

Urban Renewal of Historic Towns in Hungary: Results and Prospects for Future in European Context

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1 Introduction

Urban centres always attracted great attention, but today there is a particular reason for studying them, as more and more social, economic and environmental problems have accumulated in their area. Among them the situation of historic urban centres is quite special, as beyond their central location and function—by means of their historic, cultural and built heritage—they have an essential role in creating and reflecting the image and the memory of a city.

First, the question of heritage tourism can be raised, though these quarters are also residential areas, their residents wanting to meet the same common needs. Since the society and the economy change much faster than the urban fabric, this generates a conflict between city and citizens. This essay summarises a several-year-long study focusing to a question which was formulated in seven Transdanubian (West-Hungary) towns: i.e. how were they changed, whether by urban design and planning or by spontaneous development?

In Hungary urban geography and sociology have focused their attention on Budapest and its characteristic quarters with their special problems. However, the study of country towns should not be neglected, which was a significant motivation in this research as well.

We have to add that the historic cities have particular features in Hungary, i.e. historical drawbacks, which they had to face during their history. In Hungary the way of European urbanisation had moderate outcomes; the cities had weaker citizenship, weaker economy, and generally slower industrialisation and in the long run slower urbanisation. The conquest of the Ottoman Empire affected the

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half of the Hungarian Kingdom, so the urbanisation of the Great Hungarian Plain lagged behind and turned to a different way of development: the so-called market town emerged with the particular farmstead ("Tanya") system in their hinterland. The cities hardly worked out the disadvantages, few of them succeeded to rise to the highest places of urban hierarchy including the capital of Hungary, the latter Budapest.

The development of the towns of Transdanubia, the Uplands and Transylvania did not remain undisturbed either, but the way of urbanisation was the same. For these reasons Hungary does not have the kind of historic cities like the richer and luckier cities of the West. The built heritage from the middle ages are very scarce, while baroque townscapes are general (Enyedi and Kovács 2006).

This is the background that motivated the study of historic cities of Transdanubia as well, focusing to the following questions, among others:

- How can the several-decade-long activity of heritage planning (i.e. protection of built heritage) be evaluated in historic inner-cities of Hungary? Might it be seen as a real urban renewal which has also brought social and economic regeneration to the affected quarters, or can it be regarded first of all as an architecture- and culture-based activity?
- In which direction did the development of historic urban quarters turn before and after the transition? How has spontaneous renewal taken place? Which are the newest efforts in urban policy?
- What kind of social processes can be recognised? What kind of conclusions can be drawn for the future? How has the function of preserved historic cities been altered by the influence of monument restoration and new city centre building? How has it changed after the transition with the conditions of market economy?
- What kinds of questions arise about the future of historic urban centres? What kind of future gains shape for the historic quarters?

2 Methodological Background and Areas of Research

The subject of this essay is the historic city. By this, I do not only mean an inner urban zone built up by the end of the nineteenth century, but more closely, the outcome of the pre-capitalist urban development i.e. the walled cities and their historic suburbs).

For studying the historic towns I used the methodological traditions of urban morphology and urban geography as well. Accordingly, during my research the analysis of the ground plan, the street pattern, the urban fabric, the building structure and pattern gave a starting point. For this reason the basic lessons of the morphological school, the Chicago school, the theory of the housing class (Rex 1968—compare the theory of functional morphology in Hungary—Mendöl 1936) have been considered; i.e. the ground plan and the street pattern has a great significance in the research as well as the explaining of urban development.

The traditions of the settlement geography of Tibor Mendöl were continued and developed in Hungary first of all by Ernő Wallner and Edit Lettrich, so it lead from the urban morphological approach through social geography ("Sozialgeographie" in German) to the elements of urban social geography (Jankó 2005; Györi 2009). These features have remarkable connections with the Conzenian urban morphogenetic approach, but they have visible perspectives of the cultural readings of the urban fabric, as the element of the common memory as well (Conzen 2001; Heineberg 2006).

