

Political commodification of the inner city by constructing spectacles: Manipulation and gentrification in the contemporary urban development agenda in Budapest.

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Introduction

Since Viktor Orbán's party FIDESZ gained power in 2010, a large amount of public investments have been and are planned to be made in Budapest's inner city. Projects carried out by the national government and municipalities differ from previous urban development practice in that the projects are not based on urban development strategies and consultation with stakeholders, are realised with significant financial contribution of the European Union, their implementation is fast and professionally managed, and they target public spaces instead of housing.

The perception of the Orbán regime's urban development policy for Budapest has been rather ambiguous in the Hungarian urban studies discourse. Above all, due to the lacking underpinning of the current urban development policy, it is largely seen as a group of chaotic, fragmented actions, and not as a coherent agenda. A few large-scale urban development projects of the government drew criticism (due to their focus on representation rather than addressing needs of the population e.g. in Götz, 2014; Bardóczy, 2013), but also support (for the projects' potential to attract tourists and positively affect their environment in Kandó, 2014b; Szemerey, 2012; Kovács, 2012), while many projects and measures either did not draw much attention or were welcomed by commentators (Götz, 2014).

In the current paper I argue that the main reason behind the lack of criticism is that municipal and government-led projects implemented as part of the Orbán regime's urban development policy, are based on a veiled strategy of developing the city by constructing spectacles, a tool widely used in mainstream neoliberal urban development worldwide (Gotham, 2002) and in which paradigm most Hungarian planners and urban professionals tend to think. The most significant peculiarity of the urban development policy of the regime is the primacy of the projects' political benefits over economic ones. In this way, spectacles in the inner city are primarily not conceived of as to be promoted on the market attracting capital, but rather as manipulative images of political success and national integration.

Commodification of the city by constructing spectacles

Writing about the role of sight in geography, Tuan (1979) notes that European culture is preoccupied with images and visual experience, but this often limits complex understanding of reality: solely perceiving is insufficient to comprehend and conceive, therefore concentration on images and spectacles can blind us to fully understanding reality (ibid). Therefore, the spectacle, generally perceived by spectators as a strong visual experience, has the potential to both attract and manipulate.

The spectacle has played a crucial role in strategies of the state to commodify urban space from the 19th century Paris to today's New Orleans (Harvey, 2006; Gotham, 2002). Drawing on the spectacular reorganisation of public space in Paris under the rule of Napoleon III, David Harvey states that the capitalist urban development of the city was carried out with the intention of asserting middle-class hegemony over the city by facilitating freer circulation of money (Harvey, 2006).

According to Harvey, the large boulevards constructed under Napoleon III "became public spaces where the fetish of the commodity reigned supreme in every sense. [...] It was the

symbiotic relation between the public and commercial spaces [...] under the aegis of commodification and spectacle”, which process depoliticised the enforcement of the bourgeoisie’s hegemony over space (Harvey, 2006:27). Further, Harvey asserts that “[t]he character of public space counts little or nothing politically unless it connects symbiotically with the organisation of institutional (in this case commercial, although in other cases it may be religious or educational institutions) and private spaces” (Harvey, 2006:31).

Investigating contemporary urban development projects (UDPs) of Budapest, a great deal of similarities with 19th century Paris can be noted. Large-scale, spectacular UDPs are completed in the inner city; public spaces are reconstructed, increasingly regulated and policed so as to make them attractive for the middle class and tourists. Nevertheless, Budapest’s redevelopment under the rule of Viktor Orbán’s party FIDESZ shows at least one remarkable difference with that of 19th century Paris, or contemporary Western capitalist cities: the government and municipalities do not rely primarily on commerce, but rather institutions and regulations in reshaping the city. The reasons behind the emergence of this more state-led strategy lie in the political-economic circumstances: the stagnating real estate market; the abundance of EU funds for urban development; the Orbán regime’s antipathy towards (and a significant share of the population’s with) “foreign” speculative capital investments and its representative institutions (shopping malls, banks, etc.); and the party’s machiavellist methods in policy-making.

