

Public Space ‘Development’: A Case Study of Erzsébet Square in Budapest

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Erzsébet Square is one of the most frequented central squares of Budapest. It has been an important meeting point, especially for young people, since a cultural centre and concert hall, the Gödör Klub opened in 2002. However, for more than a decade it has been a sight of political and financial struggle resulting in a rundown environment, which was then renovated in 2013 using 2.5 billion HUF public funds. This research draws upon a quoted question from David Harvey (1985:14) that is “In whose benefit is space to be shaped?” and aims to explore the recent ‘development’ of the Square from a critical perspective focusing on the experience of the users and visitors of the Square. Therefore, it draws upon the literature concerning the end of public space and the right to the city arguments (Harvey 1985, 2012, Lefebvre 1996, Mitchell 2003). In conclusion, it is argued that following the ‘Western’ or global trends the processes took place at Erzsébet Square may be rather described by commodification than development, resulting in a(n upper-) middle class targeted and consumption focused, over surveillanced, commodified space that is exclusive and unaffordable for many.

Conceptual Debates on Public Space

Commodification of public space is often state led, through policies and interventions that create an exclusive, marketable, ‘upgraded’ space for tourists and for the public eye that is the public eye of the consumers (Harvey 1985, 2012, Lefebvre 1996). An indirect form of commodification of space, as in this case, may happen through renting out a publicly owned space, a public square or a park. Such upgraded places are spatial representation of the exclusionary attitude towards the poor and towards ‘otherness’ that characterizes consumer society (Bauman 1998, Mitchell 2003). Therefore, while space remains public in a legal sense it loses its deeper meaning as public; that is the physical manifestation of political sphere, the embodiment of democracy (Parkinson 2012). This tendency has intensified in the case of Hungary in the last few years and has become the most conspicuous in the case of the homeless, but an authoritarian and punitive moralisation of public space is at the core of planning in general.

The transformation of Bryant Park in New York City is a great analogue for the present case study as it tells a similar story, in terms of forced top-down upgrading of an urban space, introduction of excessive surveillance and commodification of space in general (Madden 2010). As Madden (2010:190) argues only a space “that is accessible to all, where all can be seen and engage in meaningful intersubjective communication, should qualify as public”. In this sense, the end of public space argument applies to many contemporary urban spaces, as “they restrict access or visibility or otherwise obstruct meaningful intersubjectivity”. Harvey (1985, 2012) and others (e.g. Lefebvre 1996, Mitchell 2003) similarly argue that “the traditional city has been killed by rampant

capitalist development, a victim of the never-ending need to dispose of over-accumulating capital driving towards an endless and sprawling urban growth no matter what the social, environmental, or political consequences” (Harvey 2012, xv).

Ivson (2007) on the other hand notes that there is a growing literature of “transformationist” perspective that does not see depoliticised public space as the end of public space, but sees it as an element of a wider change effecting society in a wider sense. That is the increased centrality of consumption and commodities. That is to say space and society mutually construct and reconstruct one another (Gramsci 1985). In this sense, as Barber argues “shopping and civic encounter have been divorced”; while once shopping used to be just “one of several things that drew people into spaces” today it has become the primary reason. (Barber 2001 cited in Parkinson 2012:162). This is what Madden (2010:187) refers to as “publicity without democracy” in her case study, and argues that public (space) in contemporary context is “decoupled from discourses of democratization, citizenship, and self-development and connected ever more firmly to consumption, commerce, and social surveillance”.

However, it is important to contextualise meanings as even in the case of Western countries it is rather questionable whether 'freer' or 'more public' public space have ever existed, before its commodification and over surveillance; or perhaps it was just under different control. In a non-Western context, for instance in post-Socialist Europe the appropriation of the concept of public space (as it is understood in Western context: that is a physical manifestation of the political sphere, the embodiment of democracy) is perhaps even more problematic. Mitchell (1995:121) notes that “the definitions of public space and ‘the public’ are not universal and enduring; they are produced rather through constant struggle in the past and in the present”. That is to say, there has always been a question about whose democracy or whose freedom or whose public space: “From this perspective the struggle for democratic urban public space is an activity involving creation and construction, not repair and retrieval” (Phillips 1992 cited in Iveson 2007:7).

Research Methods and Data

This research was based on the combination of multiple methods including the collection and analysis of both secondary and primary qualitative data. As part of this case study, discourse, content and interview analysis were combined to answer the following research questions: What has changed on Erzsébet Square in terms of user experience? Who are the target audience of the square? How did the facilities of the square change? How do these facilities determine the target audience?

Castree (2005:541) argues that case study research in human geography serves an important function. “It shows the world to be persistently diverse. Yet it shows that this diversity arises out of multi-scaled relations such that it does not emerge *sui generis*”. McCann and Ward (2010:175) similarly emphasise this both territorial and relational notion in theorizing and conceptualising cities and urban policy. As they argue research should be “equally sensitive to the role of relational and territorial geographies, of fixity

and flow, of global contexts and place-specificities (and vice versa), of structural imperatives and embodied practices, in the production of cities.”

