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Renewal of the Petőfi Square and its surroundings in Komló, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Public space is the most important place for social life, but it is also part of the identity of the local community. This is particularly true in Komló, where the mining past is still a perceptible and integral part of local identity. Petőfi Square is the central square of Komló's Kökönyös district, an urban district center that preserves the memories of its past, but has not evolved with changing needs in the city for some time. The renewal of Petőfi Square and its surroundings was an environmental architecture task that built on local values, responded to the needs of local people and helped the development of community life, and had to cope with a number of parallel demands.

KEYWORDS

square renewal, urban planning, urban design, environmental architecture, local community, identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Komló is a beautifully located small town in the Mecsek Mountains 20 km north of Pécs. The former small village developed in the first half of the 20th century with the start and growth of coal mining and became a town in 1951. Komló is a typical example of a socialist mining town. Its population peaked in the early 1990s, when it had more than 30,000 inhabitants. In the last 20 years, with the closure of the mines, the town has had to cope with population decline and economic problems. The town, which now has a population of around 22,000, has a significant socialist-realist architectural heritage [1].

The district of Kökönyös is one of the dynamically developing parts of the town, where the mining past is as much a part of the identity as anywhere else in the town. The housing and public spaces built for the miners 60–70 years ago during the socialist period are now obsolete and there is an urgent need to renew and improve them (Fig. 1).

Based on the Integrated Urban Development Strategy (IUDS) of the city, the aim of the planned interventions is to make the western part of the settlement, especially Kökönyös and its central area, attractive and suitable for community and economic functions. In line with the IUDS, the public space renewal project has been implemented with the following specific objectives:

- design and development of a multifunctional space in the center of the district;
- reconstruction of the urban green infrastructure network;
- raising public awareness of environmental and health-conscious behavior;
- improving conditions for sport and healthy lifestyles;
- implementing measures to develop economic and event tourism based on local resources;
- encouraging entrepreneurial activities and retaining the population;
- promoting cooperation between residents, civic initiatives and strengthening local identity;
- using innovative technologies and solutions.



Fig. 1. The Petőfi Square, the center of Kőkönyös district in the 1950s (Source: digitalized postcard from 1957)

The renewal mainly covered two major areas: the Petőfi Square and the Recreation Park in the block behind it, together with the surrounding parking areas. To reinforce the area's role as an asset exchange hub, nearly 200 new grass-grid parking spaces have been created around Petőfi Square as part of the public space renewal (Fig. 2).

2. PETŐFI SQUARE

Petőfi Square is a prominent public space of Komló, which is a well-defined small town scale public square, the center of the neighborhood. Its location in the city and the important long-distance bus stop make it a node for changing means of transport. Since many people commute to their workplaces in Pécs from here every day, they reach Petőfi Square by other means of transport (car, local public transport, bicycle, on foot). The area also plays a decentralizing role, being the heart of the Kőkönyös district. There are several public services nearby: a school, retail and service outlets, a post office, a bakery, a grocery store, a tobacconist.

In the past, the space was unable to fulfill its functions, due to its generally poor quality and problems with its original design. The area had mostly well-maintained vegetation before the investment (an important asset to be preserved) but was designed as a public park, not suitable for contemporary 21st century public space use in its present form. A functional and spatial rethinking was timely to transform the space into a formal sub-central space for

diverse pastimes, where green spaces continue to dominate but do not impede everyday use. Until 2017, the road in front of the large condominium on the western edge of the square had a busy traffic with parking spaces along the road, which prevented the uninterrupted pedestrian use of the space and direct connection of the condominium functions to the open spaces (Fig. 3).

The new square was designed with the aim of providing favorable conditions for pedestrian and cyclist traffic, without the unpleasant effects of car traffic (smog, noise, risk of accidents). The aim is to create a coherent space with a strong emphasis on pedestrian traffic, richly landscaped but paved. This gesture has also defined a new character for the square, ensuring its everyday use, providing accessibility to its functions and, in addition, offering the possibility of a quiet, shorter stay for relaxation, leisure and events, thanks to its high-quality green spaces (Fig. 4). The new geometry has been designed to accommodate the existing and planned functions in a way that preserves the significant features currently present in the square, such as the 'Miners' statue and trees of dendrological value.

