

Katalin Pallai:

Historic Areas : Destroyed or Destructive

or

The Role of Heritage in the Metropolitan Development of Budapest in
the 19th and 20th century

The Historical Metropolis - A Hidden Potential

Conference in Krakow 26-29 May 1996.

1. Abstract:

The title of this conference, from the many possible constituting elements of the development of the Central-European metropolis, chose to focus on the heritage, and its protection as a potential for development. I suppose most of the contributions will concentrate on the positive aspects of the given topic. At conferences we tend to speak about difficult methodological questions and great conservation projects. Using the example of Budapest, I would also like to speak about decay and destruction in the most pragmatic sense.

In the last decades our concept of monuments has been vastly enlarged, both in the chronological and typological sense. The conservation movement has greatly strengthened and public consciousness has considerably increased. Economic value of the heritage is more and more acknowledged, and some efficient marketing technics were also introduced by the heritage industry to exploit them better. All these can feed unlimited optimism about the possible survival of old districts and structures.

My argument will be twofold in this short paper:

- the quantity of the preserved buildings and urban areas can not necessarily grow in accordance with the acceptance of their age, aesthetic, cultural and historic value,
- in case the right balance between conservation and redevelopment is not found, the attempt to preserve can become the cause of a destructive process for the whole city.

To illustrate my message, and according to the periods, emphasized at this conference, I will examine two periods from the long history of Budapest:

1. Budapest after 1870: when the change in the city was in harmony with the new political situation after the Historical Compromise. On the contrary to many criticism of unscrupulous destruction, this period symbolizes for me a balance between destruction and heritage¹ creation. In an incredibly prospering period, the physical frame of modern living, the industrial age metropolis was created in Pest. During the same period, the monuments of Buda were transformed into the symbols of the accepted and wished past. Contemporaries made their courageous statement, they clearly redeveloped Pest, so their construction through destruction created the conditions for the pulsing life of the city, while in Buda the purist reconstruction of the old buildings, created the heritage, the needed historical coding of the monuments, for the reinforcement of their identity.
2. Budapest after 1990: At this period the realistic limits of forced conservation and its necessary balance with economically viable investment will be examined. The case of the already derelict living areas, with architectural elements of minor values, where there is hardly any chance of economic and social development through conservation, will be taken to illustrate, that benevolent, but unrealistic attempts can be destructive, both locally, and in the context of the whole city as well.

My conclusion will be that because of the contemporary, extremely wide concept of historic values, in the case of the historic areas of minor heritage, a more organic inclusion of the conservation into the general city policy is necessary. And for the rehabilitation of these parts of the city, preservation can not be as unquestionable and privileged as in the case of the major sites, but only one factor of city policy. So a “strategic conservation planning” has to find the right limits of preservation, to make preservation attempts realistic, so that not much more than necessary would be lost.

¹ The term heritage is used here in a broader sens than simply a stock of monuments - like for example in the Council of Europe documents - or their preservation. I mean by heritage the interpretation of a perceived past. It means when from an old building or area, through the valuation of its past periods, a version of its history by an added meaning will be presented through conscious selection, modification and presentation of its selected elements coded for contemporary messages and use.

2. Budapest after 1870 - The Balance

2.1. Pest - Destruction for Prosperity

As in another chapter of this book in the study of Vera Bácskay it is discussed in greater details, after a long medieval history with rich and beautiful periods changing with lesser fortunes, the 150 years of the Turkish invasion (1541-1686) represented a big break in the development of the two cities. After the "liberated" Hungary became a part of the Habsburg Empire, and Buda and Pest were reviving slowly into small provincial towns. In the XVIII. and XIX. centuries the government headquarters were situated in the Buda Castle, while Pest lived as separate merchant town on the other side of the Danube. More serious development started only in the first half of the XIX. century, when a neoclassical city was built up at the place of the medieval Pest.

The fast development into a modern metropolis started mostly after the Historical Compromise (1867), when the building of Budapest² into a great capital, representing the prestige and power of the - in some sense - reborn Hungary became a state and nationwide ambition. The whole country was paying for the construction of the new city, through the financial policy, which gave big tax reductions or total exemptions for construction investments in Budapest. Out of the possibilities, enthusiasm, and creativity of citizens and the practical motivation of the capital a new and fastly growing city of totally new dimensions was created in some forty years at the place of the old, out-dated towns.

while the number of the inhabitants grew from 300 thousand to 1 million in the given period	1870	1910
the number of houses rose	8.565	14.059
the no of floors altogether rose	11.561	30.605
the no of houses with 3 floors or more rose	200	3.264

² Budapest was officially created in 1873. with the unification of the former towns of Buda, Pest and Old-Buda.

