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JOURNAL OF DESIGN CULTURE

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# A “REINVENTED” CITY<sup>1</sup>

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**Dr. Dénes Tamás**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In this essay I will interpret and analyse the process of restoration that has been under way in the past five to six years in the Transylvanian city of Sepsiszentgyörgy. I will use an aesthetical-semiotic reading to uncover what meanings the places, buildings and public places of the city may specify for its inhabitants.*

*My analysis aims to verify two hypotheses. My presumption is that the renovation of the city brings back ideologies of the bourgeoisie: that the designers are trying to symbolically reinvigorate 19th century civic ideals. At the same time, it is predictable that while this renewal is partially a reawakening of tradition that has been radically eradicated, the result can only be a conglomerate of dispersed, indicative, but ultimately empty symbolical forms which are mostly discredited by the very context they come to be in. Thus only a simulacrum of the old civic ideals can be achieved.*

*In this analysis I also question the possibilities of urban development that exist for post-socialist cities of the Middle and Eastern Europe.*

*#post-socialist, #urban development, #bourgeoisie (citizenry), #simulacrum*

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## INTRODUCTION

There aren't many places more interesting than post-socialist cities for urban research. Compared to developed western cities, post-socialist cities are very different regarding their history, present state and possible future. The delay in their development, their relatively short civic history, the remnants of rural characteristics in towns, the enforcement of urbanization, the forced and failed industrialization, and the massive effect of the socialistic city planning has led to a very fragmented cityscape which is contradictory in its challenges and very different from developed Western cities with a significant civic history<sup>2</sup>. Since 1989 the post-socialist cities have found themselves in a new historical situation in which they needed to reinvent themselves whilst trying not to lose sight of the once devalued past but at the same time catching up with the accelerating present while reckoning with the cumbersome legacy of socialism. Most post-socialist cities could not cope with these challenges and not always because of lack of funds. This situation called for long-term planning and complex answers together with an idea of the city that is primarily defined by its inhabitants “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1991). Instead they responded to the immediate needs resulting in ad hoc decisions which only added to the already fragmented state of these cities.

This complex situation is present in the city I have chosen for my analysis, Sepsiszentgyörgy, which in the past five to six years has undergone urban renewal and transformation. This renewal was initially aimed at the public squares and spaces of the city and quite a few buildings have been renovated. It is nonetheless important to note, that although it is by far a finished process and the renovations are still underway, it is already possible to circumscribe and scientifically analyze the results of this work. In my analysis I will verify two hypotheses. My presumption is that the renovation of the city brings back ideologies of the bourgeoisie: that the designers are trying to symbolically reinvigorate the ideas of the 19th century civic ideals. To some extent this is logical because these architectural elements are present in the city and, although fragmented, they do define the image of the downtown area. At the same time, it is predictable that while this renewal is partially a reawakening of tradition that has been radically eradicated, the result can only be a conglomerate of dispersed, indicative, but ultimately empty symbolical forms which are mostly discredited by the very context they come to be in. Thus only a simulacrum of the civic nature can be achieved.

<sup>1</sup> This essay is the extended and updated version of my essay entitled “Sepsiszentgyörgy reloaded” 2011. In: *The Chair: Visual Encounters with Power*. ed. Bakó R.K. 77-86, Kolozsvár, Transylvanian Museum Society.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding this see also: Bodnár Judit. 2013. *A különbség megalkotása: A nyugati és nem nyugati, a kapitalista és a szocialista városlogika szembeállítására*. 455-479.

I will reveal this simulacrum by tracking the civilian's path defined by the spaces and places within the city. In following this path we can also discover the pitfalls and possibilities that exist for post-socialist cities in Middle and Eastern Europe.

