The new building
Towards the end of the 19th century, the area of today’s Szabadság square was occupied by a single colossal edifice called Neu-gebäude (New Building), designed by Isidore Marcello Canevale in 1786 during the reign of Emperor Joseph II. The building functioned as a prison during the Franco-Prussian War, was later used as a prison, and after the defeat of the 1848-1849 War of Independence it became a prison for Hungarian patriots, and many were executed here. Among these martyrs to the cause of liberty was Count Lajos Batthyány, prime minister of Hungary’s first independent government. In 1851 Lajos Kossuth, Mihály Táncsics, Dániel Irányi and their associates who had escaped the reprisals by fleeing abroad were all hung in effigy in this building. Thus, understandably, the square that stood free after the Neu-gebäude was torn down was named ‘Szabadság’ (Liberty) and the streets leading into it were named after the martyrs and heroes of the War of Independence.

By the end of the 19th century, the building had become a symbol of detested foreign oppression, like the Bastille in Paris. Following the Compromise, the New Building was to serve as a printing press, then an orphanage, but it was eventually demolished in 1897. In the course of the 19th century, the city became so densely built-up that in the period following the Compromise, the neighbourhood of the infamous Neugebäude was considered as part of the city centre, and eventually it had to be demolished. Its place made way for a completely new quarter.

The building site was divided into 28 plots and offered for sale with a thirty-year tax concession. The buyers included the Austro-Hungarian Bank, which had no headquarters in Budapest, and the Hungarian Royal Postal Savings Association. The subsequently demolished headquarters of the Budapest branch of the Austro-Hungarian Bank on József nádor square was unsuit- ed for the purposes of a central bank, and so a decision was adopted to erect a new building. Szabadság square, a central area earmarked for development but still undeveloped, proved to be an excellent site.

The tender
The Austro-Hungarian Bank invited tenders for planning the Bank’s Budapest headquar- ters in the summer of 1900. In strict observance of the dualist system, eight Hungarian and eight Austrian architects were invited to submit a tender. The Hungarians includ- ed Ignác Alpár, Lipót Baumhorn, Flóris Korb, József Hubert, Albert Körössy, Ödön Lechner, Artúr Meiningg and Ernő Schannen, with the Austrians represented by Fellner and Helm- er, Franz Freiherr von Krauss, Karl König, Friedrich Schachchner, Ludwig Richter, Lud- wig Baumann and Otto Wagner. The panel of judges consisted of two Austrian architects (Christian Ulrich and Emil Förster) and two Hungarian architects (Gyöző Czigler and István Pucher) and government and bank dig- nitaries. According to the decision made in May 1901, the judges unanimously awarded the first prize to Ignác Alpár. The press and Hungarian architects celebrated the result as a national triumph over Austrian architec- ture. In Austria, the professionals were sur- prised by the Hungarian success, as they had been certain of an Austrian victory.

The little that was published in the Aus- trian press about the event, it was, nevertheless, fair: it was generally conceded that Ignác Alpár deserved the award. Another building, namely the Stock Exchange, was already under construction at this time under Alpár’s plans in Szabadság square, and it is very likely that the judges were influ- enced by the need to maintain the stylistic unity of the two dominant buildings in the square.

Unfortunately, the plans submitted in the competition have been lost. The only one we have knowledge of from the maga- zine ‘Hungarian Design Contests’ is the one made by Ignác Alpár. As far as the other plans...
are concerned, we can only make speculations based on contemporary publications.

Construction of the Budapest headquarters of the Austro-Hungarian Bank started in the spring of 1902, and was completed within three years, in the spring of 1905. It was a monumental structure with a palatial facade, with columns 12 metres high and 1.5 metres in diameter, spanning two stories, finished at a cost of 4.5 million crowns compared to the projected cost of 3 million.

The designer

Ignác Alpár (1855, Pest – 1928, Zurich) was a great Hungarian master of the late eclectic-style architecture. He was born in 1855 under the name of Ignác Schöckl into a craftsman’s family in Pest. He did not fare well in school and after the fifth grade he was sent to serve as an apprentice to a stone mason. He started to work under the guidance of Alajos Hauszmann in 1873, then transferred to an academy in Berlin (Schinkel Bauakademie) to continue his studies. In his first year there, he already participated in academic contests and won several first prizes.