The elimination of the existing non-functioning public toilet was a client requirement. The underground building was partially demolished and added to and converted into a storm-water storage tank and is used to store rainwater collected from the roofs. The square is watered by a sprinkler system to water the lawns, trees and newly planted flower and bulb plantings and low shrubs.

The main function of the square is to provide a meeting place for informal recreation. To this end, the aim was to



Fig. 2. Aerial view of the renewed Petöfi Square and Recreation Park (Source: with the permission of The Greypixel Workshop)

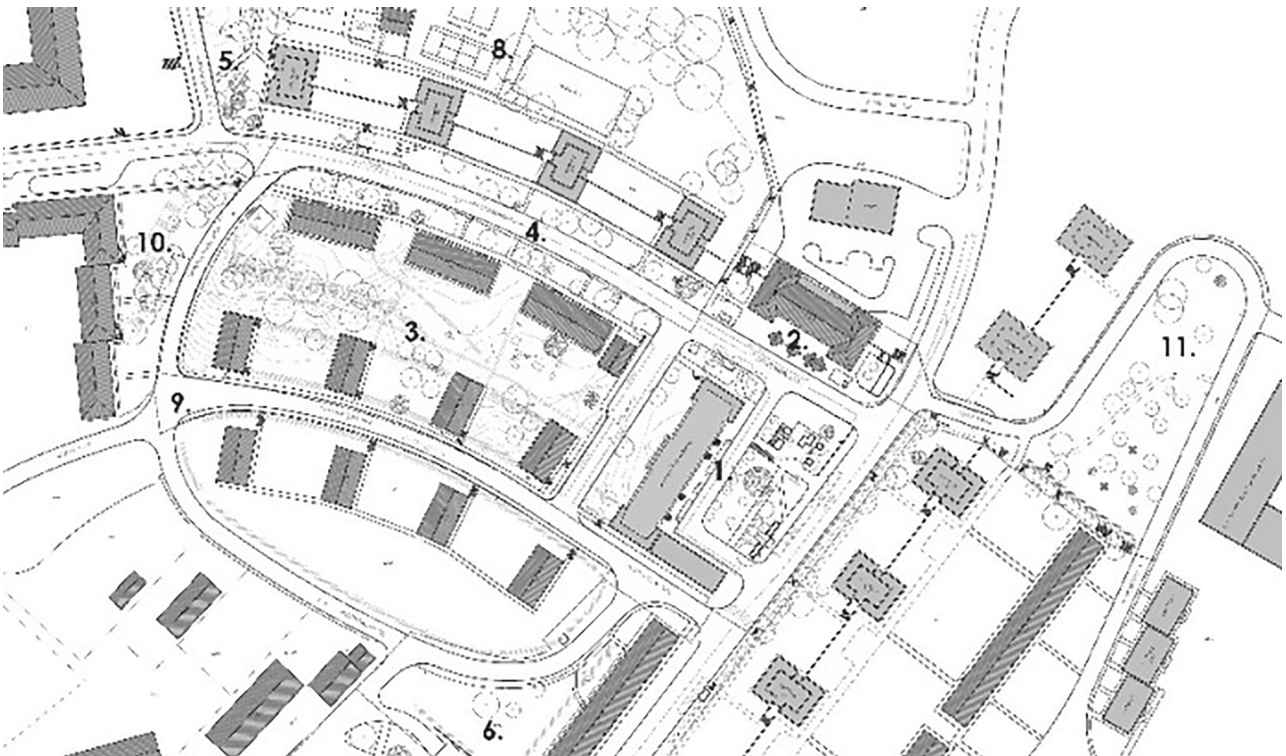


Fig. 3. The Petöfi Square and the recreation park (former state) (Source: authors' drawing)