The Board of Public Works was founded in 1870 in order to secure harmony, between life and physical surrounding, even in this fastly growing period. The style was the Historicism with its different variations at different times.

The construction of the Andrásy avenue (1870-1885) was the first big intervention into the old urban fabric. On its elegant facades, in majority neo-renaissance elements merge into orthogonal blocks on the two sides of the straight street, creating a typical example of the so called severe historicism, which was the dominating direction of the style at this time. The ground floors of these beautiful buildings were occupied by shops and coffeehouses, while very elegant, beside lesser quality apartments, filled the upper floors.

At the very end on the 1880's some criticism, influenced by the ideas of Sitte, arose against the "modern system" of the planer, severe style, diverting the preference towards more baroque values. Architecture of the facades became richer in ornaments, with corner towers decorating them, and the cityscape became more picturesque, filled with statue like buildings of elevated plasticism, with dynamic vistas and three-dimensional compositions of squares.

As the first - but not perfect - example of this new period, the Great Ring (Boulevard)³ has to be mentioned. Though it curves through the city no real spatial intrigue can be felt on it because the great width. So the inclination of the new period can be experienced only at the placing of the major public buildings, like the Vígszínház theater.

In the 1890's another great new project arose, which was already totally in the spirit of the late historicism: to construct a magnificent avenue, more monumental then ever, through the middle of the Inner city till the Danube and through a bridge to Buda. And really when you follow the Rákóczy street from the Eastern Railway station to Ferenciek square, you realize they have succeeded. Ferenciek square, just before the Elisabeth bridge⁴ can be a great symbol of the period: Here in the course of a few years the medieval urban fabric, with its narrow streets and one or two storey high buildings was suddenly changed, through ruthless destruction of the old, into a dynamic space composition based on the wide avenue with a slight change of direction, cutting through the huge and symmetrical Klotild palaces, with their elaborate baroque towers, and rich ornamental decorations, creating a theatrical composition with the other five-six storey high, new buildings. When you look at pictures of before and after 1905., the change is striking: in the course of a few years the atmosphere of the small, outdated town has completely changed to that of the industrial age metropolis.

³ It was planed in 1870 and constructed mainly in 1884-96

⁴ 1893-1903

The Ferenciek square might be a culmination in quality of the late historicism in Budapest, but the Szabadság square was the place it went the furthest. There, after the old prison, the Neugebaude had been destroyed (1897), to the North of the inner city, a great new "construction ground" was created for the new architecture of prestigious public buildings and elegant tenement houses for the high bureaucracy in between the Parliament and the Basilica.

Hardly any limitation can be felt here on the square and on the buildings constructed here in either space, money or creativity. The empty ground and great hopes created even greater dimensions than before. In this way the scale is definitely the XX. century already, but the square might become even so big that the aimed dynamic composition of the different buildings is weakened by it. On the facades Egyptian obelisks, ionic columns, Romanesque ornaments, mannerist masques and baroque window frames dwell together as the fruit of such an unscrupulous and exuberant creativity from the elements of the last four millenniums of the history of architecture, that stricter minded architectural historians can probably up till today hardly decide to laugh or cry when looking at them.

This happened for the center, but for the fastly growing population⁵ of Budapest around the Inner city and the new administrative district huge areas of tenement houses were built till the Great Ring and gradually further out to mostly fill the nearly 200 km² territory⁶. During this great period, beside the prestigious public buildings of the center a huge territory was filled up with housing in the style of the historicism creating one of the most extensive urban zones of Europe, which survived till today with a relatively unified character.

It is no question, that as a result of these years, a splendid new city emerged in Pest for the optimistic new period in the history of Hungary, but at the same time most of the old Pest had disappeared. It was typical of the spirit of the age, that when one of the main figures of the Board of Public Works was reproached about the destructions, he simply replied: "In past centuries they were not ideologies and discussions, but great, basic, creative forces that destroyed and raised cities. They also did this for one city several times. As in the case of Budapest."