Construction of spectacles by the public sector can have obvious benefits: they are symbols of development, prosperity, and hence, the success of the government. For political entrepreneurs, spectacles are of special utility in societies where negative visual images of degradation prevail, whereas those of prosperity rarely appear. Baudrillard (1981), Harvey (1989) and Gotham (2002) point out that exchange value has been eclipsed by sign value and signs themselves become commodities to be sold and consumed on the market, therefore the meaning of signs becomes crucial in contemporary capitalism. Accordingly, focusing urban development to creating signs and shaping their meaning can be a fruitful strategy, yet it must be ensured that the meaning of signs will not be contested. The Orbán regime lays a special emphasis on ruling the symbolic meaning of signifiers. “There is hardly any place in the city where nothing is being renovated” (Magyarország Kormánya, 2014), says the prime minister in his speech held at the opening ceremony of one of the spectacles, the Castle Garden Bazaar, to illustrate that Budapest is developing faster than ever before. This image is without a doubt very strong in a city characterised in the past two decades by deterioration of the physical environment, protracted completion of large-scale UDPs and corruption scandals.

Nevertheless, besides the spectacles’ ability to serve political goals, they are also applied as tools to attract the middle class, tourists or investors (that is, capital) to, and thus gentrify, certain areas. In the communication of politicians and in brochures popularising governmental and municipal UDPs, spectacles are often referred to as boosting real estate prices (Liget Város, 2014; Erzsébetváros, 2014), means of attracting tourists (Baán, 2014; Magyarország Kormánya, 2014; Vajna, 2014) or the middle class and investors (Kocsis, 2014). However, gentrification of the inner city is fostered less by what Harvey (2006) calls the facilitation of freer circulation of money, but rather revanchist policies, strict regulation and control that ensure that spectacles fulfil their dedicated function. Thus, the process appears more political.

If spectacles are created with the aim of changing the social composition of visitors, users, inhabitants of a locality, they can cause social conflicts. Therefore, spectacles are always manipulatively mobilised in a normative context so as to eliminate possible social conflicts. Such strategies are permeated with what Clark calls the “normative naturalising tendency” in the gentrification discourse (Clark, 2005:266). It is hard to argue against the reconstruction of public spaces, renovating and filling old historical buildings with new function, making streets cleaner and safer or preventing people from living in public spaces. Such results are always presented as brought by the cooperation of the nation (Magyarország Kormánya, 2014; Baán, 2013; Budapest Videó, 2014). In this way, spectacles become positive images that enhance national integration, as a tool to disguise class or political struggles.

In the following, I attempt to present examples of the political commodification of space by the construction of spectacles. In my overview, I look at three, sometimes overlapping, forms of materialisation of the spectacle in contemporary Budapest: large-scale UDPs, public space renovations and the regulation of the public space.

Laying the fundamentals for the spectacle before 2010

From 1990 until 2010, the prevalent urban development agenda of Budapest was characterised by increased fragmentation of urban governance between the government, municipality of Budapest and those of the districts; the reliance on market forces in shaping the development of the city and a race-to-the-bottom between district municipalities and agglomeration settlements in attracting investments (Tosics, 2005). Despite efforts to channel private capital into urban development according to a strategic vision, market-led urban development largely occurred following ad hoc mutual interests of political and economic actors (ibid).

In that period, urban renewal was a key tool of the urban development agenda. Whether implemented as based on a strategy (e.g. in district 8 and 9) or ad hoc municipal-private deals (district 7), urban development in Budapest's inner city has been launched mostly with the aim of improving the economic potential of "morally and physically obsolete" inner-city areas (Budapest Városrehabilitációs Programja, 1997:I) by renovating the housing stock.