With this background I used empirically collected data for the analyses. In the designation of study areas it was principal to allow for the analysis of how the historic inner-cities fitted in the urban fabric as a whole. I also endeavoured to seek out some historic suburbs, staying in a given area size. Finally, the survey was made in the historic inner-city areas of Győr, Pécs and Magyaróvár, and in the historic quarters (i.e. historic inner-city and its historic suburbs) of Kőszeg, Pápa, Sopron and Veszprém. The designation of historic inner-cities was less difficult; the earlier walled cities with their plot-system adequately indicate their former extension and there is sufficient documentation. The designation of suburbs was somewhat more difficult. They were rarely defended by walls (except for Sopron and Kőszeg). The focus was to consider the plot-system, the natural boundaries and historical data.

The data survey was made between 2000 and 2005. Among others, morphological and functional data-types were collected: number of dwelling units, building period, number of storeys, morphology, type of zoning, state of repair of the building and functions. The data of monument protection, local protection and partly the time of construction were taken from governmental- and municipal sources, as well as the data of municipal housing properties. The unit of the survey was the plot, or rather the individual building.

Secondly, I used for my analysis block-level data of 2001 census received from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office and register-district level of 1990 census data gathered from a CD-ROM database. On this basis, thematic mapping and statistical analysis was made.

3 Preservation of Monuments and Urban Renewal: From Past to Present

The preservation of monuments is a special field in the international practice of urban renewal dealing with the renewal of historic quarters. Generally more disciplines co-operate, the complex, integrated and holistic approach of urban regeneration is widely used, which cannot ignore either social, economic, or architectural aspects (Roberts 2000).

Between 1945 and 1990 in Hungary and in the (post-)socialist states the conservation of monuments gave the only chance for historic quarters to survive. The communist regime tolerated and also financed the conservation of monument sites



Fig. 1 Monument houses in Kőszeg, Jurisics square. Photo by the author

and cities. The negative exceptions were those states where the built heritage was interlocked with the former nation that formed the state (Baltic States, Romania—Hammersley and Westlake 1996; Custodis and Schürmann 1998; Ashworth and Tunbridge 1999; Nistor 2001; Rutkauskas 2002; Bucek 2006).

In Hungary the preservation of monuments—as in other countries—started first with the aims of art, culture and heritage protection, and only secondly with social aims (Fig. 1). In the 1960s the preservation of monuments was considering the conservation of sites, which paralleled with international tendencies (Ashworth 1991). Therefore the conservation areas were designated, but the practice of heritage planning was excluded from urban planning. In many towns urban planning and design with a historical and a non-historical point of view existed side by side and caused huge conflicts in the townscape and city-identity by the building efforts of housing estates and “new city centres” (Figs. 2 and 3—Winkler 1983).

By virtue of the nature of the socialist regime, urban renewal based on intentions of social policy could not gain ground, but was kept back until the mid-1980s. The so-called social urban rehabilitation essentially took place in Budapest—in planning in the 1970s, and in practice in 1985—where the slums of the inner districts of Pest gained attention (Lichtenberger et al. 1994).

For these reasons the conservation of monuments cannot be considered as urban renewal in the strict sense in Hungary. First, their incentive came mainly from architecture and heritage preservation, the social and economic aspects lagging behind. Consequently the double-selective feature of urban renewal came into being: it was intended only for monuments, and primarily for public housing. Therefore renovations have not brought a remarkable change in the social and

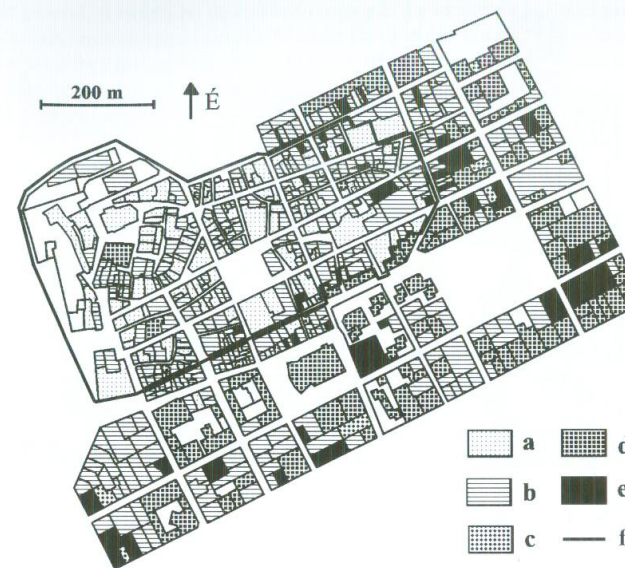


Fig. 2 Historic city of Győr. Construction period of buildings, 2005. *a*: before 1800 (Baroque and older) *b*: between 1800 and 1930s (historic) *c*: between 1930s and 1945 (early modern) *d*: between 1945 and 1989 (socialist modern) *e*: after 1990 *f*: Border of the conservation area. Design and cartography by the author

economic renewal of historic quarters. Social decline could only be hindered or prevented in the neighbourhoods where a wide-range of conservation and regeneration was carried out.

