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Esztergom

A City Centre Between Historic Sites¹



ABSTRACT

The following short paper discusses the reconstruction of the City Centre of Esztergom in the second half of the 20th Century. The “*New City Centre*” in the area between the two historic zones of the town was planned as a completely new construction. The paper shows how this centre reflects a compact version of the ideology of city reconstruction of the time, how the architecture concepts chanced with the time. The plans of a radical intervention were rejected. Most of the buildings were built in an even more “*historicising*”, almost post-modern style. But the townscape could not integrate this style. Thus, after 1990 came up the task of “*reconstructing the reconstruction*”.

KEYWORDS

monument preservation, architecture sociology, history of urban planning

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*“If there is any place in the land that is defined by its architecture – with a single building that colours the entire cityscape and shapes the city’s sights – then Esztergom is that place.”*² Thanks to its size and its location on top the castle hill, the basilica is clearly visible at a distance of more than ten kilometres, while the historic cityscape is rather modest, at least in comparison to the twelve cities in which areas were first listed as historic sites in 1961.³ Esztergom was the only city in which two historic zones were listed: one near the basilica (archbishopric town or Watertown) and one in the former royal part of the city around Széchenyi-Park.⁴

The area between the two zones would also have qualified as worthy of protection, but a new modern city centre had been in planning here since the 1940’s. The *“New City Centre”* in the area between the two historic zones was planned as a completely new construction during the four decades of Socialism which ended in 1989. Although this area is very small, it has a decisive effect on the cityscape. Esztergom city centre more or less offsets the basilica, as it represents, with only one centrally located building, modern (in the lingo of the time, *“Socialist”*) Esztergom.

The following short paper focusses on the time when the city centre was being built, between 1960 and 1990. It shows how this centre reflects a compact version of the ideology of city reconstruction of the time, immediately adjacent to the historic zones.⁵ Besides contemporary professional books and studies on city remodelling also planning documents of the Hungarian National Archives (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár) served as sources for this paper.

THE OVERDUE CITY CENTRE

Until 1895, Esztergom was made up of four individual settlements: the Royal City of Esztergom, Watertown, St. George’s Field (Szentgyörgymező) and the Parish of St. Thomas (Szenttamás)⁶. The former square, where the city centre (Rákóczi-tér) would later be built, was located exactly where the Royal City, Watertown and the village-like Parish of St. Thomas met (only St. George’s Field was located slightly further off). This area gained importance also because, as of 1885, it provided the fastest access to the bridge to Párkány (today Štúrovo). No less than seven streets led to Rákóczi Square, where all together they formed a small, open square. Even the nationally significant paved federal highway along the Danube (B11) went by there. And at that time and precisely in that place the idea for the erection of a city centre was born. Rákóczi Square and its surroundings preserved their character into the middle of the twentieth century with the former suburban type of building characteristics: low houses, full of nooks and crannies between. Only the so-called Lőrinc Street towards Párkány⁷ was given a more impressive outer aspect.

So it is no coincidence that, a good half-century after the once independent cities had been united, a prestigious new design for Rákóczi Square was the main objective of the architectural competition held in 1943.⁸ The plans submitted to the competition have to this day only partially been unearthed.

² Cf. GRANASZTÓI 1978. 81. Quotation translated by Zita Horányi.

³ Buda (Budapest), Eger, Esztergom, Győr, Kőszeg, Pápa, Pécs, Sárospatak, Sopron, Székesfehérvár, Szombathely, Vác, Veszprém (POZSONYI 1973. 99.; GERŐ 1971. 186–188.).

⁴ GERŐ 1971. 187.

⁵ ROMÁN 2004. 228–229. Cf. also JANKÓ 2011.

⁶ PIFKÓ – ZACHAR 2000. 75.

⁷ Štúrovo/Párkány until 1920 Hungary, 1920–38 Czechoslovakia, 1938–1945 Hungary, 1945–92 Czechoslovakia, since 1993 Slovakia.

⁸ KUN 1981. 29.