⁵ in the first three decades after the unification the population of Budapest nearly tripled even without the growth of the agglomeration. In 1869: 270.476 people lived on the unified territory (302.086 on the territory of Great Budapest) in 1900: 733.358 (861.434) and in 1910: 880.371 (1.110.453).

⁶ From the unification - 1873 - to 1950. the territory of Budapest was 194,44 km², at the beginning divided into 10, later into 14 districts. After 1950, with the annexation of 21 neighbouring settlements Great Budapest was created on a territory of 525 km², divided into 22 districts.

It was this dynamic, unscrupulous approach that destroyed nearly the complete historic urban area of Pest, to give place to the new, with the meaning of prosperity. This seems outrageous to most contemporary “heritage-over-conscious” critics, still “hausmanisation”. i.e. large scale rebuilding was considered acceptable not only in Budapest at the time, but modern Rome and Berlin were transformed with the same approach after 1870, to make them appropriate capitals of new Italy and Germany. Destruction meant not only disruption from the past, but a conscious attempt to create the efficient and beautiful structures for the new, prospering and, in this way, meaningful contemporary city.

2.2 Buda - Anti-preservation for Heritage Creation:

It might be surprising at the first sight, that the development of Pest in these decades seems to represent absolute "heritage unconsciousness"⁷, whereas the reconstructions of Buda seem to be the opposite.

On the Castle hill of Buda the start was very difficult even after the Historical Compromise, because it was still serving as an Austrian fortress. It was clear for the Board of Public Works that the hill as a fortress was already an anachronism at the end of the XIX. century, and as a palace it was small and weary. As in the whole monumental construction of Budapest at the time, there was a clear wish to compete and even surpass the imperial Vienna, soon the idea was raised that in an enlarged and reconstructed Royal Palace on Buda hill Hungarians "can show all the greatness of the Hungarian past, present and future, due to the rank of the Hungarian kings". The most interesting point behind this ideology was that the Hungarian king, who finally even contributed to the construction of this palace⁸, was Franz Joseph, the Austrian Emperor, who was dwelling in the Hofburg of Vienna at the time. But beyond the seemingly schizophrenic situation this construction is an excellent example for the case when the function of a building goes far beyond sheer practicality and the function of a monument is definitely not only to be a relic preserved for museology. It is clear, that in this case Hungarians needed the new,

⁷ The “heritage unconsciousness” is the criticism. Still, denial and disruption from something, presupposes consciousness as well, Especially when the destruction of the old happens for giving place for new, meaningful creations. In these cases the destruction of the old is not only necessary, but it can be a responsible and courageous statement. So, in my opinion, the apparent contradiction between the concept of Buda and Pest presented here are in deep harmony.

⁸ M. Ybl and L. Hauszmann 1890-1905

monumental palace, in the scale of the new Pest on the other side, as a historical scenery to look at, in order to feed their spirit by the symbol of their own historical background.

The transformation of an old building into a monument more appealing to associative feelings was even more obvious in the case of the Matthias church⁹. There a purist reconstruction was executed, through which a dull looking, old church was first freed from the prison of the neighboring buildings, to stand as a statue, created for three-dimensional viewing. It was turned into a great monument of the imaginary, wished past, whose "each stone speaks about the greatness of the past" according to the creator's aim.

At the time, beside the church, on the side of the Danube, viewed from Pest, there were only the old, crumbling walls of the castle. It became soon obvious that the great new monument "could not be presented that way", so the oldest looking new part of the castle hill, the Fishermen's Bastion was also built¹⁰ to add to the historical decoration.

The purist reconstruction of the church, the fairy tale like forms of the bastion (which is sometimes called by cynics a historical wedding cake out of stone), created a tale of the past. Undeniably, the tale was invented for the contemporaries, this was a practical and scrupulousless use of old buildings for contemporary symbolic purposes, which can be strongly attacked by later standards. However, the constructions on the castle hill were very important in their symbolic, associative meaning.

2.3. the Balance:

Buda and Pest, the same story: many old things disappeared. Both were greatly reconstructed to fulfill the needs of the contemporaries. Out of Pest the pulsing, new metropolis was built up, to give the frame of everyday life and sure prosperity, and out of Buda a historic scenery was built up to strengthen consciousness, by a great image of the past.

