

An Oral History of the Nov Lik and its Legacy

(Some Names Redacted)

Ned Beaman

Ned Beaman was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival to write a short story responding to Matthew Darbyshire's An Exhibition for Modern Living at Manchester Art Gallery. Showing 25th September 2015 – 10th January 2016, the exhibition was the artist's largest solo show to date and included ten of his sculptural environments alongside new work investigating the links between collections, objects and identity. The resulting story, An Oral History of the Nov Lik and its Legacy (Some Names Redacted), was performed by Ned at a special event as part of Manchester Literature Festival at Manchester Art Gallery on 16th October 2015.

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**Manchester
Art Gallery**



An Oral History of the Nov Lik and its Legacy (Some Names Redacted)

_____, **architect:** No one deserves more credit for how Britain looks today than Emil Zograf. The rediscovery of the Nov Lik began with him. A few weeks ago I was at the New London Awards lunch, and I was looking around at a room full of architects I've known for twenty years, and I thought to myself, 'So much of this can be traced back to those lectures at the Bartlett in the mid-90s.'

_____, **architect:** The Bartlett faculty was going through a staffing crisis at the time, otherwise I don't think he ever would have got hired, even as a part-time lecturer. He specialised in a subject nobody had ever heard of. And he wasn't exactly prepossessing. Famously, he had this box of old Soviet-era 35mm slides which he guarded with his life, and we used to say he looked as if he'd stepped out of one of his own slides: all speckled greys, a bit off-centre and out of focus. He smoked so much that even the undergraduates thought it was excessive. Also, he was very cantankerous. But he was compelling at the same time. And he was so passionate about the Nov Lik.

_____, **architect:** It's remarkable – frightening, actually – to think that the Nov Lik might have disappeared from history forever if not for one man turning up on Gower Street with his box of slides.

_____, **historian:** Sofia in the 1920s was not fertile ground for a movement like the Nov Lik. In contrast to Germany or the newborn USSR, there was no state funding available in Bulgaria, no institutions where these artists could find a home. The emissions of the broader European avant-garde arrived very late there, if they arrived at all. But when the right group of young people come together at the right time...

Kata Csernoch, from archive interview: My grandmother was dying. Although I had nursed her during her dementia, I knew she wouldn't leave me anything because she thought I was a hussy, so one night I crept into her bedroom to steal some of her jewelry. While I was rummaging in the drawer she woke up and grabbed my wrist. In a panic I told her I was the *nasledstvoto kradets* [the imp of Bulgarian folklore who steals or destroys the bequests of the dying]. She urged me to burn down the house with everyone inside.

Félix Gyöngyössi, from archive interview: In June of '22, with the proceeds from Kata's grandmother's jewelry, we bought a cowshed and converted it into our first studio and classroom. At last we could put some of our ideas into practice.

Pál Szaniszló, from archive interview: We believed in facades that oscillated, alternated, imbricated. We believed that homes should be as small as possible because large homes only add to the housework for the wife. We believed that materials should be inexpensive and disposable so that a building could evolve alongside its occupants. Stubborn materials just create the temptation to leave the building unchanged for decades, even centuries. Among architects, only an egotist believes that his design should be eternal.

Félix Gyöngyössi, from archive interview: All those words like 'coherence', 'purity', 'sincerity' – to us, those had the ring of dictatorship. Some artists said they wanted their work to be untainted by money – to us, denying exchange was like denying physics, even under socialism. As soon as I built my workshop, I sold the building to Nándor Megyik, who owned Megyik's, the first department store in Sofia. He leased it back to me at a discount in exchange for putting in a kiosk at the front where a girl sold cigarettes and yoghurt to passersby. That was Annamaria, who would become my second wife.

_____, **architect:** It was exhilarating – to find out that everything we'd been taught about 'good' architecture was already considered old-fashioned by these Bulgarians in the 1920s.

Kata Csernoch, from archive interview: We were tremendously excited by composite woods. We believed that new woods could be refined from trees in the same way that aluminium could be refined from bauxite. Any time we heard that a new composite wood had been brought to market in America, we would send off for a sample, and there was a great commotion in the workshops when the parcel arrived a few weeks later. If I close my eyes I can still feel the different textures under my fingertips. Homasote, Masonite, Fir-tex, Feltex, Nu-Wood, Beaver Board, Upson Board and so on – not forgetting my own favourite, Acousti-Celotex Cane Tile.

Félix Gyöngyössi, from archive interview: Of course, we also made great strides in our own experiments. That wall behind you, for instance – no doubt if you asked the manufacturers, they would tell you that veneers of that kind have only been developed in the last decade or so. But what we were doing in our workshop back in the 20's, with only the tools we could scrounge, was actually far more advanced.

_____, **architect:** MDF with an oak veneer was not at all in fashion [in the mid-90s]. We were all snobby about it. But when we saw what the Nov Lik designers had done with composite woods, we realised that in fact MDF could be a beautiful, timeless material.

Kata Csernoch, from archive interview: We put the Bulgarian flag everywhere we could. Not because we were nationalists, but, on the contrary, to tame it, or at least to try. Of course, we brightened the colours a little.

Pál Szaniszló, from archive interview: We had no choice but to develop new paints because we dreamed of a colour palette that the paints of the time could not make real. We wanted the brightest possible pinks, yellows, cyans, limes.