The preliminary research was based on the analysis of secondary sources. As a starting point, it was aimed to outline the background of the Square through analysing the post-socialist planning and policies in relation to the Square, with particular focus on the post-2002 era, when a cultural centre and concert hall, the Gödör Klub opened. As part of this research the websites of the square, the local government and the city were consulted as well as the national and local municipalities were approached for further information, such as lease agreements and planning strategies. At the same time by the analysis of online news sources and online forum conversation it was aimed to gather the problem areas and issues that may concern square users. It was a foundation for the further research as well as due to the nature of online opinion formation (anonymous) it gave a different angle to the observation than the later face to face interviews or conversations. The online forums were particularly important as there the opinion of the earlier square users could also be found, who decided not to visit the Square after the changes.

The preliminary research was followed by the collection of primary data in the form of participant observation over the summer of 2014, including the ethnographic observation of the Square and short semi-structured interviews with the square users and the security guards. The semi-structured interviews ranged from 15 to 40 minutes, depending on the size of the approached group, their interest in the topic and their willingness to participate. The groups ranged from one person to 5 people, all together 15 groups, 28 people were interviewed including 13 female and 15 male participants from the age of 18 to 72. The security guards were approached with unstructured interviews and information was acquired through open conversation that allowed unforeseen topics to come up.

It should be noted that due to the fact that the square was reopened at the end of March 2014 and the interviews were conducted from mid-summer the results were already effected by the fact that many of the earlier users of the square, who did not like the changes have stopped visiting the place.

Empirical Findings and Analysis

In this section, the problem areas and remarks of the visitors and the security guards of the Square mentioned throughout the interviews will be discussed, as well as those noted by news sources and forum conversations. The most frequently mentioned problems were the lack of public toilets, lack of bins and the rubbish all around the grass, the presence of the security guards, the new rules regarding to bicycles and alcohol, and the expensive bars and more generally the way a new, more elite subculture took over the place.

Extract from a Day on the Square. A sunny Saturday the Square starts to fill up early. More typically starting with tourists and families with small children during midday and with young people (including teenagers, but mostly people in their mid-20s, early 30s) from around 4pm, and it reaches the busiest time around 9-10pm. The most typical

activities include mingling around, drinking in one of the bars or somewhere in the park – most typically around the pool with their feet touching the water. Sitting near the fountains that push out refreshing vapour from between the stones is also a popular place, especially when the weather is very hot. Barely any conflict appears (or seem to appear) on the Square. The guards only seem to walk around and face only minor incidents, such as bikes on the square, skaters or people lying around where they should not (as the guards tell them), but these ‘issues’ are easily solved, in most cases with a single notice.

Facilities. “The park’s intended public was not faceless and certainly not classless” (Madden 2010:198) and perhaps starting with the list of facilities of the Square is the best way to present the target audience. Akvárium Klub (Gödör Klub before), that is the key element of the Square, even though the interviews suggest that visitors of the Square often do not actually have any moment spent inside (or even on its steps, where tables and chairs are located for the consumption of drinks and food). Fröccs Terasz is an open bar with wooden, colourful furniture with summary, beach-like feeling that is only open during the summer. Prosit Bar, is located a little bit outside of the buzz of the Square with its high tables it is probably the least popular place on the Square targeting higher-end costumers and is usually filled with men in suit after work, during week days. Design Terminál is a governmental institution for the development of the Hungarian “creative-industry”. “Its role is to encourage domestic ‘evolvment’ of young generations and to draw the attention of both domestic and international investors to the economic potentials inherent in these talents.” (designterminal.hu) Terminál Restaurant and Bar, as it says on the webpage is a “meeting point of gastro-adventurers, for a little morning buzz, a quick dinner, an afternoon sauntering and in the evening we let the world to open up”. Terminál Market works together with the restaurant, selling Hungarian, unique, special and mostly bio-food. Erzsébet Car Park has been here since the Gödör Klub opened in 2002 and finally the new bike-share scheme, the MOL Bubi has two spots on the square too (with 30 bikes all together). Without any further investigation, it is already conspicuous that the square now has a well-defined new, solvent target audience.

The most common problems that were mentioned were very practical and did not focus on the general transformation of the square. Perhaps it was also due to the fact that the interviewees were mostly those, who decided to frequent the square regardless of the changes. The one problem that nearly all the interviewees mentioned was the lack of (free) public toilets. Other, similar problem that was often mentioned, was the very few bins and their locations and consequently the rubbish and cigarette butts all around the Square (especially in the green parts). However, a few critical observations were also made. For instance, Kálmán (26) complained that, ‘the programme of Akvárium became much worse. (...) I have the impression it became a posh place, completely breaking with the traditions of the old Gödör.’ Others highlighted the fact that although they would love to enjoy the new places on the Square, ‘as they certainly do look very cool’, but they simply just cannot afford even to have a beer in these places (Jolán 21).