The people who merged in the mondain activities of the prospering metropolis of Pest could proudly look up to the hill, to the majestic symbols of a less troubled past, to be reinforced in their identity. And in this sense, the monuments fulfilled their role for the real life, and for those Hungarians, who were very busy trying to build a much greater future.

⁹ F.Schulek 1873-96

¹⁰ F. Schulek 1890-1905

The great city, that grew up on the two sides of the Danube, in the course of a few decades, is the core of the built heritage for today.

The 1930's added some monumental reconstructions carried out according to modern standards and smaller scale developments of good modern buildings.

The communist times contributed to Budapest's history with some monumental reconstruction, some new buildings and with a massive structural distortion of the old Budapest. In 1950 the whole agglomeration was annexed to Budapest, then huge housing projects were built in the outer areas, and very little done in the inner parts. After the seventies, as an inadequate answer to retarded motorisation, the radial avenues were enlarged and the whole transit and local traffic was lead through the inner city. As a result of those decades, till the end of the eighties, inner housing decayed to very poor condition, pollution became very strong, better to do populations fled from the old buildings of the historicism of the inner areas, and the environmental conditions decreased rapidly.

3. After 1990 - Where is the Balance ?

At the beginning of the transition, we inherited one of the greatest united territories of historicism, but partly in a terrible physical condition, with poor infrastructure, bad environmental conditions, and filled with a housing stock which became an infinitely mixed property after the privatization of individual apartments. Local governments were created to be responsible for the city and its rehabilitation, but their resources did not allow them to effectively face up to the new challenge. At the same time, enthusiastic urbanists and preservationists, educated under socialism, had great visions, but limited tools to achieve them.

3.1 Survey of Character Values:

After the political transition started, both the new heritage consciousness and a lot of enthusiasm were strongly present in the newly formed local government of Budapest. Limits of action were much less felt, and a great preparation started to make new city policy and regulation.

The most interesting new attempt on the field of the heritage was definitely the elaboration of the Character Plan¹¹ of Budapest.

The basic principle of the inventors was that each part of the city is important, has a role in the whole, and has the right to retain its own special character. So survey had to be done on the whole 525 km² territory of Budapest at the same time. The Character Plan studied not only monuments and listed sites, but the whole city with a new, value-conscious method, so that the atmosphere and character of each individual part could not only be protected, but further developed as well. Its aim is to be a basic tool for the solution of further urban questions, such as zoning, planning, regulation or suggestions for all participants of the investment and construction process.

The Character Plan studied each individual district, block and house of the city to survey, register, and put on a computerized map the characteristic features of the urban environment.

The registered features were the following :

- analytical survey : the type of the buildings, the height of the buildings, the function of the buildings, the age of the buildings, vegetation of the surroundings of the buildings, morphological situation)
- analogical survey : character of the area (like metropolitan character, small town character, garden city character, peripheral, suburban character or village like character)
- chronological survey: grouping the buildings into the typical periods of the construction of Budapest.

The computer was the tool to superpose all these features, and distinguish the existing areas of individual, and homogenous character. Many thousand units of homogenous character resulted from the mechanical processing of the data, out of which 538 units with individual character were created by already small restrictions.

¹¹. The Character Plan was elaborated by the concept of Ferenc Cságoly and Tamás Meggyesi, by the Építész Stúdió KFT, on the commission given by the Municipality of Budapest in 1992.

After the first publication of the Character Plan the elaboration of the so-called Cadastre of Values followed, which is a method for relatively deep surveys of territories for a later regulation or development concept.

The elaboration of the Cadastre of Values means that each unit of individual character will undergo a closer scrutiny:

1. first all plans, photos, historical facts, existing protection lists, bibliographies are collected, then the historical and cultural description of the area is prepared. Here subjective literary sources are used as well, as, in addition to the seemingly objective data, personal views, feelings, impression can also be revealing. On the basis of all this material the presentation of the area is prepared.
2. The already prepared surveys are presented again, completed by some new ones on the structure and qualities of space among the buildings. Then the smaller units with homogenous character are surveyed individually. To the relation of the homogeneity thematic - meaning harmonizing - and non-thematic - meaning different character - elements are defined.¹² The quality and condition of individual buildings and different natural units, then typical elements of the environment, are also registered. Finally visual connections and visible silhouette elements are defined from important external and internal viewpoints.
3. Based on the synthesis of all these surveys in the last part of the Cadastre of Values, the character values of each homogenous sub-unit are described, and suggestions are defined, which can create the spirit and basis of any decision on interventions into the area.