But even those that do exist show that the architects did not deal with the given historic features very respectfully. After examination by the Historic Monuments Protection Authority of the 1950's (1953, carried out by Kálmán Szelle), the plans had to be revised⁹. A few years later, Széchenyi Square (centre of the historical Royal City of Esztergom) and its surroundings were listed as historic sites while on Rákóczi Square only two buildings were listed.¹⁰ One might wonder why the Historic Monuments Authority was not more persistent and why it did not do more to preserve the historic buildings in the area between the two historic sites, i.e. between Castle Hill and Széchenyi Square. The answer may lie in the particular local situation (which would require further investigations), but it is an established fact that Esztergom was not an isolated case: *“Political pressure was put on the Historic Monuments Protection Authority (...) to list protected areas sparingly, with respect to size as well as number”*.¹¹

So, the price for listing a historic site in Esztergom seems to have been the *“approval of the authorities”* for the reconstruction of the city centre. The plans for the city centre had already been completed in the 1950's.¹² The open spaces in the city were to be enlarged by increasing the building line setbacks in order to achieve an imposing regularly shaped square. János Sedlmayer was the planner in charge, who was considered to be one of the foremost professionals in that field in Hungary at the time.¹³ Even if the scale of his designs was too monumental – reflecting the appearance of the second Russian capital, St. Petersburg – they show a basic tendency towards humility with respect to the old city, especially concerning the open visual axis to the basilica.

In the fifties, however, such a plan was considered unrealistic in Esztergom for political reasons. Blue collar and mining towns such as Tatabánya, Oroszlány and Dorog were given absolute priority as far as investment by the state was concerned. During the toughest years of communist dictatorship, the Catholic church centre Esztergom was considered a *“sinful city”* that was not worthy of receiving support from the system of the *“working class”*¹⁴.

BUILDING THE NEW CITY CENTRE

In the sixties, Esztergom lost its isolated position. Although the city did not regain its original leading position within the county, as *“residential city of the Dorog industrial area”*, it stood a good chance in the fight for the financial resources of Socialist planned economy.¹⁵ The design of the new city centre could in the sixties be ranked as a concern of regional, partially also of national significance.¹⁶ For this, four requirements needed to be fulfilled: 1) Increase the number of inhabitants; 2) Create important services also for the agglomeration: retail stores, schools; 3) Modernisation of the transportation system and an overpass for B11 and 4) Promotion of tourism. Because the country gave the latter item highest priority redevelopment of the city centre began with reconstruction of Spa City.

⁹ Source No. 1.

¹⁰ Source No. 1. 1953.

¹¹ ROMÁN 2004. 229. Quotation translated by Zita Horányi.

¹² Source No. 2. 1956.

¹³ KUBINSZKY 2005.

¹⁴ BÁNLAKY 1992. 56–66.

¹⁵ Cf. LETTRICH 1964.

¹⁶ Source No. 3. 1969.

Until the middle of the 19th century, maps showed a sea surrounded by marshland at the place where today's so-called Spa City is situated. After it was drained, a restaurant was built there, and swimming baths were created in which thermal spring water was collected. Later, a sports pool was added outdoors for swimming in the open air and smaller additions such as changing rooms were made.¹⁷ The plans of the 1960's for the spa called for the demolition of nearly all the annex buildings with the exception of the restaurant and the swimming pool. Even adjacent streets were to be razed to make room for hotels, among other things.¹⁸

It is characteristic for that time that an expertise on the project refers to first and second class tourism. Just two decades after the revolution that was to put an end to class society this is an indication of the fact that "*Socialist society*" accepted the difference in income and even cemented it architecturally: "*Demands regarding accommodation vary. Some of the guests, who arrive in groups or singly, are more demanding, and request more comfortable, cultivated accommodation; the others are looking for simpler lodgings.*"¹⁹ Therefore a little further away from the pools, a modest tourist hotel was built with cramped rooms and minimal technical equipment.

For the more demanding, i.e. wealthier guests, a hotel was built immediately adjacent to the listed historical building, with all conveniences available at the time. An auditor's report of the planning institute comments on the difference between the hotel designed by Dezső Tóth and the listed historic swimming baths: "*The new hotel which is designed according to modern trends does not disturb the overall architectural concept in spite of its divergent appearance*".²⁰ The spa hotel includes almost all the elements of modern architecture: the wings on stilts that jut out over the sidewalk, the street façade consisting of nothing but clear glass, the pure form of the grid-like reinforced concrete construction and the rhythm of the terraces allowing one to intuit the arrangement of the rooms inside which were consistently laid out according to a standard scheme.

The development of the spa complex in Watertown was, however, never completely finished, because in 1965 planning of the city centre took priority. Two to three hundred apartments, several dozen businesses and department stores were to be erected in the city centre, and also B11 was to be enlarged.²¹ It was clear from the beginning that it was not a question of repairs, but that the planning of the city centre was going to be an entirely new project.