Since gentrification was a process generally welcomed by politicians and, at best, ignored by planners (Aczél and Gutai, 2006), local programmes fostered the process rather than limited it. Therefore, urban renewal programmes of districts differed mostly in their considerations for townscape protection, that is, the extent of demolition of the historical housing stock in the areas designated for urban renewal. Such projects directly entailed population change (i.e. displacement of tenants to less central areas or compensated in cash) (Csanádi et al, 2007), while some programmes focused on the commodification of public spaces such as turning Ráday Street and the Gozsdu Court into spaces designed for consumption. A few spectacular projects were also started in the 2000s, such as the construction of Corvin Plaza, a shopping mall in the historic urban fabric of the inner city, cutting apart a street as part of the Corvin Promenade project; or Bálna (Whale), an iconic brownfield redevelopment project realised in public-private partnership on the bank of the Danube designed for commercial and cultural use. Although they had been announced as flagship projects positively affecting their surroundings, due to bad architectural quality, protracted implementation and the sharp contrast between plans and the projects' final form, both projects realised in public-private partnership appeared as failures in the public discourse, that is, negative images (Szemerey, 2010; Somlyódy, 2007; Zubreczki, 2014).

"Symbolic, ambitious actions which embody that we belong together"¹: Governmental large-scale urban development projects

After Viktor Orbán's party FIDESZ won in both the national and the municipal elections (on both the city and, with the exception of three districts, district level) in Budapest in 2010, the implementation of a seemingly new urban development policy has taken place. On the one hand, in line with the party's centralising efforts, educational and healthcare institutions run by municipalities became managed by the national government, the scope of the Municipality of Budapest's authority was reduced vis-a-vis district municipalities, and municipalities were made beholden to the government by assuming their considerable amount of debt, and, most

¹Government commissioner Balázs Fürjes at the conference of Napi Gazdaság „Development in the focus: New opportunities and challenges on the real estate market” held on 6 May. (Budapest Videó 2014)

importantly for the present investigation, it took a leading role in urban development of Budapest.

Short after FIDESZ gained power at all administrative levels in Budapest, in 2011, a package of large-scale UDPs were announced, commonly referred to as the “large-scale governmental investments in Budapest” (Földes and Tenczer, 2011). UDPs have been implemented directly by government commissioners appointed by the national government who work independently from municipalities. The UDP package consists of a large variety of spectacular and costly projects including reconstruction, refurbishment of existing and construction of new landmark institutions and facilities in the inner city. Projects have been designed and implemented without substantial consultation with the Municipality of Budapest, experts, the population and relevant actors or institutions. In the realisation of the projects, the Municipality of Budapest plays a subordinated role mainly as an issuer of permits. The projects were announced in the drafting phase of the long-term urban development concept which later turned out to formulate objectives conflicting the realisation of governmental projects in a variety of ways (CivilZugló Egyesület, n.d.).

The largest project in the package is the refurbishment of the Castle as the Prime Minister’s Office. In the first phase, the Castle Garden Bazaar, a representative and iconic building, originally built as a shopping centre at the end of the 19th century, having failed to fulfil its designed function after its completion and had been underutilised ever since, underwent refurbishment so as to become a representative cultural centre (Csontos, 2014).

The government fervently sought to exploit the spectacle in the electoral campaign as the building has been opened in two monumental opening ceremonies shortly preceding the national and municipal elections. In his opening speech, the prime minister referred to the project as “the pride of the capital of the nation” that survived privatisation and becoming a shopping mall, therefore now after the building was renovated “we do not have to be ashamed in front of ourselves and foreign visitors” (Magyarország Kormánya, 2014). In spite of criticism from oppositional political parties, 50 thousand visitors visited the site on the first weekend after it opened (L. Simon, 2014), yet there it is still uncertain what functions the building will host (Kerényi, 2014).

In the forthcoming second phase of the revitalisation of the Castle Quarter, the National Gallery, the National Library, several other institutions (museums, libraries, theatres and several institutes of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences) will be displaced from the Castle. Museums are planned to be relocated in buildings to be constructed in the City Park, currently the only large park in the inner city. New buildings will be designed by architects to be selected in an international architectural competition.

The announcement of the plan of turning the city’s oldest park into a museum quarter caused protests and drew criticism from urban planners, NGOs and professional organisations such as the Hungarian Society for Urban Planning. The project has been criticised mostly for that the site is unsuitable to host a museum quarter and the completion of the project would significantly may threaten the park’s recreational function, consultation with stakeholders has not taken place and the plan is inconsistent with existing urban development strategies and building regulations (Kandó, 2014a, 2014b; Ráday, 2014; Magyar Urbanisztikai Társaság, 2013; Mélyi, 2013; Körmendy, 2014).

