



## Urban Ecology Australia - EcoCity 2

Urban Ecology Australia  
EcoCity 2 Conference - Adelaide, April 1992

Home

What's  
New

About us

People

Projects

Articles

Links

Contact  
Us

Support  
Us

# BUDAPEST: SEARCHING FOR WAYS TO MAKE THE CITY LIVEABLE

Tamás Fleischer

*It's great to be a tourist in Budapest. The city's beautiful location gives an idea of its history: a crossing point of the Danube, the meeting point of the hills and the plain and of the East and West.*

*But, for inhabitants, much more important issues are that the streets are dirty, smelly, noisy, that the life is expensive, sometimes dangerous too; that traffic jams are frequent, and everybody is nervous, strained.*

*Is this inconsistency a general metropolitan feature or the product of some special local tension? Can we discover its origin, and is there any chance of the city authorities achieving some improvement in the situation by way of town-planning policy?*

**It's great to be a tourist in Budapest. The city's beautiful location gives an idea of its history : a crossing point of the Danube, the meeting point of the hills and the plain and of the East and the West.**

The view from the Buda hills onto the Danube River and flat Pest is magnificent. Likewise, if we stroll across the Erzsébet bridge from downtown Budapest, we encounter a breathtaking panorama. The gradual curve of the Danube allows one to see the Buda hills, and the part of the city built upon their slopes. Behind us lies the flatness of the Pest side, and in a second we can sense that two regions meet here at the banks of the river; the Great Hungarian Plain and hilly Transdanubia. But if we think about the fact that the Danube was the border ('limes') of the Roman Empire, or we think over the centuries passed since that time, we can say

even more: Western and Eastern Europe meet at this point: differing cultures, differing settlement networks, differing infrastructures.

**But for the inhabitants, smelly, noisy streets, the frequent traffic jams, the dangerous conditions, the high cost of living and the fact that everyone is uptight and tense, are much more significant issues.**

But why isn't it as pleasant living in this gorgeous city as it appears to the sightseeing tourist? Is this inconsistency a general feature of large cities, or the result of some special local tension? Can we get to the root of this inconsistency, and is there any chance that the city authorities will be able to improve the situation via a comprehensive urban planning policy?

I will try to explain the structural and psychological inheritance which limits the development of this city, which despite its wonderful geographic setting has a barely tolerable everyday environment. Is the city council capable of finding the middle way between the extremes of just hesitating and looking to spontaneous processes, or of arbitrary interfering into anything - now, in a time which is not at all encouraging for large-scale developments?

The raging debate which erupted from the decision whether to organize a World's Fair (EXPO) in Budapest can shed light onto these questions.

**World's Fair? Mixing dreams, symbolic signs, market slogans and provincial desires with the recognised need for conscious development.**

Hungary carefully began to court the West prior to the dramatic political changes in Central and Eastern Europe. The Hungarian government attempted to demonstrate its capability to the west by making a few progressive decisions, ensuring, meanwhile, that the essential political power structures remained firmly in place. The plan to organize a joint Vienna-Budapest EXPO fits well into the scheme of these decisions. Austria and Hungary could have demonstrated the possibilities for thawing the cold war between two different political systems and jointly remember their pre-WWI history.

In the mid-eighties these hopes had to be enveloped into symbolic form: but by and by the whole symbolism become unnecessary. The two systems could approach each other in an ever more open way, until 1989 when the 'second world' collapsed more suddenly than anyone expected. Since then world opinion is no longer concerned about WWI; rather it is focused on overcoming the legacy of WWII, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall is far more significant than renewed friendliness between the two ex-members of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In light of the precipitous political developments, the issue was placed as a referendum to the voters of Vienna, who decided they do not want the

World's Fair. Those city development projects which would have been supported by the World's Fair, however, have begun, and *these* were important for Vienna in the long run.

In Budapest the starting situation was exactly the opposite. There was and still is no thoroughly planned out and legitimate city development policy. For many, the World's Fair seemed to fill this need, offering the force for a comprehensive city development. Regarding the careful examination of the inheritances the preparation could cover some of these expectations. First there was a panicked, haphazard scramble to find a location for the event, but then many of the heated debates' structural questions were clarified; the much-debated issue of locating the World's Fair seemed to calm down by 1990.

