

Budapest "mega-project" to defy the downturn

Government appoints museum director to oversee €150m cultural quarter

BUDAPEST. László Báán, the director of the Szépművészeti Múzeum (Museum of Fine Arts), has been appointed government commissioner for Budapest's new museum quarter, it was announced on 30 September. He will plan the merger of the museum's collection with that of the Hungarian National Gallery. Central to the plans will be a major museum building, the New Gallery, intended to house the modern sections of both collections. Báán, whose commission runs from 1 October to 30 September 2013, will also organise an international competition for architectural tenders for the new building.

Báán says that his appointment "was the day a long journey began... my brief as government commissioner includes working out the entire concept for the new museum quarter within two years".

In keeping with his original vision (*The Art Newspaper*, July/August, p24), Báán hopes to create a new museum of Hungarian photography alongside the New Gallery. The director predicts that the museums, which will cost an estimated €100m to €150m, could be open to the public as early as 2017.

Radical changes

In the space of a few years, Báán has turned the Museum of Fine Arts into the most visited museum in Hungary, with more than half a million visitors in 2010. Since being appointed general director in 2004, he has taken the museum, which houses a collection of Old Masters, from a position of relative obscurity to the point where it now contributes extensive loans to exhibitions at leading international institutions, such as London's Royal Academy of Arts.

At home, the museum's popularity has been boosted by temporary exhibitions showing the likes of Dürer, Botticelli, Titian and Van Gogh, and the quality of its programme prompted Báán's acceptance by the influential Bizot group of global museum heads in 2007. For the director's next, government-backed, initiative,



José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, right, visits the Museum of Fine Arts in March 2010, accompanied by the museum's director, László Báán

he aims to create an extensive museum quarter, hoping to make Budapest one of Europe's top museum destinations.

Despite Báán's achievements, his progressive agenda has not been easy to implement. He says: "At the time of my arrival, the museum was a true sleeping beauty, which was in urgent need of redefinition." From the beginning, he aimed to develop "a completely new attitude that would enable us to catch up with the museums of the western world, which were a good 25 years ahead of us, as soon as possible."

"Just to give an example of the position at the end of 2004, the museum, housing the major collection of international art in Hungary, only had a Hungarian-language website. The museum did not even have separate departments for education, communication and organising exhibitions."

It is now more than 20 years since the fall of communism in

eastern Europe. Issues surrounding the restitution of property rights, the structure of public institutions and the mechanisms of bureaucracy cast a 20th-century shadow over contemporary development. Translated to the museum field, such factors have

people to implement them. During his first few months in charge, Báán changed most of his departmental managers, mainly by promoting people already working at the museum. He also brought in more than 50 new employees, many of them

“It fits in perfectly with the logic of this government to launch a cultural mega-project of such emblematic significance right in the middle of general budget cuts”

resulted in many institutions remaining trapped in a kind of post-communist limbo, with the idea of modernisation seemingly hidden beyond a dusty glass ceiling. Báán's solution to the problems of transition was a radical overhaul. He says: "It was evident that it would not be enough to renew just a few things, nor to do it at a steady tempo. I was convinced that the entire paradigm of behaviour, the entire system, everything had to be changed, and fast."

Innovation in eastern European museums is normally associated with contemporary art, with governments keen to back "sexy" new projects and young arts professionals eager to manage them. Báán's efforts are, therefore, an unusual example of a significant focus on historical fine art. Central to the changes, he says, was finding the right

energetic young graduates. Government support for modernisation has been integral to his achievements, Báán says. But with such a strong agenda for change, the director has had his critics, as he readily admits. "Becoming an exemplary institution is, on the one hand, a source of responsibility and pride, but at the same time, it is also a source of serious conflicts with institutions and interest groups that are concerned with maintaining the status quo," he says. "We have had our share of experiences along these lines."