After the transition no remarkable change occurred concerning the aims of urban renewal, only the leading actor changed: instead of the public sector the private sector turned into the economic driving force. We have to add that this happened with twenty years' delay compared to Western Europe. Thus, monument protection existed parallel with public-lead urban planning and development. The rehabilitation efforts survived only in Budapest.

In many towns the former conceptions of urban development, i.e. planning features live on, and the life of the historic inner-cities is shaped basically according to them (especially in Pécs, Győr and Mosonmagyaróvár). For example in Pécs the transformation of the SW, SE and NE part of the historic city, i.e. the conservation area continued with new buildings after the transition as well. It means that there was and still is a different planning and regulation concept within the conservation area (Fig. 4).

Nevertheless, the urban development got into an ideological vacuum, and the question: “what is the role of the public without money?” can be raised. However,



Fig. 3 Veszprém. Historic city and twenty-storeyed tower-house with 130 flats. Photo by the author



Fig. 4 Historic city of Pécs. Construction period of buildings, 2005. *a*: before 1800 (*Baroque and older*) *b*: between 1800 and 1930s (*historic*) *c*: between 1930 and 1945 (*early modern*) *d*: between 1945 and 1989 (*socialist modern*) *e*: after 1990. Design and cartography by the author

stricter planning regulations have appeared in the historic cities as well, and the conception of area conservation is more and more predominant in everyday life (esp. in Pápa, Kőszeg and Sopron). The spread of the aspect of town conservation

is not general, it would be desirable to improve the extant tools (local protection, regulations, architectural orders), because the historic townscape is very vulnerable even if they are applied. But it might be said that regulations are not enough to preserve the historic cities, the experiences of urban renewal of Western Europe say that the civil and economic actors must be involved as well, to gain greater success (Balsas 2000; Drewe 2000; Vermeijden 2001; Ball and Maginn 2005; Bonneville 2005; Verhage 2005). The answer to the question above came a bit slow: the EU-practice, based on the urban-initiative experiences offered a motivation-tools-methods-aims package, which is under adaptation this time.

For the majority of the towns there are very few methods to enhance the renewal: the public housing estates were largely privatised. It was many times partial; the houses stayed in mixed property conditions and became a major source of urban decline.

It would be a possible step forward in the practice of urban development in Hungary, if the aspects of an integrated approach, of partnership, of long-term thinking and sustainability could take place among the sphere of urban policy as well.

4 Leftovers and Possibilities: The built Heritage of Historic Suburbs.

Around the walled cities historic suburbs evolved, which were originally separate villages and then, only later, merged into the urban administration. Generally, compared to the cities, citizens of the lower class lived there, who worked in agriculture or were handicraftsmen. These quarters underwent a transformation in the nineteenth century depending on the development rate of the towns. Though in smaller towns they were left untouched, since the reconstruction plans made in the era of socialism (with only a few exceptions) remained unrealised, and heritage conservation also lagged behind, partly because of the priority of private house owners, and the public sphere concentrated their money and effort to the inner cities.

The particular built heritage of these quarters could be pointed out with geographical methods. The historic suburbs of this study can represent their earlier economic and functional role, the former territory of the agricultural population and the rural townscape. For this reason the concept of the historic city needs clarification, because it is possible to separate the historic suburbs in a social and an economic sense, in a different way than formerly. Among the studied towns Sopron owns the most characteristic historic suburbs, which form almost a whole belt around the city (Jankó et al. 2010—Fig. 5).