### **THE METHODS OF APPROACH**

Nowadays, research into cities is not solely based on the definition of the city as the high-density permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous persons (Wirth 1938). Relative to this overly sociologising definition, the concept of the city has expanded since the 1960s and new aspects of it come into play. Of these, the spatiality, and the relation between spatial and social processes will be my focus in the following analysis. The theory of this relation is based on the so called "spatial turn", concepts and theses of which have since evolved and have positively influenced a lot of research (Jo Guldi 2014). Not by chance does Ana Maria Rabe say that the "concept of space is experiencing a boom today" since the concept of space is often debated in relation to arts, society, politics and culture also.

My analysis is based on the spatial concept of Henri Lefebvre. For Lefebvre, space is a social structure defined by values, meanings and interpretations (Lefebvre 1991). Space is not an empty place in which happenings take place, but the structure of ideologies and meanings. In a dialectical relationship space is the creator of identities and can express the dimension of history. Lefebvre, like David Harvey (Harvey 1973), speaks of urban spaces as sites of social reproduction, space is produced by social structures: these could be economical, conceptual, or political. In other words, as the power of structures to produce spatial images, by which he means the structures of capitalism which are understandable since the city cannot be separated from the capitalist production dynamics (Castells 1978, 18). Post-socialist cities are more complex in this regard too, since they carry the socialist legacy, which is not an image of the capitalist mode of production, more an expression of a political will—which could be that of the state, the party or the designer.

If we link the concept of space to the concept of power we actually express the Foucauldian thesis of omnipresent power, which says that power is everywhere because everything draws from it. Though Foucault's research was primarily focused on the relation of power and knowledge he is the one who called the twentieth century the century of space in which simultaneity, syntheticity, closeness and distances matter (Foucault 2000, 147) as opposed to the nineteenth century, which was a century of time. This turn demands a change of methods for approaching urban space. When we research the manifestations of power in urban space we are actually researching the structure of space, its power of preserving and expressing significance/meaning, and the characteristics which tell us what may be

done, and how, at different places in the city. These possibilities also tell us who we are as the users of these spaces.

Obtaining results for the research described above is not a neutral work, but a critical task which is pursued by critical urban theory, which is quite fashionable these days. Critical urban theory emphasizes the mutable characteristics of urban space politically and ideologically conveyed and formed in social struggles and points out that "the incessant (re)building of the city is the site, conveyor and product of social power relations" (Brenner 2013, 22). Critique reveals those forms of power, exclusion, injustice and inequality that come from the capitalist social structures. This goes together with the research of the alternative and emancipatory possibilities of urbanism, possibilities that are present in cities but are suppressed (Brenner 2013, 30).

We also find forms of exclusion and inequality in post-socialist cities. It is important to note that in the case of these cities capitalist relations could only manifest themselves in the past twenty-five years and these were mainly characterized by disregarding the residential sections built under socialism, concentrating their renovation efforts on downtown areas. As to how these projects were carried out and how successful they were, we will see through the example city I have chosen for my analysis.

For the critical approach to be visible we need to be able to read the city, to be able to understand the signs. The "reading" of space is not an easy task even if we do it continually while contributing in a creative way in the realization of possibilities coded in the given spaces. Visible urban space is fundamentally different from the space based on participating, moving, experience, as Michael de Certeau says in his essay entitled "Walk in the city" (Certeau 1984). Walking in the city actually contributes to the realization of possibilities given by the constructed spaces. The critical viewpoint has a hard job, since the power manifesting in the public spaces often likes to hide behind masks, appear in non-expressive ways which impedes recognition of its real nature. On the other hand, the power of space oftentimes can only manifest in time which makes all methods of analysis and interpretation based on synchronicity inadequate. Thus a diachronic view is also needed to interpret the historical processes in relation to which the meanings of space can be interpreted. The next section is dedicated to creating such a perspective in which I will look through the "impossible" and "uncontainable" legacy of Sepsiszentgyörgy.