Government commissioner (since 2012 ministerial commissioner) László Baán, who is also the director of the Museum of Fine Arts as well as the future Museum Quarter merging all museums located at the site in one institution, justified the project with its potential to attract 1-1.5 million tourists (Baán, 2013) and the project’s capability to become an “elevating cause that people, regardless of their party sympathy, can consider as being in the interest of the national community” (Baán, 2012). Alleged benefits of the project are supported by an impact assessment ordered by the government and authored by an international consultancy, yet the main statements of the analysis are not supported by facts and calculations, therefore it leaves doubts about its expertise and independence (Pákozdi, 2014b; 2014c). Despite wide criticism, some well-renowned experts and intellectuals support the project due to its potential to become a landmark attracting tourists and to “contribute to the economic and

social recovery of their surroundings” (Szemerey, 2012), a disadvantaged neighbourhood called “Chicago” in district 7 (Kovács, 2012; Kandó, 2014b).

Besides the two related flagship projects, a number of projects are carried out in the inner city with the leadership of government commissioner Balázs Fürjes. According to Fürjes, the projects are “symbolic, ambitious actions that aim at strengthening [Budapest’s] role as the capital of the nation; that [...] embody that we belong together” (Budapest Videó, 2014). Therefore, similarly to the reconstruction of the Castle and construction of the museum quarter, UDPs aim at constructing spectacles that are intended to symbolise success, arouse national pride; control space; attract tourists and the middle class. Other projects (both completed and planned) include the reconstruction of the square surrounding the Parliament in its 1938 form; renovation of Erzsébet Square and the Aquarium club; construction of the Rubik Science Centre, a museum designed to present “Hungarian inventions” to be located on an artificial peninsula stretching into the Danube.

The biggest UDPs are concentrated on a rather small area located on the edge of the inner-city districts 8 and 9, and are supported by municipal investments and urban renewal programmes in both districts. The reconstruction of the building of the former Military Academy to host the newly established National University of Civil Service; reconstruction of the FTC football stadium; construction of the House of Fates, a Holocaust memorial centre on a brownfield site (the planning of which has been boycotted by most Jewish organisations); the renewal of the People’s Park the necessity of which the government commissioner justifies by that “we do not dare to let our children there even during the day, moreover we ourselves do not dare to go to certain parts of the park, because what takes place there can be best described with terms of criminology” (Fürjes, 2014). The revanchist intention to gentrify the adjacent Orczy Quarter, one of the most deteriorated parts of Józsefváros drawing media attention for drug distribution centres, is overtly expressed by Máté Kocsis, the mayor of the district as he intends to rehabilitate the surrounding Orczy Quarter by locating a police dormitory in the neighbourhood and to attract students and investors (Kocsis, 2014).

The Orbán regime lays a special emphasis on the exploitation of the spectacle provided by large-scale governmental UDPs. Besides broadcasting the construction and opening of the new institutions in the media, spectacles also appeared in newly founded magazines published by FIDESZ-close think tanks and publishers where politicians and intellectuals (journalists, architects, film directors, analysts, etc.) praise the governmental projects as signs of development after a long-lasting decay in articles illustrated by impressive images of the projects (Magyar Krónika, 2014; Nemzeti Érdek, 2014).

Reshaping public spaces

The government’s policy of commodifying the inner city politically has been pursued, although on a different scale and in different form, by district municipalities as well. Prior to 2010, inner-city districts 7,8 and 9 had all pursued urban renewal programmes mostly with the aim of catalysing urban change and improving the socio-economic status of the areas by either the sale of their municipal housing stock to investors for real estate development or by renovating the old housing stock and moving in better-off tenants after completion. (The first two phases of Magdolna Quarter Social Urban Rehabilitation Programme with their focus on improving the living standards of tenants of social housing units and strong emphasis on the participation of tenants in planning and renewal process, has been an exception in the inner city.)