Simultaneously, a lack of time put great pressure on the situation and greatly reduced the possibilities. It became ever clearer that due to this lack of time, only the same old pet plans for constructing metro lines and bridges would be realized -- the long-term negative effects of these plans became more and more obvious even to the planners during the course of the debates. *"We realize that would be better, but we only have enough time for this,"* -- this slogan replaced the earlier one where, in a less informed position they could still proclaim with full self-confidence that *"we will only build things we need anyway."*

Two fronts developed, basically along the lines described below:

The **supporters** of the World's Fair, who based on the logic of a market economy feel that *any* kind of development and the expected prosperity associated with it is better than hesitation and postponement. All of the pressure groups who will benefit from the EXPO belong to this side, including: the construction lobby, the companies who rely on governmental contracts, tourism, trade, and those planners who, in the previous regime, were committed to a few exceptional projects, and their prestige and interests which have equated the EXPO with the question of their existence.

Those who **oppose** the EXPO wish to have an open debate about the city's macro planning, and based upon the results see whether the EXPO fits into the process. This side is composed of those who have previously opposed ill-conceived plans, and includes those greens who feel the EXPO is unnecessary as an advertisement of western conspicuous consumption, and several specialists, architects, economists, and sociologists, who see a large gap between the EXPO'S slogans and what can be achieved in reality.

Below, I will discuss not the questions of the EXPO, but two ways of thinking which influence the city's development in two different ways. One wants to rely on spontaneous processes when a faulty structure needs to

be surpassed, and does not realize that the spontaneous processes will only help the structures actually being strengthened and restored. The other wants to initiate the development of a new structure which would be capable of directing spontaneous processes in the right direction.

There are four topics which can be important regarding the relation between the structures and urban development:

- what are the city's structural problems
- what spontaneous tendencies are prevailing in the city's development at present
- what goals can be made to solve the problems
- what tools are available to achieve the stated goals, taking into consideration the spontaneous efforts and counter interests too.

**The city's structural problems: over-centralisation, and as a result the over-burdening of the downtown area, overcrowdedness, and the self-propagating nature of the entire phenomenon.**

Budapest's real and imaginary networks are far too centralised and hierarchical: transportation, telephones, commerce, bureaucracy, etc. are all dependent on the downtown area. This situation is unbearable not only from the point of view of the depending zones, but for the overloaded inner core zones as well.

Otherwise Budapest's situation within Hungary is similar. This problem has historic roots, and is not simply the legacy of the past 40 years; rather, it is the result of the past 150 years, strengthened by the last few decades' centralising efforts.

Today the *nation's entire* road network system intersects in downtown Budapest, but it is interesting to note that the transportation development policy which blindly aims to satisfy the 'needs' itself serves this anomaly: the main roads entering Budapest have had their space ensured by having the public transport along major lines sunk underground. Only the national road entering through downtown South-Buda lacks a metro; there are now serious efforts to remedy this situation.

A well-thought out development policy wouldn't remove pedestrians from the surface of the city to make way for *automobile traffic*, and the current metro network should not be developed in a ray network reproducing the destructive ray patterns underground.

**Spontaneous tendencies in the development of the city: the mistakes patterns of development only increase the negative consequences.**

**(‘More of the same’).**

You would think that the fact that the overcrowdedness and overcentralization problems of Budapest's downtown have been recognized and generally acknowledged would lead to the finding of the real solutions to these problems. On the contrary, the situation is just the opposite: while we have heard the diagnosis for years, the actual developments continue to worsen the problem, and presently we have to fight against the continuation of the existing mistaken, centralizing patterns.

It is not all the same, that the diagnosis is based on symptoms or that looking more closely we establish them analysing the creation-processes of the symptoms. Unfortunately, behind the seeming agreement regarding the Budapest problem, there are varying interpretations, and the general commonplaces on the symptoms in reality not enough for a right intervening policy to base on.

The current situation, which we summarize with the word *overcrowdedness*, is in itself not enough to determine what needs to be done. Overcrowdedness is the result of a relationship, i.e. it expresses the relationship between people and cars and the area or space allotted to them. The issue of overcrowdedness can be explained as a ***lack of space*** (services, parking places, institutions, bridges, lanes, sidewalks, etc.) relative to the needs; but it can also be described as ***the needs are too large*** (there are too many cars, too many people) relative to the space available. It is obvious that depending on which interpretation of the problem we accept defines the solution we choose.

