

# WOODEN PORTALS IN THE HISTORICAL TOWNSCAPE - CASTELLANY OF SOPRON -

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*HU ISSN 1418-7108: HEJ Manuscript no.: ARC-050919-A*

## Abstract

The wooden architectural and construction - joinery monuments became during the times historically united with the specific buildings, old quarters and are now inseparable parts of them. The wooden architectural details are such special local values, which create a special atmosphere, a unique and unrepeatable character for the historic face of the town by joining and overspanning rows of streets. The tasteful wooden portals contribute to the conservation of the spatial and social balance of the quarter by providing the corresponding usage of the street.

The picturesque atmosphere, the unmatched 'couleur locale' of the townscape in Sopron, would not be complete without decorative wooden stalls surrounding the old castellany (called Várkerület). Wooden structures in public areas are testimony to the city, the era and the society. Their structural and aesthetic quality add much more to the appearance of a street or city than these sensitive, ephemeral character refers. The shop windows, whose XIX. century wooden characteristics were becoming fashionable worldwide, very quickly spread in the commercial districts of affluent cities. The popularity of glassed wooden frames self-evidently lay in the advertising value.

## *The commerce of historical Várkerület*

When the outer city walls were built around Sopron, pressure eased on the inner zones and trader could settle along the moat. Craftsmen (amourers, harness-makers, ropemakers, toolsmiths, turners) were the first to set up wooden work-stalls here. Later, starting from the 1740's, a fully fledged commercial district developed along the moat. The city leaders couldn't bear these constructions, except those in the jesuit grammar school district where they strictly forbade any such works. Cooking in the wooden structures was also forbidden (1747). The construction works around the front castle gate area were in progress between 1761 and 1784<sup>1</sup>. Twelve-eighteen feet - wide shop system developed near the busy market. By the end of the 18th century the castle ring from 'Festő' lane to the church of Dominic was built, but a part of it remained unused. Corn market, which had once been a market, became wedged between two buildings. True to tradition, weekly market days were regularly held within the Sopron castle ring even in the 19th century. This role was gradually adopted by the street shops. The shops were originally workshops in the back part of the house of some rich merchants, tanners and textile makers. These backyard workplaces originally opened into the Ikva<sup>2</sup>, then they later extended to face the street, and they transformed into medium sized shops. In the middle of the 18th century adjacent shops formed a full circle and the Sopron commercial district, so came Várkerület into being.

## *Formation of wooden portals*

In the 19th century, urban Europe could not accommodate market places any longer. The public market places and production areas slowly transformed into continuously operating, specialised shops, and in the 19th century the appearance of the street changed when bigger business centres, salons and department stores arrived. The first local department store opened in the capital in 1849<sup>3</sup>. More significant local cities

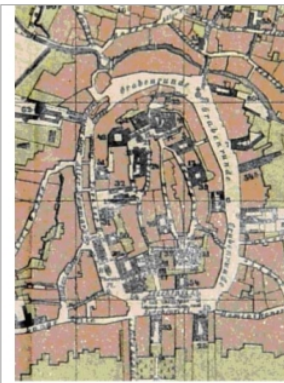
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<sup>1</sup>Historical and architectural researches of Sopron. 1951.8.p.

<sup>2</sup>Historical and architectural researches of Sopron. 1951.10.p.

<sup>3</sup>Császár László: Buildings of trade. 1995.146.p.



**Picture 1.** Várkerület in 1885



**Picture 2.** Wooden portals



**Picture 3.** Part of the Várkerület at the turn of the century (right) and in about 1910 (left)

like Sopron quickly entered the race and followed the examples of Budapest, Vienna, and Paris as fashion dictated<sup>4</sup>. One after the other new structures were built that had glass shop windows. In the 1950's work started on the transformation of shops and businesses. Dozens of drawings of shopdoors, breakages, shop-front reconstructions, forming of portals are kept in the Town Archives of Sopron. The owners of the small shops in Várkerület bought the houses in their neighbourhood and joined them to theirs thus three to four times bigger shops were created. (Some of the smaller shops remained but the bigger ones were destroyed in the second world war.)