Paradoxically, mainly the population at lower status guarantees the subsistence of this type of neighbourhood (Fig. 6). The bubble-like remainders of rural townscapes deserve preservation, and they can also play a role in strengthening local identity and in tourism development (Fig. 7). These opportunities have



Fig. 5 Sopron. Morphology of the historic town centre, 2001. I single-storied houses, II multi-storied houses, *a*: front-gabled house with ridge roof, *b*: front-gabled house with lean-to roof, *c*: house with hipped ridge-roof, *d*: house with hipped lean-to roof, *e*: transitional type, *f*: terraced (town) house, *g*: other house type, *h*: blockhouse, *i*: church, tower etc. Design and cartography by the author

already been recognised in several towns, for example in Pécs, Győr and Sopron where the conservation areas were extended, and so historic suburbs are under protection as well. We can recognise that the policy of demolition and reconstruction of historic suburbs, which was popular for decades, is changing.

5 Social Dynamics and Functional Role of Historic Quarters

The housing stock of historic cities was intensely modernised after the political transition, but the imprints of the history are still visible (Fig. 8). However, it was not followed by a remarkable social renewal, and the social processes are less definite; the analysed data refer to a social micro-pattern becoming more and more complex and puzzle-like. In the inner-city neighbourhoods of larger towns (Pécs, Győr), and in the areas of dynamic new housing construction, the replacement of local society i.e. the process of gentrification can already be perceived. In smaller



Fig. 6 a, b The historic town square of Pápa. Contrasted pictures. Photo by the author

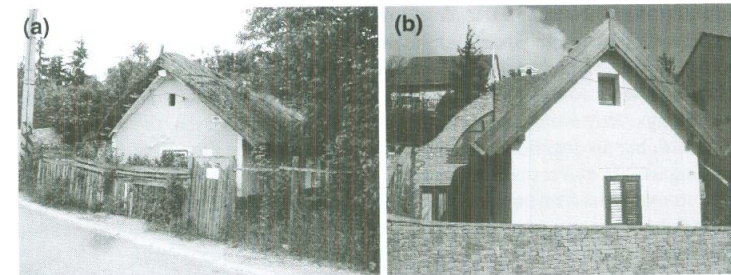


Fig. 7 a, b Veszprém. Transformation of relict heritage in the historic suburbs. Photo by the author

town quarters with signs of spontaneous renewal can also be found. The extent of regeneration is unrelated to the monumental and historical value of the neighbourhoods; the main factors being their hierarchical position in the town, their functional role and the environment of the neighbourhoods.

We need to emphasise the role of new housing; only this type of intervention can be interpreted as a real dynamic factor of urban renewal. It is not surprising, if we consider the subsidy system of housing in the recent past. This indicates that

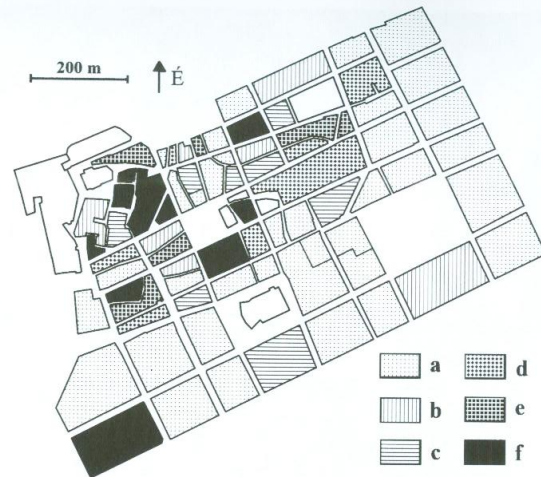


Fig. 8 Győr. Joint ratio of populated dwellings with semi-comfort, without comfort and emergency dwellings, 2001, %. *a*: 0–4 *b*: 4–8 *c*: 8–12 *d*: 12–16 *e*: 16–25 *f*: above 25 The average data of Győr: 6, 1. Data: Population census 2001 Design and cartography by the author

the renewal of historic cities cannot be restricted to new housing; the regeneration of old buildings should be fruitful for investors and owners too.

The significant role of new housing was underpinned by the functional study of the buildings. However, according to the results of the research, the listed buildings are richer in functions than the unlisted ones, though this is not unusual regarding the aims of former conservation and the central location of monuments. When studying the housing stock broken down by age, it turned out that the new buildings have more non-residential functions. They stand out especially in office and financial functions compared to older buildings.