Regarding the downtown, it is unfortunate that the ‘there is not enough space’ arguments have triumphed: the result is several transportation projects which have further deteriorated the surroundings, including the two downtown parking lots, the Erzsébet bridge which was rebuilt with six lanes, and the resulting consequences, the necessary enlargement of the connecting capacities. In reality, in the downtown the overcrowdedness problem cannot be solved by expansion, due to the fact that this problem goes back to structural reasons. As a result of the given highly hierarchical networks, people continue to be forced to appear in the downtown area, and by constructing further *points of attraction* in downtown the situation can only be made worse, not improve.

**Spatial differences: the same symptoms need different treatments, depending on whether we speak of the historical city centre, or the newly constructed housing estates.**

In and of themselves the statistical symptoms still do not pinpoint the real problem. At the same time the long queues in grocery stores, or the lack of parking space lead to different conclusions depending on whether you

are referring to a housing estate in the suburbs or the downtown area. While in the suburbs the services need to be expanded, we are convinced that in downtown it was a serious mistake to build a parking garage, to expand the transit routes and numbers of lanes.

The housing estate in the suburbs and the downtown are two more clearly definable examples; there are many intermediaries between the two, where not just the distance from the centre of town matters, but the value-statement: how much of the *given areas' traditions* do we see as alterable, and how much must be preserved? Margaret Island (a park), the Buda Castle or the Városliget (City Park) need to be analysed as part of the downtown. The values which are considered valuable in the districts surrounding the downtown need to be established, and these should not be sacrificed in the local conjuncture presenting itself by the big-scale structure of the city.

**Temporal impacts: the expected impacts of previous interventions has to be compared with what actually happened.**

We must be careful that we don't draw hasty, seemingly unambiguous conclusions and that in all cases we study the problem's spatial and temporal development, thereby preventing the repetition of mistaken mechanisms.

In the city's development all structures contain the influences of earlier building processes. Development can also be described as a continuous long-term game between decision makers and the inhabitants' spontaneous actions, where decision-makers' measures are reactions to the previous decisions' results, and to the inhabitants reaction.

The simple assessment of symptoms generally leaves this back-and-forth factor, and the decisions made want to deal with a unique situation, not recognizing the fact that the previous decisions were what caused the problem to become even worse. Psychology literature presents us with similar examples (2) regarding family conflicts, where solutions are prevented by the fact that the recurring reaction of those involved is always the same for the same symptoms. Since the same steps which led to the problem are the ones which are used again and again to 'solve' it, the author quoted has given this game the following name: "*more of the same*".

In human relationships, people neglect to assess the correctness of their reactions out of emotional reasons or due to the desire to rule over others. This part of the analogy is not necessarily applicable in the case of city-scale decision traps, but this is exactly why the following question arises: what principles can cause different persons with different characters to react in the same way over and over to the same unsolved situation?

## **The effects of economic and political mechanisms: spatial developments reflect the political mechanisms**

In the past few decades not only did a series of bad decisions reoccur in Hungary, but the strongly centralised characteristic of the decision-making processes was completely synchronised with the political mechanism out of which they were born. Referring to earlier studies we stress that not only the technical infrastructure but commerce ('provisions'), teaching, health care, etc. have also followed this ray-like hierarchical development. (3), (4).

At the same time the recognition that centralised structures fit in well with centralised political systems led to the hope that the collapse of the political system would automatically lead to decentralising the technical infrastructure. However, there is no guarantee that the new political power structure will not become similarly centralised, just like its predecessor. The older East European traditions proved to be mobilizable so that the transition is not automatic. At the same time the wait for the market to solve these problems has also prove to be an illusion.

**The market's impact: despite many illusions, market mechanisms are primarily suitable for serving the existing structure and not for establishing a new structure.**

We gave two interpretations of the 'overcrowdedness' problem above: according to the first there is *too little space* relative to needs; according to the other *the needs are too large* relative to the given situation. Both of these descriptions can be used by local authorities as an alternative. For a businessman, however, only one of the descriptions is acceptable: businesses want to satisfy the *needs*, because this can mean financial investment. The entrepreneur will open a shop or stand where there are many people, and the more people that s/he can attract, the happier s/he is - not dealing with the fact, that from another point of view this is *too many people, too much traffic*.