At first goods were displayed in the shop windows, and later this display area became the key part of the business, and later it occupied the whole front area. The decoration of the shop window was carried out with extra care, particularly those shops dealing in fashionable goods. It was common for business people to invest two thirds of their money equipping their shops and it was easy to visually entice the customer.

The first phase of the development of the display cabinet was the legged glass cabinet standing in front of the shop. The photographer's cabinet, made in 1900 shows similar transformation. But this cabinet, standing in the open, obstructed movement as it often stood at the entrance to the shop. The display cabinet developed as a mixture of the shop window and the glass cabinet which, secured to the stone walls of the house, rapidly spread and became portal.

In the 19th century ready made goods rather than designer made became the norm. A new trend developed in which shopping became not only a Sunday passtime, but an everyday activity.

From the 19th century floors were added to single-storey buildings or new ones were built in place of the small shops. Rows of houses developed following Nandor Handler's designs. In the city centre, stores opened on the ground floor of blocks of flats built on plots of similar size<sup>5</sup>. (picture 3) The buildings in the Várkerület are parcelled together extremely tightly. The narrow front end of the double-storey buildings are only with three-, four- or five axis. Business premises seem to have priority over residential ones in ratio. Most of the ground floor is occupied by businesses. Narrow brick pillars were erected on the entire space of the ground floor and between these were installed wide wooden portals (wooden frames) with glass. The facades on the upper floors did not have such wide windows. Instead they had window

<sup>4</sup>Mumford, Lewis 1985. 404.p.

<sup>5</sup>Winkler, Gábor 1988. 94.p.



Picture 4. János Fend's 1859 plan of a wooden portal

frames with noticeably protruding window sills<sup>6</sup>.

The blocks of flats in Várkerület had businesses operating on the ground-floor, which changed the whole movement regime in the building. The entrances to business premises and to houses all opened into the street. In the interest of the business, an extremely uncomfortable narrow door was left. The line of doors, entrances and display cabinets closely placed together in the facade became an independent motif in the streets. Single- and multi-storey buildings built at different times and in different styles had this same pedestal of wood and glass. The arrival of the wooden portal received varying comments in those times. There were those whose opinion was that this only made the facade unpleasant because *'it seemed as if the whole structure of the building was resting on the frail wooden frames, which gave a bad impression of the façade'*<sup>7</sup>. Besides, because the streets were narrow, the façade above the sills to the shop windows were completely obscured by these sills. After 1910 traders in the Várkerület area contributed to the planting of trees in front of the shops. They ceased to oppose it and to believe that these areas would become hideouts for thieves. The area in front of business premises therefore blossomed and the whole planning of shop windows improved. In some parts of the Várkerület old remains of wooden portals can still be seen today, which gives a glimpse into the appearance of the old streets. The picture of such streets was a montage of a 4-5 metre wide lane and an extended shop-window. The sequence of structures each with its own unique characteristics unified the street which otherwise was made up of a diversity of buildings. The effect was further enhanced by the use of colourful canvas shades above the pavement to protect against the sun. These shades were 2-2.5 metres wide and created a pleasant shopping environment.

The licences to his glass display cabinets are from the middle of the 19th century. Plans for portals were prepared by both architects and joiners. János Fend was a distinguished joiner who made a series of motifs and wooden portals in Várkerület (picture 4.). Fend's historical decorations appeared on his other works, among them furniture and castle fittings for which he became one of the most well-known joiner in Transdanubia<sup>8</sup>.

Two kinds of wooden portals were present in the building of Sopron: the shop windows and the doors. The shop-windows are similar to the traditional window structures, but these have a wide glass surface and they were erected to be plane-level with the walls. The doors had a more compact structure. They were framed-in by the pedestal, pillar, and sill which were made by the joiner. The door, which protruded outwards, was a distinctly separate entity which made the shop area (which included the pillars) more visible. The wooden portals remained, to a certain extent, an entity separate from the residential block itself and in some cases made the building more decorative. Nevertheless, this architectural approach was useful in making the 'shop-window market' beautify the downtown.