Opposition

One such experience came in February, when plans to create an underground extension to the museum were cancelled by Hungary's right-of-centre Fidesz government. Originally backed by the previous, left-of-centre

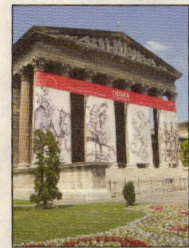
government, the plans had split opinion in Budapest, with more than 8,000 people said to have signed a petition opposing elements of the extension.

Those opposed to the plans, which Báán says will not now be revived, argued that above-ground improvements to the existing building would be a better use of government money. However, the director says that his plans for a museum quarter go far beyond the ideas of his critics. "In my opinion, this decision [to create the museum quarter] is absolutely independent of last year's petition," he says. "But if there was any relation between the government's decision and the petition, then we can't help but be thankful for the opponents, since they contributed in their own way to the possible implementation of a project of a much greater volume, and much wider scope of complexity, for the museum's development."

Cultural quarter

Báán's plans for his role as government commissioner for the proposed museum quarter mean that he is likely to have to face his critics again. Alongside renovating parts of the museum and the creation of at least one new museum building, Báán's core aim is to reintegrate the international and national sections of Hungary's state-owned art. Should his vision be realised, it would mean the closure of the Hungarian National Gallery in Buda Castle, one of Budapest's most famous landmarks, with its collection of historical Hungarian paintings relocated to the Museum of Fine Arts.

Báán can also expect anger regarding his project's estimated cost at a time of cuts, as well as questions about the feasibility of executing such a grand scheme. The director, though, says that the new museum quarter will act as



The museum's big shows have included Dürer in 2005

Biography

Born: in Budapest, 1961
1989-92: postgraduate scholarship at the Magyar Tudományos Akadémia (Hungarian Academy of Sciences), Budapest
2000-02: State Secretary at the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage
2004: appointed general director of Budapest's Museum of Fine Arts
2008: awarded the Officer's Cross Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary
2011: awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the Republic of France
1 October 2011: appointed government commissioner of Budapest's new museum quarter

both a cultural and an economic motor for Budapest's future vitality. "The Hungarian government is making use of various instruments for dealing with the critical economic situation, many of which are surprising, unusual and, for that very reason, ferociously debated," he says.

"Our prime minister is particularly fond of unconventional solutions, because he is convinced that only new approaches will offer a way out of the crisis. So it fits in perfectly with the logic of this government to launch a cultural mega-project of such emblematic significance right in the middle of general budget cuts: one which, besides its intrinsic value, also expresses an extremely important symbolic message—it is even more important to build at a time when there is no belief that it is possible."

Securing the money to create the museum quarter remains one of Báán's biggest challenges. Like many European museums, his institution has seen a decline in state support during the economic crisis. Since 2006, the museum has had an accumulated budget cut of almost 20% (around €700,000) and is likely to see further cuts in 2012 to the €3m it currently gets from the state.

Báán, though, is confident that his achievements will endure and the cultural quarter will happen. "I'm convinced that this is the beginning of an irreversible process," he says.

Asked how he will manage the challenges of his new commission, Báán says: "There will be questions... [particularly] why [we should] spend public funds on the museum quarter and not on something else. All I can do is present my case. In a free society, both the pros and the cons ought to be questioned. This is why the world of democracy is built upon 'good enough' projects and not perfect ones. And this is a 'good enough' project—indeed, a very good one." ■

Richard Unwin

THROCKMORTON FINE ART



MARIO ALGAZE
FORTY YEARS

November 10th - January 7th, 2012

Book available: MARIO ALGAZE, PORTFOLIO: \$125.00

Image

Slovenia gets a second taste of national art



LJUBLJANA. Slovenia's new Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (MSUM) is due to open in the capital on 26 November. Its planned October launch was delayed by a range of factors, including changes in the coalition government. A new branch of Ljubljana's Moderna Galerija, MSUM will be based in a former Yugoslav army barracks. Works on show will include the Artest 2000+ collection, covering international avant-garde art from the 1960s to the present, such as Alexander Kosolapov's *Lenin Coca-Cola*, 1980, left. The