### **THE "IMPOSSIBLE" LEGACY**

Sepsiszentgyörgy, the county town of Covasna is an average sized Transylvanian city with 5,400 inhabitants according to the 2011 census. This settlement gained the rank of city in the 15th century and followed the development path of many similar Transylvanian cities. The city's development and architectural heritage was defined by three

<sup>3</sup> See also: Augustin Ioan, Ciprian Mihali: Privirea pașilor și mersul ochilor. Studiu de caz: Cluj. In: Augustin Ioan - Ciprian Mihali 2009. Privirea pașilor și mersul ochilor.

<sup>4</sup> See also: Augustin Ioan, Ciprian Mihali: Vitrinele național-comunismului. In: Augustin Ioan - Ciprian Mihali, 2009.

major social changes. The scope of these changes is proved by the fact that the number of inhabitants multiplied by several times and changed considerably.

These changes are manifest not only at the level of the city, they are integrated in the context of socio-political changes that define the region and the country.

The first radical change came during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which lasted from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War, when the civic nature of the city was built in a characteristic neo-classical and art nouveau style of architecture. During this time, the original marketplace plaza gradually becomes a park, and the buildings which are still emblematic are built: the block of the old “bazaar”, the library, the city hall, the theatre and the buildings of the Székely Mikó boarding-school. (Cserey & Álmos 1999)

The second change came between the nineteen sixties and seventies, when the strengthening of communist rule began a great attempt at urbanization, to which most of the county towns fell victim. A complex yet violent project started that changed the city on a social and architectural level.

We speak of social change because in this period great numbers of people whom till then had lived in rural areas were settled in this remote industrial city. The great apartment buildings of the city, which sometimes extend into the downtown area, were built for them. These people were torn from their natural living space and they had to accommodate to living among standardized circumstances, losing the buildings and spaces they knew. These people were made to live in new circumstances where they could not experience the openness of public space because their urban spaces were organized around the closed community of a stairwell or the institution of governing power.<sup>3</sup>

Interesting materializations of this technique are the tribunes where the high-ranking functionaries or the dictator himself could make their speeches. The space towards which the tribune faces is not for the free association of civilians—which would be a completely empty and unstructured space—but for the gathering of a faceless crowd which is ordered to be there.

The new architectural changes sought to symbolically enforce the new power relations. This also manifested in the destruction of remnants of civic and historical heritage. The typical buildings of socialist urban design were built in this period, such as the house of the party, the community center, the shopping center, and the hotel.<sup>4</sup> This new architectural wave peaks with the renewal of the city center. Many civic type houses are torn down and because the old city center does not permit many changes, a new city center is designed on a hillock behind the old center which bears all the hallmarks of architectural socialist realism. In this new center they placed the equestrian statue of Mihai Viteazul, who is nationalistic symbol of the communist dictatorship and completely alien to the history of the city.



The turn of '89 cannot overwrite these two massive changes in the architecture of the city. After the revolution only three types of buildings are erected: churches, banks and supermarkets. Banks are built primarily among socialist type buildings representing a type of modern/post-modern style and creating a new city center. At Sepsiszentgyörgy as at any other such city the surrounding hills will soon be built with villas and houses of the “winners” of the revolution creating a colorful patch that cannot be integrated in the city. At the same time, after '89 a de-urbanization process takes place with more and more people moving out to surrounding rural areas. We also have to consider a drastic decreasing of population since in the last twenty-five years the population of the city has decreased by fifteen thousand.

The presence of the equestrian statue of Mihai Viteazul also draws attention to another ambivalent aspect of the city, of the Romanian-Hungarian national opposition, which also surfaces in fruitless squabbles about the past (Tapodi 2014). These squabbles are mostly about the naming of streets, the erecting of statues, and the designating of memorial places which further fragment the already fragile image of the city.