### **Structural characteristics**

The development of the models of wooden portals was determined, first and foremost, by the entrance area to the shop, especially if the shop itself did not occupy the full length of the wall, otherwise the structure followed the full width of the lower part of the facade. In the latter case, the distribution of the portal matched the separations in the building and were in line with the doors. In both approaches the eye caught the complete picture of the building.

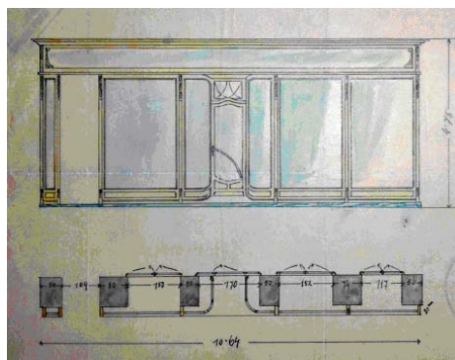
<sup>6</sup>Winkler, Gábor 1988. 94.p.

<sup>7</sup>Szabó Jenő 1884.

<sup>8</sup>Report of Chamber of Industry 1878.92.p.



Picture 5. - Várkerület 21. expert joiner Antal Schwartz's 1858 wooden portal plan



Picture 6. - Várkerület 51. Gyula Rosenthal's 1908 wooden portal plan

The shop-windows covered sometimes the whole ground-floor, in such cases the main entrance of the building became also part of the composition. *"There were often wooden façades next to one another along whole streets in various sizes and ornamentation"*<sup>9</sup>. For an easier access of the entrances they tried to avoid steps before the doors and even if the floor level of the shop was not the same as that of the pavement, at most only one small step was applied.

Later the windows of the shops were tailored larger and so the pedestals became lower and lower<sup>10</sup>. The opening for the shop-window was made low so that the internal room could easily be viewed and thus the pedestals (called "knee-beaters" at the time) that is the lower edge of the glazed shop-windows were designed to be not higher than 40 - 50 cm. For even lower pedestals a brass protecting rod was installed before the glazing. (Picture 6.) The upper line of wooden portals usually also reached the parapet of the windows of the first floor, the average height of the entry doors was 2.70 m, and the width was 85 - 90 cm. The show - cases were replaced from time to time: *"the next shop-owner, if he can, will build his gate higher as that of his neighbour and will use more ornamentation not caring the façades of the upper floors"*<sup>11</sup>.

The shop-door and shop-window openings were laced by a triple I beam. (Picture 8.) In the window design of Schneider Márton the distance of internal and external casement sashes is 70 cm. If the bearing wall was not thick enough to create a broad shop-window room, the glazed structure was enlarged towards the inside of the shop or it was enlarged towards the street matching the protruded ledge. (Picture 7.)

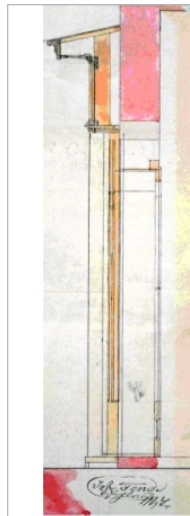
There was a show-case among the show-cases at the castellany which was protruded from the plane of the façade by 30 cm thereby creating a 70 cm deep shop-window room. Another feature of the structures is a heavy ledge sometimes protruding by even 55 cm. In such cases the support was provided by richly carved wooden ancones.

