed at stabilization rather than reinterpretation of the building were carried out; and compatible materials were used. The methods and approaches in the Bankya Bath restoration align with the fundamental principles of the Venice Charter.

Supplementation of missing elements was kept to a minimum, although in some cases they are not clearly distinguishable, representing a slight deviation from the ideals of the Charter. Critical deviations involved the use of modern waterproofing systems - a principle that contradicts the exclusive use of traditional materials but was justified by the need for moisture resistance. The requirements for minimal intervention, preservation of authentic materials and structures, and clear distinction of new additions from the original were observed. Where the use of modern materials was necessary, they were chosen carefully to avoid disrupting the historical context and to remain reversible for future interventions.

The balance between preserving historical value and functional adaptation was achieved through careful planning and consultations with specialists. To ensure sustainability, annual inspections by teams from the National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage are planned to assess the condition of façades and waterproofing, alongside public-private mechanisms for maintenance financing embedded in contracts with investors.

7. CONCLUSION

The restoration of the Bankya Bath demonstrates a balance between strict conservation and restoration principles and pragmatic technological solutions. Despite the challenges, the design team succeeded in integrating modern functional elements without compromising the historical authenticity of the monument. The success of such initiatives depends on ongoing monitoring and the adaptability of the legislative framework to the dynamic needs of cultural heritage.

The analysis of the existing literature on the subject has shown that scientific publications on the restoration of the Mineral Bath in Bankya are too few and fail to sufficiently develop the scientific and applied focus on this very significant topic. The present study attempts to consider the restoration as a systemic process in which all components of the building – architecture and decorative arts – are present in synthetic relationships. This approach is characteristic of the aesthetic concepts of the creators of the Mineral Bath and strives for an objective and as authentic analysis as possible of the original building and its modern reconstruction and restoration.

The example thus examined is a testament to the successful and comprehensive restoration of the Mineral Bath in Bankya, with a view to preserving the unique architecture and exceptional elements of plastic art that are an essential part of the building's exterior and interior. Undoubtedly, similar methods can be used in the restoration of other buildings with the same function that abound in the Sofia area - the Central Mineral Bath, the Bath in Gorna Banya, the Bath in Ovcha Kupel, the Bath in Knyazhevo. In the future, we hope to devote a series of studies to restoration projects that aim to bring back the splendour of the forgotten mineral baths and bring these unique buildings to new life.

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