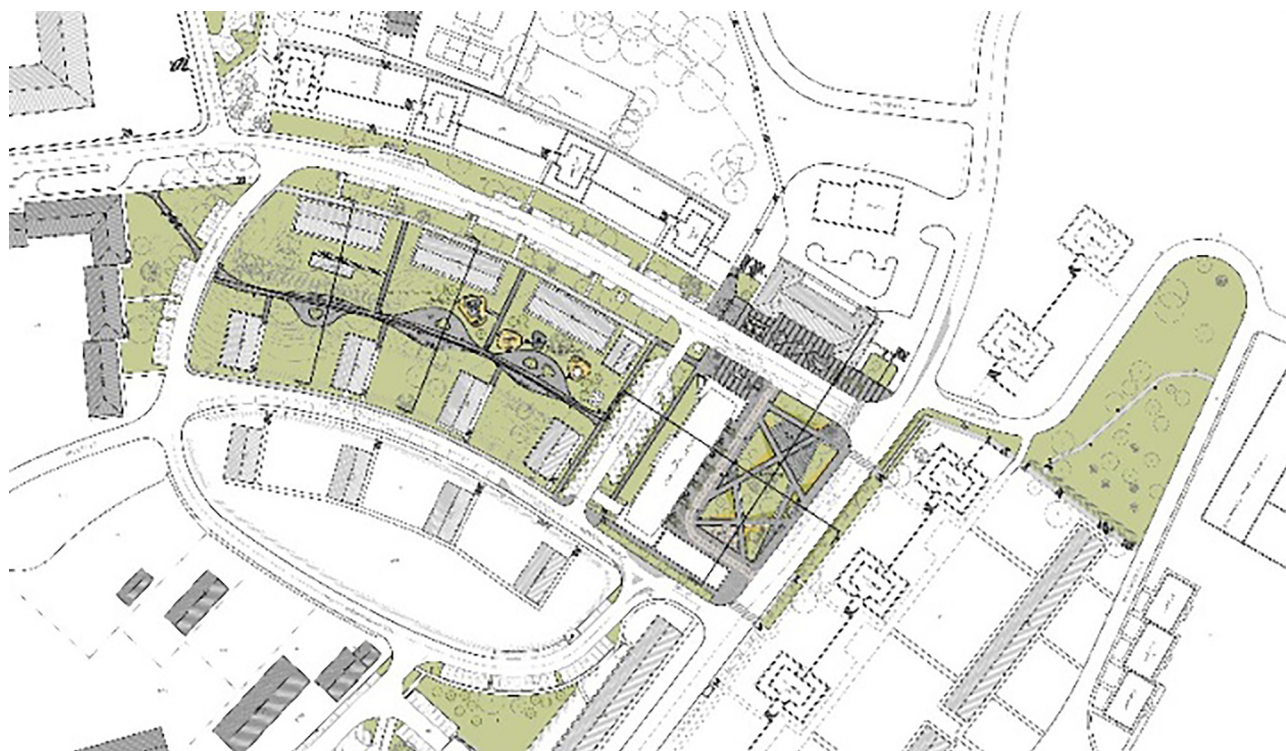


Fig. 4. The Petőfi Square and the Recreation Park (realized state) (Source: authors' drawing)

create as many seating areas as possible, which are slightly different from the traditional bench arrangement and allow for a freer interpretation of the space. The surfaces of the knee walls were individually covered with granite stone, the same material as the field borders, with durable WPC (wood plastic composite) benches in specific places, so that the entire length of the square could be used as seating.

The bus stops on Móricz Zsigmond Street and Pécsi Street were also renewed, and a digital passenger information system was installed. The inner field of the square used to have three large waste containers and three more separate waste bins, directly connected to the three staircase entrances. It was not practical to relocate the bins as they would have inconvenienced the users by being located far away from them, but they were not aesthetically pleasing when left alone and untidy. In the new square, the presence of the bins, which were aesthetically distracting, was addressed by the use of perforated cover elements in the same design as the new handrail cladding on the front steps of the commercial and service functions. Covering of the bins has also been implemented along Móricz Zsigmond Street and it is hoped that this will continue to be rolled out uniformly throughout the area.

Most of the space is covered with porphyry stone paving, except for the Wood Plastic Composite (WPC) paving under the cafe terrace. The most important criteria for the choice of materials were durability and the selection of paving materials with the lowest maintenance requirements.