The large foreign investors and entrepreneurs think in the same way. They want to gain a market niche, or piece of real estate, where they can hope to gain the largest profit (either through business or land speculation). It is obvious, therefore, that the most frequented places in the city are the most coveted (under siege), especially since the naive and inexperienced local authorities do not know the real value of the real estate and do not understand the terms of the contracts they sign. Meanwhile, the local authorities are forced by themselves to sell their property for pennies because of their permanently repeated desperate lack of capital and resources.

It would be a major error to think that we have to grasp these offers immediately and at all cost. Neither in Budapest ('then they'll take it to

Prague') nor in the individual districts ('they'll take it to the neighbouring district') will anything irreparable be done if they don't sell the most valuable portions of their real estate. In fact, it is hasty property sales that can lead to damages and irreparable losses. A better thought out city development policy could make seemingly worthless property attractive in the long run. At the same time it is worth waiting with the more valuable real estate, so that the local authorities and inhabitants can develop their ideas for how it should be developed and seek offers to realize these ideas.

At present, the areas selected with development slogans for construction in Budapest are exactly the same as the spontaneous desires of investors. There is absolutely no need for forced development for these properties to be sold. In fact, if this is why investors need to be found quickly, it is explicitly damaging, since it obstructs the possibilities for long-term, well-planned management of the economy.

The city leaders need to think through all of the possible development models and then derive the actions which need to be made.

**There are so far five models which summarize the concepts of solving the city's structural problems:**

- 1. Do Not Develop at All**
- 2. Develop Undeveloped Sites, Moving From the Inside Out**
- 3. Increase the Downtown Area**
- 4. Develop Sub-Centres; Or**
- 5. Develop a Counterweight, a Whole New City Centre**

While these models are not exclusive of each other, in order to clarify which tendencies the city leaders need to strengthen, and which they need to lessen, we thought it would be best achieved by discussing each development model individually.

**Budapest is too big anyway, it does not need to be developed at all, all development leads to further inequalities**

Although this (non) development plan is correct in assessing that Hungary's over-centralisation can be compensated for by developing areas outside of the centre, in our opinion that this model requires an unrealistic pace and means which are sociologically unfeasible, especially when it is tied to the withering away of a city of 2 million inhabitants. At the same time, the point that Budapest should not be developed with money which is taken from other sources and goes against the interests of other

communities, is a valid one.

This model has a well-intentioned anti-urban or *green* version as well, which is worth considering. According to this, big city life needs to be phased out, because it cannot be brought into harmony with nature. There is, on the one hand, a lot of truth in this. However, it is not correct to assume that the problem could be solved if the city is left alone.

Without a doubt there are many exciting questions related to an environmentally sustainable and civilized lifestyle: this is the main issue of this conference. Still, I feel that, taking into consideration that even in the developed world there have not been any dramatic change or breakthroughs toward this direction, the starting point must be the existing lifestyle in the city of 2 million, and the realistic aim is how to improve the current urban lifestyle. This is inconceivable without steps taken to improve the situation, including investments.

**The downtown needs to be repaired; there are entrepreneurs willing to do this: the bomb-sites need to be developed, to civilize the urban environment**

The basic assumption of those who support this model is that the existing buildings in the downtown are dilapidated. There is a great need for quality architectural plans and construction, which western investors are willing to finance. Budapest should concentrate its efforts on this. (5)

Those districts which have entrepreneurs offering different possibilities should take advantage of them, if they fit in with their own plans and ideas.

Still it would be a serious error to base the development of the town on developing bomb-sites in the centre of Budapest (5). We've already pointed out to what extent downtown Budapest is a traffic destination, and how much traffic channels have been built up (traffic lanes, parking lots). This model would like to add further downtown traffic targets to this scenario.

We've also discussed the fact that investors and developers will gravitate towards developing in the city's most frequented areas. We can add that they support and promote conceptions which forces the city leaders to prepare the areas for them.

These investments are oriented towards valuable inner areas, since it is the most secure kind for the investors; the value of the renovated real estate and the property it lies on will increase significantly. The city leaders, however, should support those investments which will not only increase the property itself but the neighbourhoods value as well. This is how the city - the local authorities and inhabitants - can benefit from the investment.