The first building plans that were made between 1962 and 1969 intended a still more radical intervention, but the designs of the local architect's office (planner: Ferenc Schneider) renounced all historical types of buildings and, where the streets had been, placed a huge building mass in the centre of the plot. The monumentality of the seven-storey buildings with ribbon windows and the "*no walls*" look of its strongly subdivided construction would indeed not have shown to advantage, considering the narrowness of the streets, if the building had not been placed in the middle of the building plot. At ground level along the frontage a row of stores, and a glass superstructure was projected, partially covered by shed roofs. On the spot where one hundred razed apartments had stood, almost three hundred apartments were to be created; the area available for commercial enterprises was to be enlarged from ca. 800 square meters to more than five times as much. This city centre wanted to be a counterpart to the old city of Esztergom.

¹⁷ PIFKÓ 1997.

¹⁸ Source No. 4. 1963.

¹⁹ Source No. 4. 1963. Expert's opinion on the plan: László Szabó Sóki. Quotation translated by Zita Ragoncza.

²⁰ Unknown author, source No. 5. 1964.

²¹ Source No. 3. 1969.

While preparations for the investments were being made, the city council held a nation-wide competition for plans for the city centre that included not only designs for the centre itself but also for the entire area between the two listed historic sites, all the way to St. Thomas Mountain. The planners dreamed of a modern city centre with bypasses, fly-overs, a cultural centre reminiscent of an amphitheatre and an elevated pedestrian zone for the envisaged agglomeration (130,000 inhabitants).²² The call for tenders involving apartments housing 130,000 persons was in itself unrealistic and it is therefore not surprising that of the numerous ideas only individual elements were accepted for the actual city centre, and that happened only because one of the contestants was the already mentioned Ferenc Schneider. He and his colleagues (above all Kálmán Homor, Director of the Architectural Office of Esztergom) were responsible for the entire project.

In 1971, reconstruction work on the houses began, but not according to the original plans.²³ Work on these new plans began before the tender of 1971 which shows that this project was undertaken independently of the tender. The new concept threw out the seven-storey “*sky scraper*”, the stores were integrated into the lower stories of the three-storey, steep-roofed residential buildings.

The group of buildings on the Little Danube was completed first. The atmosphere resembled the extension of the spa which had, after all, been conceived architecturally as a historicising extension of the apartment building between the two world wars. On the one hand, the group of buildings closes off the courtyard of the apartment building from the future city centre, and on the other hand it creates a new U-shaped square towards the Little Danube. The connection between the projected city centre and the riverbank was solved by placing the central axis of the group of buildings on stilts. Thanks to the smaller scale of the building complex and the interplay of the façades, a solution preserving the atmosphere of the historic city could be found.

The second building phase concerned the buildings along Lőrinc Street. This group of buildings was built in an even more “*historicising*”, almost post-modern style. The one- to three-storey buildings with high roofs seek to reflect the vertical scale of the former street and the piecemeal structure of the building plot. This is significant because in this way the planners gave the impression that modern architecture shows understanding in its treatment of the historical aspect of the city. So the southern façade was arranged along a zigzag line to provide shade and loosen up the appearance of the block.

The last building phase did not take place until the end of the seventies. When Rákóczi Square, which since the forties and still at that time was considered to be the starting point for the development of the city, was renovated, a delay occurred, primarily due to the unsolved traffic situation. While still no solution was in sight, the investment for the city centre, the purchase of the department store (enlarged by additional residential blocks), could be postponed no longer.²⁴ The “*Bastion department store*” (Bástya Áruház 1977–80) is proof of the robustness of the seventies and creates a city in the city with its own elevated sidewalk level that leads to an independent “*network of streets*”. The elevated sidewalk of the building complex offers a view of the multi-storied town houses on Rákóczi Square.

The contemporary elements of the ground floor (stores, traffic) are barely perceptible, creating an almost painterly static (and historical) appearance. To an even greater extent the same is true of the exit of the sidewalk towards the thermal spring. As much as the Bastion department store attempts to profit from the surrounding historic cityscape, it still manages to suppress the latter.

²² Source No. 6. 1971.

²³ Source No. 7. 1970–72.

²⁴ Source No. 8. 1977.

To correct this, at the end of the eighties, as part of traffic regulation, a proposal was made for a grass strip in front of the building to cover its front side.²⁵

During the last phase of the city centre project and in the last minute before the fall of communism, the party building (house of culture) was erected in continuation of the Bastion department store. It is grotesque that the building with the greatest ideologic role in the socialist cityscape was built so late. Today the building is known simply as the “*green house*” and eases the robustness of the Bastion department store in that it intentionally imitates the rhythm of the oldest building in the city centre, the classicistic spa and restaurant.²⁶ The development of the city centre began to falter, however, in 1989, and has not been continued to this day.