In 1877 he was named librarian of the Hungarian Society of Berlin, created for Hungarian students, then was elected secretary and finally chairman. In 1880 he was awarded the Schinkel Medal of the Association of Berlin Architects. He returned to Budapest in 1881 upon the invitation of Hauszmann and spent seven years working with Steindl and Hauszmann as an assistant lecturer. Then he decided to go independent and opened up his own office. The six years he spent in the German capital significantly affected his style for a lifetime. Contemporaries and critics spoke of him as ‘a difficult person’, full of contradictions, but his works leave no doubt as to his talent. Instead of the grace of neo-Renaissance, Alpár’s architecture is characterised by monumental feats of late historicism, an amalgam of Greco-Roman and ancient Eastern stylistic elements. Speaking in 1916 to the Austrian Association of Professional Engineers and Architects, Alpár summed up his artistic credo as follows: ‘Sound technology, i.e. fine craftsmanship; conscientious management, i.e. strict accounting; and fitting the building to its environment, to the townscape, in as monumental a form as possible.’

In addition to the central bank building, Ignác Alpár designed several other financial institutions; for example, he started the design of the building of the Hungarian Commercial Bank of Pest on Franz Josef square (today Roosevelt square, housing the Ministry of Interior). Zsigmond Quittner continued the work on the plans and Alpár was again in charge from the second phase. Other works of Alpár include the Hungarian General Credit Bank (currently Ministry of Finance) located on József nádor square; the First National Savings Association of Pest (headquarters of the Budapest Stock Exchange until 2007), on the corner of Váci street and Deák Ferenc street; and the Budapest Stock and Commodity Exchange on the other side of Szabadság square (housing the Hungarian Television until July 2009). Alpár designed a historical complex called Vajdahunyad Castle in Városliget (City Park) for exhibitions and special events on the occasion of the millennium of the Hungarian State in 1896, which has been the home of the Museum of Agriculture for some years. Alpár was a prolific architect; in addition to the financial institutions, he designed over thirty primary and secondary schools, a university and several churches. He designed a total of approximately 120-130 buildings (the exact figure is not known) spread throughout the country.

The external decoration of the building

Alpár designed the facade to exude an aura of strength and serenity. The building’s two main facades (one facing Bank street, the other Szabadság square) are asymmetrical. The one facing Szabadság square is more ornate, as it was designed to complement the Stock Exchange on the other side of the square.

The building is illustrated by the reliefs of sculptor Károly Sennyei, starting at the corner of Kiss Ernő street and Szabadság square, with the following scenes: smelting the ore and casting bars of precious metal; coining money; printing paper money; designing and stamping paper money; arts, science and silversmithing; animal husbandry, agriculture and industry; Phoenician, Egyptian, Arab and Jewish trade; medieval banking; and mining for ore. The keystones of windows on the first floor symbolise different nations, alluding to the international nature of banking. The two stone figures on the balcony above the main entrance are the work of István Tóth; the statues on the parapet of the Bank street and Hold street corner is the work of József Róna; while the statue on the parapet facing Szabadság square is the work of Béla Markup. The facades overlooking Hold street and Kiss Ernő street are considerably more modest. The latter is the shortest street in Budapest.
courtyard facade in the building. Items of Art Nouveau architectural decoration are credit-
ed to Géza Maróti, while richly carved doors and door frames are the work of Alajos Michl.

Each floor has a characteristic ornamental motif of its own: the ground floor is decorated with wheat sheaves, the first floor with fleur-de-lis and thistles, while the third-
floor support stones, stair handles, stuccoes, door carvings and lamp-posts display horse-chestnuts. The secession-style plant and flower-patterned mosaic tiles in the foy-
ers and passages on the ground and upper floors were made by József Walla of Törők-
bálnint. The wrought-iron rails were designed by Ede Alpár and the wheat-motif light fix-
tures are the work of Rudolf Kiszling.

Original plan of operation
In addition to interior architectural details, Alpár laid emphasis on meeting advanced functional requirements. He explained this as follows: ‘When I started drafting the plans, I soon realised that the task I undertook dif-
fered from the buildings that transacted ordi-

The internal decoration of the building
As visitors move upstairs on any of the stairs, they can admire the original windows of Mik-
sa Róth. With coloured windows and wood-
work, the main staircase has the most ornate