The 'floating' green areas in the new geometry are covered with turf, planted with flowers and shrubs. The green fields

are separated from the surrounding paved surfaces by a 20 cm wide, light grey, cut and countersunk granite block border. The benches on the square were individually designed. The durable WPC sitting surfaces were placed on the upper plane of the knee walls with granite slab cladding (Fig. 5).

3. RECREATION PARK

Behind the block of flats on Petőfi Square, to the west, the block interior bounded by Móricz Zsigmond and Mikszáth Kálmán Streets used to be a valuable but underutilized green space with a significant tree stand at the western end. The area was ideally suited for the creation of a park for longer and quieter periods of time and relaxation, as a pair with the busy public space function of Petőfi Square (Fig. 3).

A new walkway was created across the block, opening up the whole area and making it usable. As the park is bordered by condominiums, it was important to ensure that the new feature would enrich the lives of the residents rather than disrupt them. Therefore, the area between the blocks, closer to the buildings, which are maintained by the residents and separated by a hedge, was not affected by the intervention. Following the analogy of the three northern blocks, three paved terraces have been created along the promenade, with benches, litter bins, decorative lighting and plants (Fig. 4).

The focus was to ensure that the area is suitable for all ages, so a standard-sized petanque court was built at the west end, where elderly people can also relax. The old playground will be replaced by a new, modern, standardized playground



Fig. 5. Green island, granite and porphyry paving and benches of the square (Source: authors' photo)

with better accident prevention. The playground surfaces have been built in age-graded areas, starting from the east side, where the youngest 0–4 year olds will be able to play, and moving westwards, the older children will be able to use the playground. So all ages can find a form of recreation that suits their intellectual and developmental level [2].

The whole area is transparent so that parents accompanying their children can easily supervise their children, even if they are of different ages. For them, rest benches will be placed adjacent to the surfaces. The future usability of the playground would be well supported if the unit currently operating as a pub could (also) be used as a café and confectionery, which would provide a place for those who wish to spend longer periods of time here to eat, and a place for toilets and changing facilities. Playground surfaces are impact-resistant, colourful, rubberised surfaces that are comfortable, safe to use and stimulating for children [3].

The area around the petanque court is a mostly shaded area with a significant tree population. There was only one existing pine tree in the playground areas, so small trees and groups of trees have been designed here to provide shade for the playgrounds and seating areas, taking care to leave sunny areas which can also be important at certain times of the year.

The traffic order in the area has not changed, with all surfaces of the new promenade remaining pedestrian-only. The number of parking spaces around the block needed to be increased along the surrounding Névtelen, Móricz Zsigmond and Mikszáth Kálmán Streets.

Most of the paved surfaces were covered with porphyry stone, similar to the material used in Petőfi Square. The surfaces of the terraces are paved with crushed porphyry pebbles, the green areas floating in fields with rounded shapes are bordered by a 20 cm wide, light grey, cut and sunken granite block border. The walkway is undulating, 1.8 m wide, the main thoroughfare is paved with large-element cut porphyry slabs of varying sizes, separated from the small cobble paving at the terraces by a 20 cm wide cut, recessed porphyry block border (Fig. 6).

The 1.4 m wide footpaths leading from the promenade, passing between the northern blocks and connecting to the existing footpaths of the southern blocks, are paved with small concrete paving stones. The walkway and footpaths are separated from the surrounding green areas by a 20 cm wide, light grey, cut and countersunk granite block border. An exception is the border on the north side of the central field, where a low retaining wall of variable height, rising in a wave from the