Due to the financial crisis, urban renewal programmes focusing on housing renovation, refurbishment, demolition or construction implemented in public-private partnership were halted after 2010. A depressed real estate market, the availability of EU funds and the new FIDESZ mayors’ talent in utilising the spectacle in gaining popularity together led to the shift in urban renewal programmes from housing towards public spaces.

Since 2010, inner-city district municipalities completed or announced a number of public space renovations. In district 7, two centrally located public spaces (Madách Square and Almássy Square) have been renovated and the renovation of Klauzál Square has been announced. In district 9, the re-renovation of Ferenc Square renovated 8 years ago has been announced (Dr. Bácskai János, 2014).

District 8, led by Máté Kocsis, a strong proponent of revanchism and, as communication director of FIDESZ, a powerful member of the party, has been very active in using the political commodification of public spaces. Horváth Mihály Square, Teleki Square, Kálvária Square and Golgota Square have been renovated in a rather similar manner: most of the squares have been fenced off and closed for the night; rules have been set for the use of the square under which entry with animals, smoking, consumption of alcohol, entry for people under the influence of alcohol or drugs have become prohibited; the rules are enforced by security guards patrolling the squares.

The goals of the Magdolna Quarter Social Urban Rehabilitation Programme have also been shifted. The programme had been the most significant urban renewal programme in Budapest with a commitment to social integration of disadvantaged inhabitants of the neighbourhood. It laid an emphasis on the involvement of local communities in complex housing and public space renovation, and supporting renewal by a large variety of programmes focusing on social elements of rehabilitation. However, even though EU funds provided for the project were dedicated to social urban rehabilitation, in the third phase of the programme the reconstruction of two streets and Kálvária Square have been financed from the budget of the programme, and around 40 per cent of the budget designated for housing renovation has become dedicated to the most visible elements of renovation: restoration of facades, renovation of firewalls and entrance doors (RÉV8, 2014).

The Municipality of Budapest, in order to comply with the amendment of the Housing Law that required the exhaustion of the Fund for Urban Rehabilitation, disposing of a share of municipal income gained from housing privatisation and set up primarily to finance housing renovations, allocated 16.3 million euros among 29 public space renovation projects in 19 districts in 2014 “whereby the townscape scenery, [and] sustainable use, the community space becomes revalorised, which affects social processes in the neighbourhood positively; [...] [and] new economic and communal functions emerge” (Budapest Portál, 2013). Amongst the 29 funded projects to be completed in Budapest, 5 larger projects are to be realised in the inner city: the renovation of Nehru Bank in district 9, two public space renovations in district 8, and one public space renovation in district 5 and 6 (Budapest Főváros Közgyűlése, 1573/2013).

While the former Urban Renewal Fund of the City exhausted after allocating the remaining sum for public space renovation, the only resource for financing renovation of condominiums remained the scarce funds operated district municipalities. In line with the increasing focus on public spaces, funds for the renovation of condominiums, an important element of financing the renovation of old buildings inhabited by people with lower income, have been decreased by districts, and most of which became provided in the form of loans instead of non-refundable subsidies. In district 7, in years 2011, 2012 and 2013, only 150 thousand euros have been allocated to condominiums in the form of refundable loans (Erzsébetváros, 2014). In district 6, a somewhat higher sum, 680 thousand euros have been earmarked for the renovation of condominiums in 2013 and 2014 (Budapest Főváros, 2013; 2014), yet both sums are insignificant in comparison with the costs of renovation of Madách Square (670 thousand euros) not to mention large-scale projects such as the creation of the museum quarter (500 million euros) (Index, 2012; Földes, 2014).

The effect of spectacles has been exploited in a variety of ways. Reconstructed public spaces were typically opened in the year of the election and have been broadcasted, advertised and used as venues of quasi-municipal campaign events very frequently in the three electoral campaigns in 2014. The mayor of district 9 held a public forum about the re-renovation of Ferenc Square renovated 8 years ago (Dr. Bácskai János, 2014). The mayor of district 7 played the guitar on the renovated Almássy Square as part of a campaign event

and months after opening Madách Square, a banner appeared on the facade of a building facing the square that read: "For Erzsébetváros and our homeland with love" (Horváth 2014).