These are the cultural and architectural challenges that awaited the designers when they embarked upon the renewal some six years ago, and the results of which are what I would like to analyze in this essay. I made reference to an “impossible” heritage in the title of this section, and I believe I have managed to reveal the main points of this complex legacy. But why is it impossible? Nowadays every city exists as a well-defined conglomerate of its own historicity. Not to mention that the cities of today are threatened by a loss of character, of identity, as Rem Koolhaas says in his text *The Generic City* (Rem Koolhaas 1995). But in the Western European cities these layers of historicity are clearly defined spatially and the city centers have mostly remained intact which helped them become musealised. Contrary to this, Transylvanian cities, including Sepsiszentgyörgy, have a much weaker historical background with a lesser civic heritage and are characterized by a lateness. The power that overtook them was highly organized, and its modernizing techniques—rebuilding and destroying—managed to undo the civic heritage, putting something in its place that should not be continued. Thus we simultaneously have to deal with a broken tradition and a heritage that cannot be continued but also cannot be disregarded because of its massive presence. In this situation, what can a renovation take as a starting point, considering that the start of renewal is late to begin with, and since the renewal is also at the same time an act of identification? The design of public places and the city buildings says something about the city itself. Figure 1, below, illustrates the problem that the designers and decision-makers were faced with.

In this photo, which shows the state of the Szabadság square a few years ago, the Fogolyán-house is visible between a block and the



Fig.1. Fogolyán house

new County Council Building—illustrating the dividing line between the civic and the socio-communist world. But what is important is not only the break-line but also on the wedging. The picture suggests that civic nature must be freed from the grip of the socio-communist way of life. Since Sepsiszentgyörgy has a well-defined city structure and building complex it is clear that this freeing can only be achieved through the symbolic occupation of space by redesigning public squares. Question: can an attempt like this manage to create authentic forms or merely over-extended, atavistic and self-revealing forms? What do the squares and objects placed in the squares say about the inhabitants of the city? Can these squares be reclaimed after the destruction of the communism? Can this transformation help us to become closer to these squares, to understand them again, to bring the ideal of the civic inhabitant to life again?

I will attempt to answer these questions by following the path of the “imaginary citizen” through the public spaces of the city. The concept of “imaginary citizen” is a tool concept which means the city dweller of today who encounters the results of reconstruction as he walks the streets of the city. I should note that not all the changes will be described, only those which possess a hint of ideological intention or meaning. The stopping points on this route are “stations” with imaginative names, and I will depict them with photos. I will then

try to understand what kind of real and imaginary messages these stations relay to the city dwellers and how they try to provide meaning to those passing by. At the same time, I will signal the way the place itself relativizes and reveals the meanings. The analysis is not historical; I only interpret the intention of the makers when necessary because I primarily try to show the places with an indicative value. My analysis is understandable without a deeper analysis of the civic nature and lifestyle since they and their factual relations and relating habits are part of common knowledge today.

## THE PATH OF THE CITIZEN

### I. “The patron of the arts” station

Fig.2. Statue of Gyárfás Jenő.



Fig.3. Wooden statues in the suburbs.



<sup>5</sup> See:  
<http://www.sepsiszentgyorgyinfo.ro/index.php?page=209&pid=840>

In recent years, the public squares of the city have become filled with statues and artworks, mostly made out of wood.

Regarding the statues, the intent is clear: they wish to commemorate the creators and officials from the nineteenth century who founded or ran an important institution (city hall, schools, and galleries). The official language uses the term “institution-guard”, which attaches these institutions to the spirituality of the golden era of the city in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

In the nineteenth century, art became part of the civic leisure time. This not only meant the patronage of arts, but also their “consummation”. The civic city dweller frequented the opera, the theatre, and galleries, donated to art and bought paintings—he loved art. Therefore it was important to give opportunity to the manifestation of these art forms. Many of the wooden sculptures exhibited in the squares (most of them the work of local artists) can be interpreted as such. These statues have no local meaning, no message to convey, they are decorative items, and yet, placed in these squares, these works of art no longer represent the auto-intelligible art work: a certain mediation between the place and the ideals singularly conveyed by the work of art is necessary. These wooden art pieces remain stranded and void of meaning in a space defined by an apartment block, trashcans, and a supermarket. Their dispersed meaning can only communicate the desire to have a city that is filled with artworks.