Already more than 30 parts have been elaborated, and hopefully, the whole work can be finished in the space of a few years.

The Character Plan of Budapest is much in harmony with the best results of contemporary urban thinking, because first it surveyed the whole city, to define its organic units of individual character. It tried not to pose preconceived value systems, but to accept existing local characters, and understand the environment from the viewpoint of its inhabitants. It conceived the existing character as "a possible local energy, which could work as a potential for development". It gave the credit even to the strangest periphery to have some local specialty that residents can be attached to. It did not want to make a "comme il faut" "art city" out of each neighborhood, but to strengthen colors, the local human reference. In this way, the city is conceived as a place to know, to feel at home in, to be attached to it, to live in.

¹². Being valued as a defining thematic or non-thematic element in this sense is naturally almost independent of artistic or architectural quality.

I am convinced that the Character Plan¹³ was a great achievement even when its results have not yet been incorporated into regulation, and still only the more valuable parts of the city are being elaborated in details. I consider it important in the sense as well, that strongly raised the question of the minor urban heritage, the "second rate" urban zones, which in my opinion, are a key factor for the success of the rehabilitation of the whole city.

Though it might have a dangerous side as well. Some might feel, that from consciousness of the values to their protection, the road is already straight and simple.

3.2. The Actual Situation in Budapest:

Since local governments were created in 1990, they are responsible for the protection of the urban heritage¹⁴ and its rehabilitation on their territory. Financial resources of local governments are very limited, and the national decision on the privatization of the housing stock produced such a low income that it can not present a substantial contribution to rehabilitation either. State intervention in the last years mostly focused on the improvement of the infrastructure, so no considerable amount of public funding is available for the refurbishment of old districts. So the restarting of the old routine of rehabilitation, that was totally based on public money, is hardly a plausible idea or hope today.

Even in this situation, in my opinion, most of Budapest is not in an imminent danger of fatal decay. The castle hill of Buda is still a tale of the past in a relatively good shape, surrounded by good living areas, living relatively well, though sometimes not supplied with the due level of infrastructure. The Inner city and the Administrative area on the

¹³ For more detail on the history of monument protection in Hungary and on the Character Plan see the article: Heritage in Prague and Budapest; Protection, or the Balance Between Protection and Creativity, by Katalin Pallai. in: Magyar Építőművészet (Hungarian Architecture) 1993. 5. p. 12-17.

¹⁴ The major monuments and areas remained protected on the National level by the National List, and the responsibility of the protection of those parts of Budapest, that had been nominated to World Heritage are also at the state level. These areas, that are under national protection, but physically in the territory of municipal management, naturally create a situation not lacking contradictions, but it is not the subject of this paper.

Pest side can receive enough private investment, so that if city policy does not make big mistakes, it will not be in real danger. The areas built in the thirties consist of such a good building stock in good geographical position, that there is no great risk there either. These parts will easily survive with some, probably harmless, alterations the economically difficult years of Hungary.

But around all these parts there is a great sea of the so called minor buildings of the Historicism, with run down living and industrial areas. They create a huge belt around the inner areas, and they strongly influence their potential. If they become a desert of slums, they will be worse than barricades around an inner area from which all better living will want to escape, with the risk that at the place of the of the 24 hours city of today, offices and bad areas will only remain, as in some American city centers.

There is no question, that we have to do something with this belt, we can not afford the continuing decay around our city center. The question lies in the balance of conservation and redevelopment, that we have the chance to achieve.

With all this I arrived to the main point of my presentation: I consider a great achievement that in the course of the XX. century our concept of heritage has greatly widened in all senses - chronologically, typologically, geographically -, but I definitely feel some threat in this too, especially in Budapest. Here good hearted urbanists and preservationists sometimes have the feeling that all this enlarged stock of heritage should be not only recognized, but preserved as well. And preservation for them, according to the old routine is, that if we can not improve them at least we should make things undistractable and untouchable. This implies that nothing should happen if poor residents and local governments have no wish or possibility to conserve these areas and if exterior private investment only find feasible projects that make considerable portion of alterations, therefore contradicting to our heritage vision.