Tightening control over public spaces

Spectacles have not only been created by intervention in the built environment, but also by regulations and measures. Measures aiming at hiding signs of poverty, or measures signifying greater public safety are tools that mainly serve the purpose of manipulation. Spectators see less homeless in public spaces and feel safer in a monitored area, however, it is evident such measures do not address any of the problems, only shift them spatially. Although sleep capacities in night shelters were expanded, their condition and rules make them a less favourable option to sleeping rough (Schádi and Udvarhelyi, 2014).

One apparent element of revanchist urban development is the criminalisation of homelessness described in Udvarhelyi (2013). István Tarlós, referring to New York's revanchist mayor Rudy Giuliani as his role model (Tarlós, 2014), banned "habitual residence" first in major underground passages in 2010 and later gradually extended the ban on other public spaces of the city. From 2013 onwards, an amendment to the Constitution enabled any municipality to designate areas where habitual residence is prohibited (Udvarhelyi, 2013; Alapvető Jogok Biztosának Hivatala, n.d.).

In district 8, the municipality banned rummaging through garbage in 2010. In a public statement, the mayor of the eighth district, Máté Kocsis, considered "more order, cleanness and less stench" as the benefits of the new regulation declaring that "a new form of help [for people in need of picking through garbage] has to be found to address this problem" (Dr. Kocsis Máté, 2010), yet not proposing any measures to this end.

Besides banning living in public spaces and rummaging through garbage, municipalities paid increased attention to improving public safety by expanding and improving their CCTV network. In districts 7, 8 and 9 the development of the CCTV network has been carried out or announced. In district 7, a high definition CCTV system has been developed (Straub, 2014), in district 8, the installation of CCTV is under development so as to be able to automatically match faces of people spotted in public spaces with criminal records and spot cars without documents (Józsefváros, 2014; Fekete, 2014). In district 9, the CCTV network is also continually expanded (hvg.hu, 2013).

CCTV is, however, not the only form of implementing control over public spaces. In 2012, in Diószeghy street, one of the most deprived streets of Józsefváros with a high crime rate, mobile police station was installed. The 12 metre high container is equipped with 5 cameras, one of which can rotate in 360 degrees. (Fidesz.hu, 2012) Speaking about the benefits of the project at the opening event, deputy secretary of state Károly Konrád said: "[by locating the] container [we] let law-abiding citizens know that all technical equipments are given for the police to protect them in their immediate living environment; [and let] unlawful citizens [know] that it is not worth committing crimes here" (ibid).

Conclusion

As presented above, economic commodification and political commodification of public spaces are manifest side by side and in a variety of forms in Budapest. The inner city is no longer valuable only as a commodity to be consumed on the market, but also as a commodity to be exploited by political entrepreneurs. In some cases, the political and economic rationale may contrast each other. For example, while, in order to achieve the Bilbao effect, the buildings of the new museum quarter are to be designed by architects, it is highly likely that the design of such buildings would not fit with the aesthetic preferences of the regime (Tamás, 2014). Accordingly, large-scale UDPs completed by the government or

the control of public spaces may, without commercial functions, become too costly to be maintained from public sources.

However, the most important question is not whether urban space should be used as a political or an economic commodity (spectacles of the regime certainly have the potential to attract tourists and the middle class), but rather about the consequences of both. After all, it makes little difference if certain social groups are prevented from staying in public spaces by private security guards or the police. It likewise seems to be of little relevance whether large amounts of public money is spent on supporting private companies in pursuing urban development projects or used by the government for costly and spectacular investments.

The political and economic commodification in Budapest are both based on revanchism so as to foster segregation which, coupled with a highly unjust national social policy (Szikra, 2014), can make “governance by spectacle [...] a very chancy business, as it can too easily spin out of control to produce unintended and sometimes quite surprising consequences” (Harvey 2006:28). Implementing urban change by regulation makes the gentrification aspect of urban development manifest as a more political and less natural process which is more difficult to veil. Albeit it is hard to predict what consequences of urban development policies of the Orbán regime will bring, with the rising level of poverty, preventing spectacles from being interpreted or used in ways and by people political leaders did not intend to create the spectacles for, will be increasingly difficult.

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