Fig.4. Artificial lake in Erzsébet park.

## II. “The bridge of recreation” station





Relaxation in nature has always been meaningful for the city dweller, so the possibility had to be presented within the body of the city. The central Erzsébet-park which lies on many hectares can satisfy such a need.<sup>6</sup>

One of the major focuses of the renewal of the city has been this park. The park has been redesigned, some pathways covered with flagstone, a rock-garden was made, new plants and trees were planted. The most important feature was a small artificial lake with its own flora and fauna and a bridge arching across it. This micro-world in the middle of the urban environment had to make the encounter with nature real.

In this sense, the role of the bridge is the most revealing since it no longer has the function of connecting hard-to-reach places but merely creates an illusion of connection. The person crossing the bridge is not getting from one point to another, instead they realize a moment of recreational time outside the average workdays. The inhabitants quickly recognised this and it became a favorite photo-spot for people and newlyweds.

### III. “Let the music play” station

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the park was named after a lime tree circus planted in the memory of Elizabeth, Austrian empress and Hungarian queen. Better known as queen Sissi, she is highly regarded in Hungary and Transylvania, her memory is preserved in numerous films and monuments. The city since long is planning to erect a statue to her memory.

Fig.5.  
Bandstand in Erzsébet park.



In the park there is a pavilion known as the “Mushroom” which in civic times was the place of the wind orchestra. The city administration is trying to revive this tradition which is made possible by the existence of many wind music groups in neighboring villages. Tradition is overwritten however, and the temporary nature of it is revealed by the row of seats set in front of the “Mushroom”. The pavilion music was originally entertainment for the citizens out on a walk. The pre-set seats draw attention to the meaning of listening to music and thus it obtains an importance beyond its tradition.

Fig.6. Yellow rose arbor.

#### IV. “The moment of poetry” station



The yellow rose bushes in the picture and the plaque in between are the realization of a curious idea. On the plaque there is a quotation from Jókai Mór’s book *Yellow Rose*. Jókai Mór is one of the most important representatives of the Hungarian national romantic literature and his works still enjoy great popularity. The design projects this work into the space of the city as the effectuation of civic sentimentalism and visual sentimentality.

## V. "The connoisseur of historical tradition" station



Fig.7. Hussar statue in the playground

Traditionalist movements, and among them the hussar movement to preserve the tradition of the 1948 hussars, are greatly appreciated in Sepsiszentgyörgy. On prominent festivals, especially the 15th March, there are hussar processions, and in recent years there have been hussar recruitments in surrounding villages with the participation of high-ranking officials and politicians.

The preservation of tradition and the popularity of this movement could be the reasons why an equestrian hussar statue was erected in the park, however, the choice of location questions the seriousness of the act since the statue is in front of a playground. With this placement there is an uncertainty surrounding the work of art because for the simple viewer it is not immediately clear whether the statue is part of the playground or not. On the one hand it seems to blend with the playground equipment, but, on the other hand, it cannot be used for playing, and it cannot be climbed. This uncertainty lingers and discredits the seriousness of the intent of preserving tradition.

## VI. "Under the virtual cover of national idea" station

The civic culture formed and strengthened in the nineteenth century is not merely a lifestyle but also the carrier of nationalist ideas. It was the time in which cultural identity was defined

Fig.8. Hotel Bodoc.





<sup>7</sup> See also. Sásdi Ferenc. Magyarország kultúrája a hosszú 19. század első felében.