_____, **architect:** Some of Zograf's slides were black and white photos that had been hand-tinted, but he told us they didn't come close to capturing the real colours. Instead, he would bring in some little object that he'd come across in the street and hold it up in front of the class to help us imagine. He had a real scavenger's eye. A friend of mine claimed she once saw him pick up a half-eaten apple that someone had left on top of a junction box and finish it in two bites. The core and everything. He didn't even break his stride, supposedly.

Kata Csernoch, from archive interview: In 1925 we pooled our spare cash so that Félix could travel to Weimar as an emissary to the Bauhaus.

Félix Gyöngyössi, from archive interview: When I arrived in Weimar I found out that the Bauhaus had moved to Dessau almost a year earlier. So I hitchhiked to Dessau. Gropius refused to see me. I waited around for a while but nobody would even look at the portfolio we'd compiled. I didn't want to go home with nothing to show for the journey so I had no choice but to steal a table lamp.

Kata Csernoch, from archive interview: After studying the lamp, we produced several copies, but with slightly altered proportions, and in metallic fuschia.

Félix Gyöngyössi, from archive interview: By the way, we were no prudes at the Nov Lik, but what I saw of those Bauhaus students... They should have just called it the Fickhaus [Fuck House]. I mean, it was like a monkey enclosure.

_____, **architect:** In meetings with developers, we would describe our plans as modern, eye-catching, cost-effective. What we definitely didn't say was that they were inspired by a passionate fealty to an almost forgotten Bulgarian Modernist movement! We knew that would just scare the money away. Or at least we thought we knew. But, over the years, the Nov Lik revival spread beyond the architecture profession. These days, you'll sometimes hear

a client suggest a detail which everyone in the room knows is classic Nov Lik, although no one will actually say it out loud. Even now it tends to remain unspoken.

_____, **architect:** Among the London political classes, I think the Nov Lik has become a bit of a shibboleth for anyone concerned with urbanism.

_____, **architect:** I get so angry about the condescension of the architecture critics. They seem to assume our designs are aesthetically vacuous, philosophically vacuous, just because we don't advertise our values. But if they could have heard the debates we used to have after every Zograf seminar, and the debates we still have to this day... My engagement with the legacy of the Nov Lik has been the most rigorous and all-consuming intellectual project of my life. The critics complain that our buildings are too blatantly a product of the economic regime in which they were conceived. Oh, as if you and all your precious attitudes are any different?

_____, **historian:** As an active group of artists and students, they outlasted the Bauhaus. But their legacy was far less robust. It was almost entirely erased by the wars and revolutions that followed.

_____, **architect:** We decided to celebrate our graduation show with a trip to Sofia. Zograf kept trying to discourage us. He said we wouldn't find anything. He was right. We didn't. Except Kamenitza for 20 stotinki a pint. Sometimes when I burp I can still taste it.

_____, **architect:** The best way I can think of to describe what a lot of regenerated neighbourhoods of Britain look like today is a kind of alternate 1930s Sofia in which all of Nov Lik's ideas were realised. It's very moving to me.

Kata Csernoch, from archive interview: I am at peace with the fact that our work left no trace. As if the *nasledstvoto kradets* had come for our estate.

_____, **architect:** Nobody who was actually taught by Emil Zograf could possibly have any patience for the gossip that started flying around after his disappearance. So his origins were obscure. So the exact nature of his relationship with the Nov Lik was obscure. Who cares? He was from the Balkans. His past was turbid because those were turbid times. Just looking into your eyes you could see he'd lived through real history in a way that none of us in those seminars could even imagine.

_____, **architect:** The instant I heard the word 'hoax', I would always just say, 'OK, end of conversation.' Ridiculous.

_____, **architect:** I don't usually tell this story. Not long after we started the firm, I went out to Bethnal Green for a site visit. They were in the process of demolishing an old clothes factory. I wandered away to take a phone call and I was just sort of fiddling around in the rubble with my toe when I saw it. A slide. It was cracked but I recognised it as soon as I picked it up. I swear it was one of Zograf's. It was coated in what seemed to be some kind of mucus. Baffling. I still have it.

Félix Gyöngyössi, from archive interview: Forget the origins of things. They constrain and mislead. That was our credo.

Pál Szaniszló, from archive interview: I wanted our ideas to be as ephemeral as our materials. They were for the present moment only. That's why we never took any photographs of our work. That's why I've never given an interview in my life and I never will.

_____, **architect:** I wish more than anything that I could have met Kata Csernoch or Pál Szaniszló or Félix Gyöngyössi before they died. Although I don't know what I could have said to them.

Félix Gyöngyössi, from archive interview: I suppose your fantasy would be that we would be grateful to you for what you've done with our ideas. Instead we would be impatient. The project is not yet complete. We know you have so much more money, so much more influence, than we ever did.

Pál Szaniszló, from archive interview: Anyway, it's all wrong. Your magentas are too timid and pale. Your composite woods are too heavy and organic. Your bricolage is too fusty and monotone. You must go further if you are to honour our legacy.

_____, **architect:** We've done the best we can. I promise you that.

Félix Gyöngyössi, from archive interview: The purity of your intentions, though indisputable, is of no relevance.

Kata Csernoch, from archive interview: Go back to Sofia and lay a thousand orchids on my grave.

_____, **architect:** But –

Kata Csernoch, from archive interview: No arguments. If I hear another word out of turn it will be two thousand.

_____, **historian:** When I agreed to take part I assumed my role in this oral history was going to be much more substantial. I have many corrections to make.

Emil Zograf, lecturer: [a faint, unidentifiable sound, like a projector switching slides, or the grinding of oversized teeth]