Shop-window glasses were in the distance of the wall thickness from each other, for thin walls this distance was larger. The outside window glazing was divided to as few parts as possible and the use of

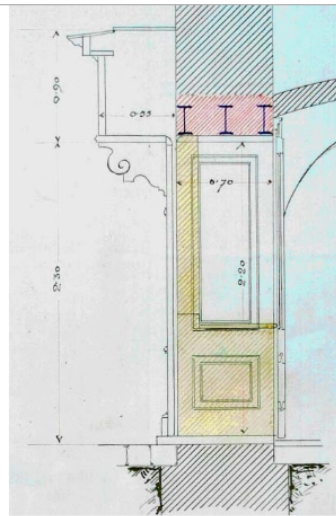
<sup>9</sup>FRECSKAY János 1883

<sup>10</sup>FRECSKAY János: Construction Joinery. Budapest. Published by Atheneum R. Társulat 1883.110.p.

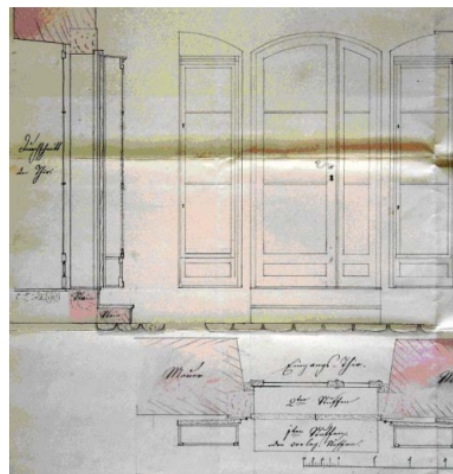
<sup>11</sup>FRECSKAY János 1883



Picture 7. János Fend 1859



Picture 8. Márton Schneider 1911



Picture 9. Shop-window case fixed on a door

ribs was avoided. They could be permanently closed or only the upper casements were opening, and that was preferable in winter as frost on the glass could thereby be avoided. The internal window behind the shown goods was covered by transparent curtains in order to allow enough light to pass to the inside of the shop<sup>12</sup>. Racks and platforms were used as furniture of the shop-windows and the internal walls were covered with mirrors. If the shop only had a shop door, small shop-window cases were fixed on the wings. (Picture 10.)

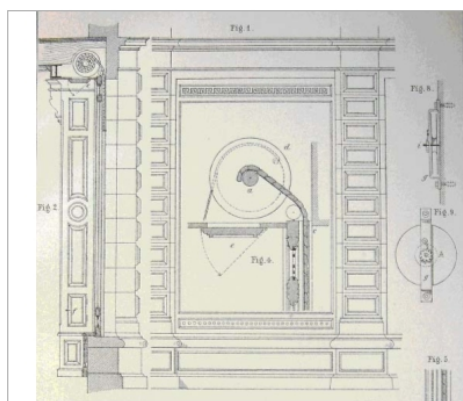
### *Additional structures*

The glasses of the shop-windows were protected against breaking-in by window-shutters and rolling wooden shutters. There were two ways of installing the shutters. In the first case the shutter axle was contained in a ledge-case protruding from the plane of the façade, in the other case the shutter was hidden in a shutter-case below the cross-beams. The use of the first or second solution depended on the height of the door or window as for low openings only the first version could be realised.

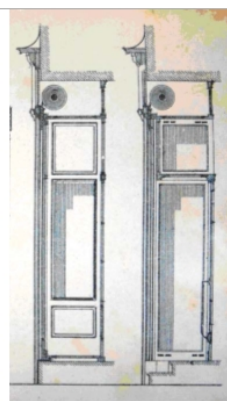
At the beginning of the 20. century the shutters were basically screening joinery structures. The wooden shutters (armour-shutters) increased the breaking safety of glass surfaces with thick and rigid lamellas and a tensioning linkage of bars. The rolling axle was hidden in the shutter-case formed as a ledge. (Pictures 10.-11.) The operation of the structure was enabled by the cooperation of guide rails,

<sup>12</sup>FRECKAS János 1883

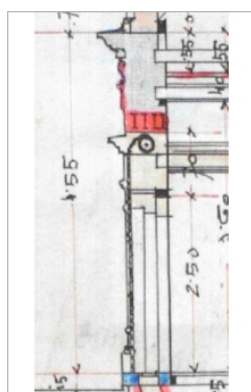




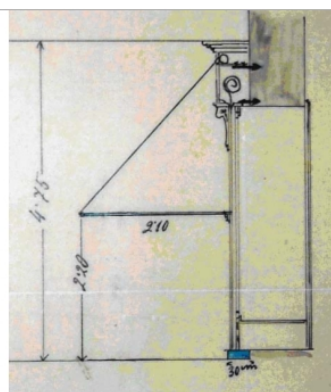
**Picture 10.** Arrangement of a shutter (Breyman II. Holz, 6. Aufl. 1900.)