The half-finished city centre deteriorated rapidly after the start of the new millennium. The bathing area in the inner city was neglected in favour of planning and erection of the new water park (located on the island just off shore from the city). The listed historic building has been preserved but the luxury hotel of the 60’s was torn down. The demolition of the party headquarters is scheduled for 2017, but also the demolition of the Bastion department store that has degenerated from the former Socialist “*luxury department store*” to a collection of small stores specializing in cheap mass-produced items is on the agenda. The idea for remodelling the building into a market came up, but never got off the ground. On the spot where a multi-storey car park was projected in the 1980’s, a huge parking lot opened in autumn 2016. The city centre has thereby been converted into a specific park+ride area, from whence people continue on their way not by means of public transport, but set off on foot to the nearby points of interest in the inner city.

POSTSCRIPT

Even before completion, the new city centre drew fierce criticism. In 1981, the architect János Kun wrote: “[...] *no architectural transition is being created between the preserved historical buildings of the city centre and those that are to be built*”.²⁷ Criticism was also aimed at the city centre because in the author’s opinion far too many apartments were built and thereby too little room remained for stores and services. Today, however, it is evident that the small retail stores on the ground level and the erected apartments are the only buildings that have continued to form an architectural ensemble over 30 to 40 years. The business complexes with single functions did not survive the decades after the fall of communism, above all because of bankruptcy of the city treasury of Esztergom.²⁸

Finally, one can ask oneself whether it was primarily a faulty architectural concept that led to the rapid and visible degradation of the city centre or whether precipitous social change is indeed responsible for it.²⁹ The question is of course much too complex to answer here. It would, however, be rewarding to consider this before undertaking the apparently inescapable task of “*reconstructing the reconstruction*”, i.e. before the city begins to rebuild the city centre or begins to renovate the existing buildings.

²⁵ Source No. 9. 1984.

²⁶ Source No. 10. 1984.

²⁷ KUN 1981. 19., quotation translated by Zita Ragoncza.

²⁸ Esztergom is not the only Hungarian City that went bankrupt on account of the housing market crash in 2008 or other financing problems. It is unquestionable, however, that the media presented Esztergom as a textbook example of a bankrupt city treasury.

²⁹ See also: LOCSMÁNDI 2016.

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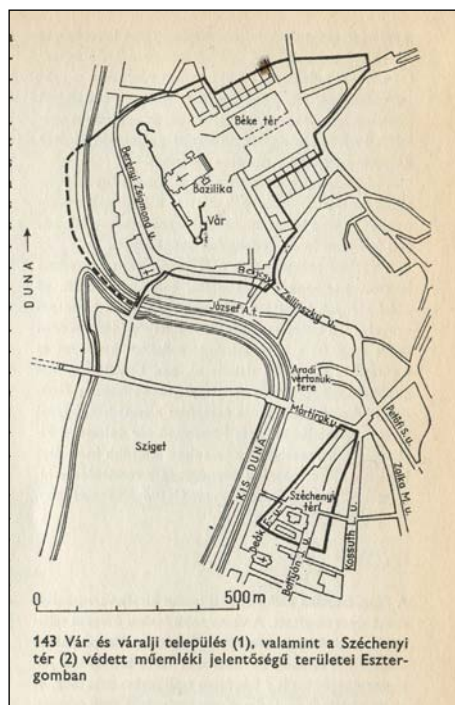
FIGURES


FIGURE 1 Protected historical sites in Esztergom (Source: GERŐ 1971. 187.)



FIGURE 2 Plan for the Centrum (Source: Archive document Nr. 2.)



(1960.)



FIGURE 3–4 *View of Centrum about 1960 and today* (Source: Archive picture from the book “Esztergom képekben” by V. JUHÁSZ KATALIN [2000], p. 14., the actual photo made by the author)



FIGURE 5 *Hotel Volán for “for simpler lodgings”* (Source: Fortepan Nr. 15937 [1972], Photograph: Urbán Tamás)



FIGURE 6 *Regulation plan for the Centrum* (Source: Archive document Nr. 7: 1970–72)



FIGURE 7–8 *The street “Hévízköz” before the reconstruction and the today character of the Centrum*
(Source: Archive document Nr. 2., the actual photo made by the author)



FIGURE 9 *Model of first Version of the Reconstruction* (Source: Archive document Nr. 3. 1969.)



FIGURE 10 *The final Version of the Reconstruction* (Source: Archive document Nr. 7: 1970–72.)



FIGURE 11 *The elevated sidewalk of the department store with view of old town* (Source: Photo made by the author)



FIGURE 12 *Degradation of the city centre* (Source: Photo made by the author)

MEGJELENT! KAPHATÓ A KIADÓNÁL.

JANCSÁK CSABA

AZ 1956-OS FORRADALOM
INDÍTÓSZIKRÁJA
A SZEGEDI MEFESZ