The essential aims of conservation—the adequate function, possibilities of presentation—helped historic buildings to get a public function during the process of preservation. Consequently, museums, public institutions and restaurants were opened in the listed buildings. For this reason a museum quarter came into being in Sopron and in Pécs. Generally, conservation areas also kept their central role in public administration, religion and culture, thus the conservation of monuments strengthened the historic urban centres in their central role.

The subsidised flats in listed buildings raise several principal and ethic questions; however, they are not worthy of the use of cultural heritage. Professionally it is still undecided whether to keep monuments in public or private ownership. For this reason municipalities and the National Office of Cultural Heritage are sometimes in conflict.



Fig. 9 Magyar street, the traditional shopping area of Mosonmagyaróvár. Photo by the author

The building of new city centres had a central role in Győr, Mosonmagyaróvár, Pécs and Veszprém; the aim was to take over or abate the central function of historic urban centres. According to the social system of the socialist regime, they planned not only public institutes and service buildings, but also housing estates. The study areas vary in their main role: they received public (Győr, Mosonmagyaróvár) or retail and service (Pécs, Veszprém) functions. However, the new city centres have turned only partly into real counter-poles of traditional urban centres. Moreover, after the political transition historic inner-cities have regained and re-strengthened their central role, because modern commerce and services prefer a more attractive, historical milieu (Fig. 9).

6 Conclusions: The Future of the Historic Town in Hungary

A very important question for the future of the historic city is an architectural and environmental question, i.e. how to conserve the harmony of preserved and non-preserved sites, areas and buildings. In this respect we can talk of failure in several settlements and quarters. The historic quarters are not equal either, in some places we may talk about an “outdoor museum-type” of development, or elsewhere we can see further differentiation inside the historic city. The development of green surfaces and areas might be a solution here to offer a harmonic transition between the old and the newer parts of the city.

The social question of historic cities arises as follows. If there is a social decline in the area, it means a cumulative conflict, which is much harder to treat because of the cultural value of conserved cities and of the building regulations. The new housing may have only limited role in renewal. Therefore regeneration, i.e. the renewal of historic buildings and monuments must be supported in some way. This means that the present prohibition-oriented regulations have to be changed into support-oriented regulations. There is a small growth in public housing property in towns, which is supported by governmental measures. Besides qualitative growth, local municipalities have to improve the composition and quality of flats. The function of social housing in monuments should be eliminated, if not by privatisation, then by improving housing quality as a first step.

The third question of historic cities deals with the economy. Today we can say that the historic inner-city has kept its central role, although, there have been some attempts to weaken this in larger county towns. However, several international examples remind us, that in Hungary's delayed urbanisation economic suburbanisation might threaten the functions of inner-cities in future. This process is under way now and the inner cities or rather the urban policy should have the answers to the challenge of the emerging shopping centres on the urban fringe.

Heritage tourism is another important factor of the economy of historic cities, but we must underline that we will not have tourist-historic cities. Nevertheless, its significance depends on settlement marketing, the way the historic city is sold, and of course on the "product" itself. Additionally, it depends on global processes having an influence on tourism, and on the structure of the tourism market. The interest in Hungarian historic urban centres is not too high in a global range, which could not be altered by drawing new "products" in either. However, historic suburbs would be suitable for this role, but in this regard the possibilities of the study towns are quite different.

On the whole we are witnessing a further differentiation of historic inner-cities, in architectural-morphological and social sense as well. The strong presence of the public sector and the dynamism of commercial areas guarantee the continuous renewal of historic urban centres. Beyond conservation areas, the stagnating-differentiating urban zones and the rather differentiating rural-type neighbourhoods are noticeable. More and more signs refer to the decline of reconstruction areas—and to the decrease of social status or the degradation of economic functions. This might divide the attention paid to the renewal of historic cities; but the former mistakes should not be repeated: the social and physical integrity of the fragment settlements have to be reproduced.

This essay demonstrates the reason for the existence and for the use of urban geographic research on the level of elemental units, i.e. individual buildings. Urban geography in Hungary must not give up empirical research that meets the requirements of geographical (regional) completeness; respect for traditions is a further reason for this. This is a great chance for urban geography and for urban morphology if they can get engaged in the research of urban heritage, and can support the decisions of urban planning with the use of their modern concepts and methodology, by keeping the social and economic factors in view—which is the

main field of geography. After all, the morphological approach is a method for the better recognition and understanding of social processes.

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