## **The downtown area is too small, and therefore it must be expanded into neighbouring areas**

This model is not too different from the previous one; in fact, it is the logical consequence, since in the downtown area the undeveloped spaces will soon be filled, and subsequently (unless the existing buildings are demolished) the downtown needs to be expanded.

The city council supports such development along the lines of such a model, unfortunately. According to this the most important task in the near future is pulling the core of the city apart in a North-South direction, along the Danube. (6)

In our opinion, this development model is another attempt to solve the problem of a *lack of space*, leaving the structural roots of the problem unsolved. An enlarged downtown, continuous with the present downtown area, would not be able to achieve substantial changes regarding Budapest's and Hungary's overcentralisation.

Furthermore, this model does not break from the past practice of *outwards from the inside* development practice, which is marked by the practice of 'more of the same.' According to this the most burning issues are inside, and these must be treated first, and then continued outwards (until now, according to the 'next five-year-plan'). In the wake of developments which initiated further problems, rather than solving them, the problems inside were once again deemed the most urgent so the whole vicious cycle could begin again.

Our third reservation is economic: by attempting to revitalize the southern parts of the city, the city authorities are increasing the value of areas which would increase anyway, in the scheme of a well-thought through development policy. Plugging a southern island into the city's circulation and developing that area well would increase the value of the entire stretch of shoreline between the downtown and the island, making it attractive for investors, while the opposite scenario is not true: very few of the investments being made along the periphery of the downtown are increasing the value of property towards the south. Instead, the current debate about the allocation of the developments will be reactivated, but in the shadow of an even more unfavourable downtown expanded to huge proportions.

## **The load on the downtown area can be relieved by establishing sub-centres**

The '*sub-centre*' model appeared in the general developed plans 20 years ago, including six sub-centres. Much of this was actually realised: these sub-centres have developed into important local shopping centres, and as a result, it is no longer necessary to travel to the downtown to

shop. However, the architectural solutions, the bare housing estates, the lack of streets, etc. fail to make these new centres attractive and with ambience, bearing the stamp of an epoch. Private shop chains have difficulty fitting into the spaces which were not planned for them, and thus the provisions lack variety.

According to a newer development idea (8), the **industrial zone**, which lies between the downtown and districts attached to it in 1950, could be transformed, via a change in paradigm, into a **commerce-service zone**. The current downtown would remain a centre from a historical preservation point of view, but not function as an organisational, business centre. (Fig. 2 (see end of paper))

### **Establishing a new city centre, which is exclusively capable of taking on the role of a capital, or European metropolis**

Finally, according to the above models the 'anti pole' model includes the recommendation that in southern Buda, including the northern, undeveloped part of Csepel island, a new site could be opened for development. The investment aimed at the historical downtown could be redirected to this area, with the aim of gradually establishing Budapest's new city centre. (9)

This plan, in complete harmony with concept described above, would connect the new business/administrative centre on Csepel to the Pest side with a bridge (the continuation of the Hungária körút), while another bridge would continue this main traffic artery over into Pest.

The northern part of Csepel Island is bordered by two diverging branches of the Danube, and the south is determined by the basins of the Szabadkikötő (Free Harbour). The island is well-suited for developing an **exceptional trade regulation area** (duty free zone, special trade belt, etc.) which would be attractive for investors. Since throughout Hungary the regulations are at a very elementary stage, and progress comes much slower than expected (due to the existing inflexible structural, social and attitudinal limitations), the island could, provisionally substitute for this lack.

The area could serve as an experiment, able to offer more daring, attractive conditions (tax breaks, lower restrictions), since even in the case of an error (under or overvaluation), chaos will not ensue throughout the country. What is even more important is that the government can guarantee that it will not change the regulations in the zone for five or ten years, making the future predictable for the investor: eliminating what may be the greatest reason investors are holding back. This would ensure that in a relatively short time, the new investors would improve the environs for each other, visibly attracting various functions, and thereby relieving the traditional downtown of its load within a reasonable time frame. At the same time the whole process is not tied to any strict schedule, and in the

case of slower development it would happen at a slower pace. Another such zone, with different regulations, could be opened elsewhere. In the case of faster, successful development the zone could be expanded gradually, *ad absurdum* it could finally extend to encompass the entire country.