Environment. Just like the facilities outlined above the whole environment and the decoration reflects a park where design and spectacle is prioritised and utility is not in

the focus (Montgomery 2013). With the help of the interview materials and the conversations with the security guards in the following the new environment is illustrated, where a clean, orderly and secure square is aimed to be kept with more or less success. The decorative elements, the combination of different waterworks, the mallow stone, the glass walls, the unified design and their harmony are all to attract young professionals, the (upper-)middle class and tourists who want to enjoy their time in a 'safe', 'harmonious' open area. The adequate private security guards are also walk around the square in pairs or in threes, depending on the time and day 2-5 pairs of them. It is part of the lease agreement between the government and the renting company that the Club "is obliged for maintenance, to keep the buildings/ kiosks/ tools clean and protect from and remove potential damages (e.g. graffiti)". Throughout the conversations with the guards it has become apparent that they are not only there to protect the Square from crime or damages, but from everything and everyone that do not suit the façade. As they said, 'there are certain rules', 'things that the maintainers don't like here that we have to pay attention to'. When they were asked to list the most frequent problems they have to deal with, they tended to list the following four: pocket picking, disorderly young people, homeless people and druggie people.

The bike 'issue' is two-fold, but concerns were expressed by approximately half of the respondents. On the one hand, the then newly implemented bikes of the bike-share system (MOL Bubi) was introduced, as well as several separate or semi-separate bike lanes approaching the square from different directions were implemented. On the other hand, however, some of the regular bike racks have been replaced by Bubi bikes or by bar areas, leaving fewer places for (regular) bike users to lock their bikes, accompanying a policy that people are not allowed to keep their bike lying beside them on the square, as bikes are not allowed on the square. As Kinga (18) noted 'There used to be a lot more bikes around they also removed several bike-racks.' József (40) similarly pointed out that 'It's not allowed to lock your bike to the barrier. I can only leave it at the bike racks. It wasn't like that before'.

The newspaper articles and the attached forum conversation discussing the situation on the Square were ambiguous, including both good and bad experiences. These included debates on the manner of the guards or their intimidating presence, and whether someone is sent off from the square with the same behaviour that was accepted before (i.e. drinking alcohol that was not consumed at one of the Square's bar). While the debates presented both satisfaction and anger, one of the forum commenters receiving the most up-votes made the following critical note that also resonates with the information gathered from the guards: 'Ok, so I should be happy because there are stupid rules that I don't need to keep? At least not until they like my face? Until I am sympathetic? ... Until I vote well? So, I can go there, drink my beer and smoke, but then I instantly become corrupted' ("faculty" in the forum conversation under Ács 04.04. 2014)

Conclusion

The present case study aimed to highlight the problematic concept of 'development' and the attached processes in contemporary urban planning. Development no matter on what

scale (personal or global-economic) presupposes a normative ideal to be reached that determines a goal that is often lack an intersectional, critical perspective. As this research highlights, urban policies in Hungary, following the international, neo-liberal trends, prioritise a development that is targeted towards the middle-class through consumption, further deepening the gap between those, who can and cannot consume.

The transformation of the Square seems to very much resonate with the international literature, and as Madden (2010:187) argues in the case of the Bryant Park, “a new logic of urban publicity was assembled and built into the landscape”, that is a publicity that is centred around consumption, resulting in a commercialized and commodified space. Urban (public) space, Erzsébet Square in this case, becomes a commodity, and thus exclusive by the fact that people simply cannot afford the products sold on the square, therefore staying on the square becomes unaffordable and inaccessible. As Harvey (1985:13) argues commodification of space is a process, when through “annihilation of absolute qualities of place”, its use value is replaced by an exchange value. This is particularly relevant in a case when the given space is located in the city centre. Development in such context will mean to maximise economic growth, to have a square that has an audience with money to spend in an environment where spectacles are tools of depoliticisation. (Gotham 2002).

Drawing on Iveson (2007) it can be highlighted that the protection of the Square through increasing surveillance, may also enhance access to public space for many. However, it is not the case in the present situation as the Square has always been a relatively safe place and as it has become evident from the conversations with the security guards their presence is not (solely) for protecting people from crime, but to protect them from distaste or losing comfort and joy. Their presence was important so the (upper-) middle class can “avoid confrontation and class relations can be kept to an abstraction” (Goode 1978 cited in Harvey 1985:13)

Exclusionary and punitive ways of addressing poverty have been increasingly favoured by (urban) policy makers in Hungary, targeting primarily the homeless but effecting others as well. Through the institutionalisation of such attitude towards poverty, criminalisation and consequently fear and thus the acceptance of surveillance have become normalised. Under such circumstances the defining point, where ones freedom ends and an other’s starts, is quite unequal and lacks any democratic approach: freedom can be consumed therefore ones freedom to use/be in public space is limited by their ability (or desire) for consumption.

Therefore, it can be argued that the development of Erzsébet Square did not aim to protect a relatively equal access to the Square, it does not aim to be welcoming to everyone. This is particularly problematic when not only a legally defined public space loses its public feature, but when in fact it happens through the investment of public funds. The case of Erzsébet Square is far from unique. In fact, using public funds to reduce public access to public spaces is the general tendency in Hungary and globally.

Key words: public space, commodification, urban studies, critical theory, Budapest

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