No action here, by my opinion, means that gradual, further decay will happen. In this case, we keep this declining belt around our city center, and the decline will surely spread, and we will loose the chance for the rehabilitation of the whole city. In the case that we let the “dangerous private investment” come in later, the increasing value gap¹⁵ might make the investment even more profitable for the invested capital, but authorities loose position and will have no chance for any portion of conservation.

Even though I am somebody, who loves Budapest, and its history, who has romantic attachments to its different parts, I also have to realize, that in healthy and living cities

¹⁵ I mean here the gap inbetween the existing value of the decaying territory and the - by redevelopment - possibly achievable value.

the buildings and characters permanently change and have to change, to be changeable to fit the changing needs and conditions. Our heart might be breaking, but we have to destroy old buildings to give place to new ones. This is only the normal circle of the life of cities. We might be over-conscious of the past today, we might feel attached to all old window-frames and door-knobs, the value of age might be overly fashionable, there is still the hard decision, that if we do not keep a balance and do not accept changes and losses, the built heritage will still be a potential, as mentioned in the title of the conference, but a potential source of decay.

I do not believe, that some old, decaying areas of bad living conditions - for example the outer parts of the VIII. district (Józsefváros) - with lacking of infrastructure, without any inner potential to change, fastly turning to slums, should be preserved, in their original form because they are old. In my opinion they hardly qualify as heritage: they are definitely not a public good. The public does not want them and does not care to come to these areas. They do not improve life, and are definitely not an amenity or frame of decent human living at the end of the XXth century. On the contrary, they fix bad living and bad effects, they are the headquarters of crime, prostitution, and low class living. It does not elevate our city, it only harming even the neighboring better areas as well.

We have to face that no intervention is a decision. It can also be a very destructive one. Not a bulldozer, because that is unpromissible, but a gradual and uncontrolled destruction. So we should better make the compromise with the possible investment which might change more, then our taste, to utilize the gap in-between the existing and potential value of these territories, than rather wait until we are in no position of compromise at all.

I am also convinced that since heritage as a category widened to everything, to even all character values of the city, it can no longer be a philosophical or technical issue, contemplated and decided on by preservationists alone. The minor urban heritage, must be a commodity for locals, who want to live comfortably and it must become one vital factor of the city policy to be reconciled with all other fields. In the case of the minor urban heritage, the basis of consideration can no longer be the privileged, untouchable subject of conservation, but it can happen to be the one, which might be losing the battle. Preservationists may not feel happy about this trend, they might lose their issue sometimes, but even at those times hopefully the case of the fundamental conditions for the survival and better life of cities and the case of the better living conditions of the people will probably win.

So we have to accept about them, that, in contrary to great monuments on national lists, in the case of the minor urban heritage:

- their possible contemporary functional value sometimes must play a decisive factor for their possible survival, so alterations must be considered much more freely in their case, then in the case of monuments,
- the protection of the physical shape of the minor urban heritage in big quantities is possible only in case when they can present interest for investors, what in most cases mean great compromises from the traditional viewpoint of preservation,
- tools for their protection must be very different, much more incorporated into the general city policy,
- external questions to protection and conservation have to be more seriously considered, and sometimes become more decisive to their fate, then their simple aesthetic or age value,
- it can very easily happen that whole areas with valuable, special character, but an unsavable stock of buildings in the given urban position and conditions, will have to be lost, or to be redeveloped, for the healthy development of the city as a whole.

In my opinion, in those cases, where unfortunately not only preservation but destruction is also needed in a given area, the sad consequences must be acknowledged and the difficult but courageous decisions about destruction must be made. Otherwise the heritage will not be a potential for the development of the city, but on the contrary, as meant in the title of this conference: it will be a potential cause of decay in a more far reaching territory of the city, harming and diverting the overall urban development. Especially in cities with limited resources - and unfortunately, by my knowledge most cities fit into this category - heritage protection must fit into long term, and serious strategic planning. Because there is the risk, that if we try to save every little stone, dispersing our resources, we can do so little to everything, that by even the best intentions, we will only cause general decay, so long term destruction.