### **Means to Reach the Ends: Does a World's Fair Fit Into This Scheme?**

Let us summarize the most important lessons which we've expressed regarding the various development models for Budapest.

In the downtown areas the investors' main interests lie in the most valuable pieces of property and real estate. The local authorities' interests should be to avoid spontaneous developments until they have a plan for the development of the district or area. Otherwise all agreements made now restrict what will be possible in the future.

A slower pace for large-scale developments of downtown Budapest seems advantageous. Another important aim is furthering development from the periphery of the city inwards. This is required to lift the load off the downtown, which could be best assisted by developing a new city centre, capable of taking on the role and responsibilities of a national and European metropolis. The northern tip of Csepel Island is well-situated for this.

Establishing a city centre on Csepel is realistic even if it is only possible to direct a portion of the investors who show interest in Budapest to concentrate here. Based on a flexible development plan, investors who could be made interested in building the infrastructure necessary to approach the area should be sought after. At the same time the development can only remain a joint interest, if the allowances made for financing do not negatively influence the plans being realised in a state of the art manner.

Only after this can it be decided when the World's Fair or some other event can assist in the city's development. What can already be established is that those parts of the 'decentralised' World's Fair sites which are *downtown districts* do not need to have the pace of investments pick up, in fact, this may be detrimental.

Areas which border the downtown, including the strips along the river, would not be damaged by speeding up development only in the case that this is not done at the price of the outlying areas, and if prior agreements are in effect. At the same time in conjunction with a hurried World's Fair there is no means for the aforementioned, so that these downtown sites go in opposition with the development from the outside inwards.

Regarding the potential new city centre, while the 1996 event is too soon

and would only cause damages, a well-planned event for the turn of the century would no doubt have a positive effect on the investments made up till then and would speed up further investments. It is clear that *an event which does not include infrastructure investments needed for Csepel Island supports the construction of the Lágymánosi Bridge, which would have explicitly negative effects on the development of the city, and is not necessary in 1996, or ever.*

### **Consequences, Questions**

Naturally I do not expect readers make a statement or take sides regarding actual technical issues of Budapest's development. I would first and foremost like to draw attention to the fact that the questions were never portrayed or debated in an open manner. What is needed is not a statement on the content, but on the way the decision was reached: prior to drafting technical designs a consensus taken not only from engineers needs to be established regarding the future of the city.

The current tendencies are in complete opposition to this: while no one questions the truth of the above, certain significant powers are obstructing the problems from being expressed on a political level, so that by the time a decision has to be made the decision-makers are faced with limited options. It is therefore imperative that the city leaders partake as partners in the insecurity of the situation and take responsibility for allowing the most aggressive lobbies to succeed in pressing seemingly technical questions by.

### **REFERENCES**

- (1) Miklóssy Endre: Budapest - új fejlődésu pályán ÉGSZI Gyorsjelentés 20, szám 1991 július
- (2) Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J.H. & Fisch, R.: Változás. A problémák keletkezésének és megoldásának elvei Budapest, Gondolat 1990
- (3) Fleischer Tamás: Infrastruktúra-fejlesztési csapdák Közgazdasági Szemle 1986 február
- (4) Fleischer Tamás: Infrastruktúra: helyzetek, nézetek, szemléletmódok. Közlekedéstudományi Szemle 1990. május
- (5) Fazakas György: A városi fejlesztés motorizációja, városi lokomotívok Kézirat. Előadásként elhangzott a *Budapest jövője - a jövő Budapestje* városfejlesztési konferencián az Ujvárosháza Disztermében 1991 áprils 5.-6.-án

(6) Schneller István: A város térszerkezetének távlati koncepciója. Előtanulmány *Budapest szabaddemokrata főpolgármesterének programjavaslatai 1* 1991 augusztus

(8) Nagy Béla és munkatársai: Javaslat a dél-budapesti városrész fejlesztésére Kézirat (pályázati műleírás) 1990 november

(10) Aczél Gábor: Mekkora legyen Budapest? Beszélő 1991. április 13.

These references have been entered as provided by the author.

---

[www.urbanecology.org.au/ecocity2/budapest.html](http://www.urbanecology.org.au/ecocity2/budapest.html)  
9 July 2003