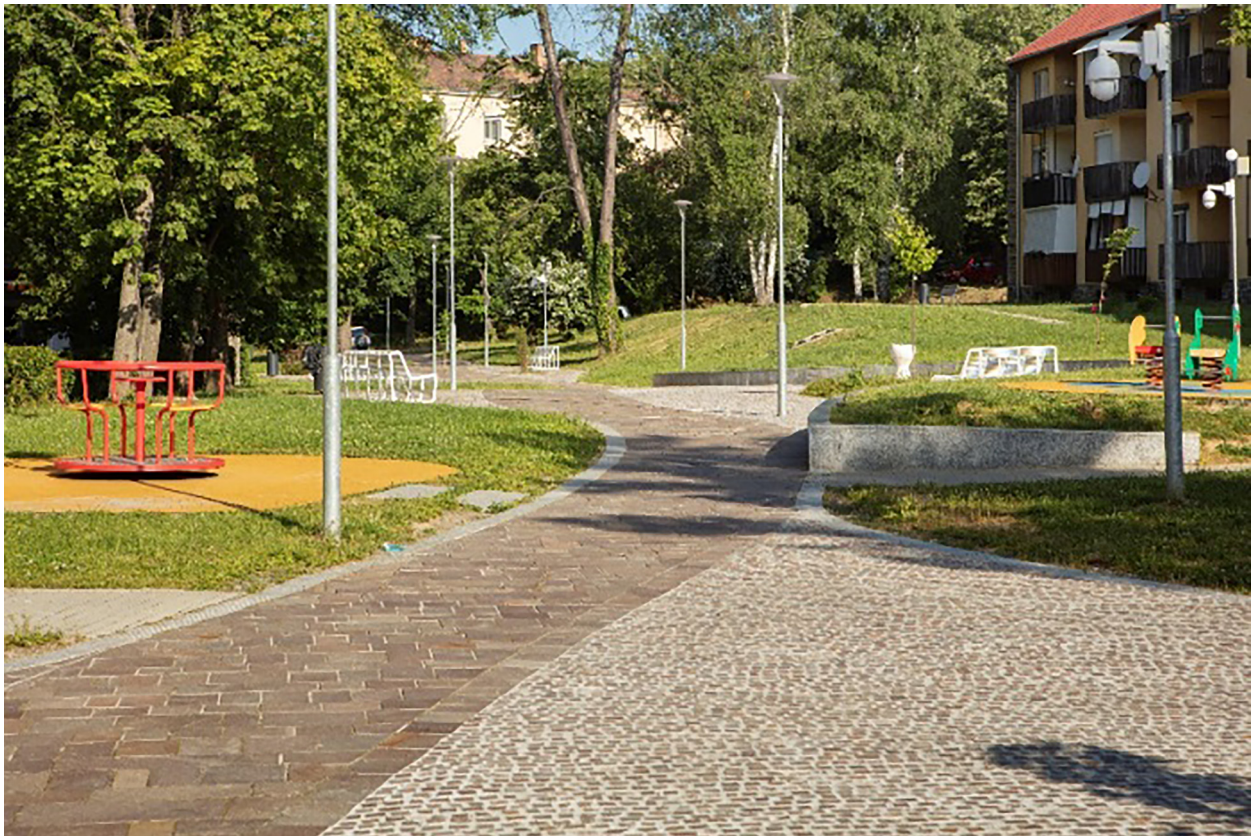


Fig. 6. The new undulating promenade of the Recreation Park (Source: authors' photo)

edges towards the center, is constructed of masonry between the andesite footpath borders, starting and returning from the recessed granite border, to support the ground behind it.

The playground fields floating in the green area are made of impact-resistant, colorful rubberized, molded surfacing. The fields are separated from the surrounding green areas by a curved, elemental bed border. Access to the playground fields from the footpaths and promenade is via granite slab tiles at the marked locations.

New litter bins have been installed in the square, and benches have been placed in the terraces and next to the playground. A small field in the central square, surrounded by a granite border, has been equipped with a white 'Zsolnay' drinking fountain.

4. CONCLUSION

The renewal of Petőfi Square in Komló is a successful example of how to ensure the harmonious coexistence of different generations by creating modern green spaces that meet the recreational needs of the population, using durable, long-lasting materials and paving, and creating parking areas that change the function of the square and its surroundings. An important contribution of the project was to free the square from the negative impact of vehicular traffic, to create surfaces that allow for modern services and to ensure safe pedestrian circulation. The revitalization of an

outdated public space that had deteriorated over time was achieved in a way that continues to give the population a strong sense of identity. The public space renovation was completed in spring 2020, just before the pandemic outbreak, to the great satisfaction of the local population.

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