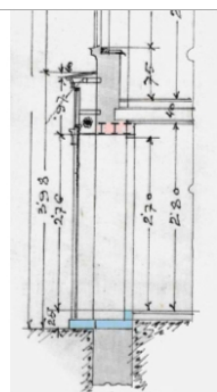
**Picture 11.** Cross section of a shop-window by a German sample book after 1910



**Picture 12.** Schöberl Mihály 1905



**Picture 13.** Rosenthal Gyula (an architect of Vienna) 1908 „Rollbalken, Portale und Sonnenplachen“



**Picture 14.** Schöberl Mihály 1911

**Cross sections of ledges functioning as shutter – cases**

stay rods, harnesses, harness spools<sup>13</sup>.

Not only the pull-down shop-window shutters were hidden behind the ledge, but also the rolled-up shop-blinds. (Picture 13.) At the beginning of the 20. century the shop-blinds became important features of broad shopping streets and in case of the shops in the castellany no construction licences were provided without them. The more, if the shop blind was not installed, 30 crown fine had to be paid<sup>14</sup>. According to §329. of the construction regulation of the epoch *“the lowest part of the shop-blind or firm lamp shall be at a height of 2.30 m from the pavement”*<sup>15</sup>. The ledge was an important element of the face of the shop as the name of the shop and/or the owner appeared there. The typography was not unified, various types of ornamented and advertisement letters were used. The inscriptions were also installed on larger shop-blinds.

Wooden portals were completed by screening structures, screening canopies and wooden shutters. Screening canvas canopies, wooden shutters, solid or lamellar louver-boards became decisive elements of façades. The quantity of incoming light could be controlled by screening canopies and thus the overheating of the internal room was reduced. The canopies had characteristic light colours as darker shades having light absorbing features could cause further thermal load.

Wooden louver-boards were solid wooden boards or not movable lamellar frame structures with gaps. Louver-boards could even be directly bound on window-cases or on the external wall surface or eventually on a special mounting case. Shutters and louver-boards were most weather-affected joinery structures

<sup>13</sup>MOLNÁRNÉ POSCH, Paula (szerk.) 2002

<sup>14</sup>SVL. X.111/1911

<sup>15</sup>SVL. X.111/1911

and so their production and maintenance required professional knowledge.

### *Saving and protection of wooden portals*

Wooden construction details disappear from our towns unperceived. Street furniture, pavilions and old doors, windows, gates and wooden portals are most exposed to decay. In historic town centres the wooden portals deserve protection. Shop portals and shop-windows matching the ancient environment can be created by observing some rules. Such a rule can be the unification of the ledge heights that is setting the maximum and minimum heights, creating the harmony of the advertisement letters, typography and colour usage. It is recommended to use dark brown or green colours for painting the wooden elements and to keep the ratio of the façades and glass surfaces. A special question is the usage of shop-blinds as they cover a substantial part of the façades so that they cannot be seen by the pedestrians and they wear off comparatively quickly. Their use is advisable also at present as they are practical elements of the protection of the wooden structures against the radiation of the sun. Besides, it is unquestionable that this solution is useful as the "shop-blind-range" on the row of shops at the castellany once designated an affectionate shopping route.

During the Second World War Sopron experienced nine air attacks<sup>16</sup>. The castellany was heavily damaged during the bombings in 1944, 65 architectural monuments and houses of architectural monument character were ruined and damaged and the row of old merchant houses was broken. Behind the ruins a comparatively intact section of the town wall was found with the big roundel and three smaller semi-circle shaped bastions which were not hidden again by new buildings by the town leadership.