<http://korok.webnode.hu/products/sasdi-tamas-magyarorszag-kultura-a-hosszu-19-szazad-elso-feleben-1790-1849-1/>  
(Megtekintve: 2016-02-07)

<sup>8</sup> In this era the national-historically influenced painting discovers events of Hungarian history as subjects for artwork. Imposing artworks are made in this period like the Feszty-panorama painting, painted by Feszty Árpád which can be viewed as the predecessor of the Transylvanian-panorama done by Polish and Hungarian painters

linguistically and the nation was thought as the total inhabitants living on Hungarian territory.<sup>7</sup>

The Transylvania panorama-painting painted in 1897, which depicts the battle of Nagyszeben on 11th March 1849, represents an era that was gradually becoming aware of its own national self.<sup>8</sup> A reduced reproduction of this painting is exhibited on one of Sepsiszentgyörgy's squares in front of the now ruined Hotel Bodok. This hotel is the most impressive realization of the socialist urban renewal project. To complete the hotel, builders needed to tear down a significant civil structure, the Bogdan-house, which stood where the reproduction painting now stands.

The sight of this iconic solidity perhaps expresses most accurately the contradictory nature of the effort that is trying to renew a civic nature in a city that is ruled by mutually exclusive traditions. The reproduction is intended to hide a manifestation of the past—that which stands significantly taller than the idealism attempting to hide it and thus does not disappear from view.

This relation has been modified somewhat in recent years as is shown in the next picture.

The reproduction remained as a sort of an exhibition where, at the time of this picture, the new and old buildings of the city are both visible. The hotel was covered with an enormous veil which shows a tree composed of pictures of the city on its branches. Meanwhile the

renovation of the main square has begun, and as a first step a reproduction of the statue of St. George, made by the siblings Márton and György, was installed. The original of which can be found in Hradcsing yard in Prague, and was made in 1373. We have to note that though this statue represents the legend of the city's defender it is not otherwise linked to the history of the city.



Fig. 9. Statue of St. George the Dragon Slayer.



## CONCLUSIONS

The walk of the civilian stops here, upon reaching the multitude of veils, pictures, and reproductions that ought to serve as a reminder of his own self. On the path he walked he encountered manifestations of different significations which prescribe a certain modality of space usage. The civilian defined by the sites is mostly one of the nineteenth century. The sites I chose—the number of which can be increased—symbolically show these traits. The characteristics that these places try to reflect are: art-loving, hiker, music lover, sentimental, traditional, and historically knowledgeable. It is testament to the force of these places that they can express the civic identity of a city partially obscured by its own history.

The interpretation of the renewal cannot stop here however. In the short descriptions of the pictures I tried to suggest that this effort cannot prevail on its own. The image of the city is much too fragmented, contradictory, and the effort itself is rushed, even pushy. A good question is what term should we use to describe this effort? Is it a redesign, or more a remake, like the remaking of an old work?

I believe that where veils, pictures, and reproductions are present the use of the word simulacrum is well-founded. The concept of simulacrum, which is an invention of Jean Baudrillard, refers to a conglomerate of significances that stands in place of the old, that are trying to bring back the old in a context when the original is no longer achievable (Baudrillard 2012). The original here would be the civic nature that needs to be imported from time and inserted within the city so it can gain a new identity.<sup>9</sup> Thus the process of creating a new image for the city is not about urban development but about a turn back in time. But this turn back cannot be wholly effective because the remnants of socialist realist architecture and the hallmarks of forced modernization are unavoidably there to deal with. Since the civic nature is not a continuous tradition, these instances taken through time and inserted in various places might seem overdone, partial or even comical. Perhaps it would be best to treat the ideas of the bourgeoisie as a tradition to be preserved instead of a possibility of revival. It is fruitless to seek for the real subject of the public sphere, the citizen, if the spatial conditions of this public sphere are only there as a simulacrum. Perhaps, instead of ineffectually trying to conceal the legacy of communism, we should try to think in a wider perspective which would ensure that both traditions find their place. Not that the workings of such a perspective are easily managed. This is the reason why post-socialist cities are interesting subjects for this type of research. They force us to ask these questions and look for answers.

<sup>9</sup> The possibility of continuity in the Hungarian bourgeoisie and the effects of the civilian nature are discussed in the essay collection entitled “The Hungarian citizen”. (A magyar polgár 2016)

*The illustrations of this article are courtesy of the author and were taken in March, 2016.*

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