At the place there is today a vacancy which is valuable regarding the history of the town. At this point the arc of the castellany, the original streamline is broken. The original row of portals cannot be created again, but their renewal at other sections of the castle circle is justified.

The ground for the historic conservation and revival of the old atmosphere of the castellany of Sopron was laid in the sixties by the façade revival plan of VÁTERV by observing the regulations of the architectural monument committee and the construction department for shaping the shop portals. At present there is the everlasting problem of the inordinate firm signs and advertisements disturbing the look of the streets. The special regulation to curb the abuses in this field proved to be non-effective.

The historic face of the street means a coherent, familiar area with a lively commercial and cultural life for the pedestrians. The rows of shop-windows around the houses in the town centre enrich the look of the streets by a specific character, and primarily these structures are sighted by the pedestrians. For the reconstruction of the wooden portals the characteristic dimensions, forms, colouring and use of materials should be honoured.

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| Picture 1. | Castellany 1885. Map detail. Map collection of the Museum of Sopron T21.   |
| Picture 2. | Castellany. Wooden portals. Postcard. Private collection of WINKLER Gábor  |
| Picture 3. | Castellany. Detail at the turn of the 20. century (to the right: GÖNCZ, József-BOGNÁR, Béla Vol. II. 2003 and around 1910, to the left: Postcard. Private collection of WINKLER Gábor                |
| Picture 4. | Designer: Fend János, master joiner. 1859. SVL. XXIV. 4790. Várkerület (Castellany) 43. Shop portal design. (Draft: paper, ink, water colour, 36,2x26,8cm)   |
| Picture 5. | Designer: Schwartz Antal, master woodworker. Design of a wooden portal. Várkerület Castellany 21. 1858. SVL. XXIV. 4423. Várkerület (Castellany) 21. (Draft: paper, ink, water colour, 25,8x36,8 cm) |

<sup>16</sup>Boronkai Pál: Reconstruction of Sopron 1960. XIV. /1.

- Picture 6. Designer: Rosenthal Gyula, master builder of Vienna. SVL. X.75/908. Várkerület (Castellany) 51. Design of a shop portal. 1908. (Draft: tracing-paper, china-ink, water colour)
- Picture 7. Designer: Fend János master joiner. 1859. SVL. XXIV. 4790. Várkerület (Castellany) 43. Design of a shop portal. (Draft: paper, ink, water colour, 36,2x26,8cm) Detail
- Picture 8. Designer: Schneider Márton master builder. 1911. SVL. X.11/911 Várkerület (Castellany) 18. Design of a shop portal. (Draft: paper, china-ink, coloured ink, 63x33,5cm) Detail
- Picture 9. Shop-window case mounted on door. Designer: Rösler Flórián master woodworker. 1860. SVL. XXV. 11742. Várkerület (Castellany) 29. Shop portal design. (Draft: cardboard, ink, water colour, 52,4x35,7 cm) Detail
- Picture 10. Location of the shutter, Breymann II. Holz, 6. Aufl. 1900.
- Picture 11. Section of a shop-window in a German sample book around 1910. Drittes Handbuch für die Bautischlerei. Nürnberg. (year not known)
- Picture 12. Designer: Schöberl Mihály, master builder. 1905. SVL. X.140/905. Várkerület (Castellany) 31. Shop portal design. (Draft: tracing-paper, china-ink, coloured ink, 20,8x33,2 cm) Detail
- Picture 13. Designer: Rosenthal Gyula master builder of Vienna. SVL. X.75/908. Várkerület (Castellany) 51. Shop portal design. 1908. (Draft: tracing-paper, china-ink, water colour)
- Picture 14. Designer: Schöberl Mihály master builder. 1911. SVL. X.128/911. Várkerület (Castellany) 31. Shop portal design. (Draft: tracing-paper, china-ink, coloured ink, 20,8x33,8 cm) Detail

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