

Five Tales of a City: Dysfunction and Potential in a Central European Capital

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In literary studies, the expression *mise-en-abyme* signifies a story within the story, a sub-narrative that serves as a model to decipher the hidden structure and elements of the main narrative (Gide, 1973). In a similar manner, we can also speak about *mise-en-abyme* in the Central European city-text: certain buildings, streets, squares, stories or personalities concentrate the essential characteristics of the processes that assemble and transform the city; analyzing them may lead us closer to deciphering obscure procedures and meanings of the urban environment.

When searching for the DNA of Budapest, one can hardly find a more characteristic place than *Gödör*, at *Erzsébet Square*, in the heart of Pest. *Gödör*, Hungarian for “hole” is the name of a temporary structure: a cultural center, its building, and the surrounding park acting as a spectacular *mise-en-abyme* of the state of urban policy and planning in Budapest. Revealing the ambiguous nature of decision-making and the conflict-ridden life of public spaces, *Gödör* bears many of the critical symptoms of the contradictions and hostilities of Central European cities. The following pages will tell five tales about a square in a city, that could be anywhere else in the region; by focusing on the *Gödör* and *Erzsébet Square*, and by zooming out from there to a larger scale, these tales will help unfold some of the major processes that define our cities today.

Governments and memory politics in the city

Gödör's origins date back to 1998 when the conservative party Fidesz first came to power. Canceling the construction of the new National Theatre launched by the antecedent Socialist administration, the new government moved the Theatre to another location thus leaving *Erzsébet Square* with a half-accomplished underground parking garage, that is, the “National Hole”, as residents of Budapest started to call it.

It is not rare that governments intervene in Central European capital cities in such manner. In what is best described as memory politics, urban space has become a playground of competing visions of the past, of both national and urban histories. In this competition, the new National Theatre had an outstanding importance: its construction symbolized in the same time a declaration of continuity with the pre-communist era, that is, the Golden Age of both Budapest and the nation, and a proclamation of rejecting the forced amnesia imposed upon the society by the communist regime.

If an enterprise as symbolic as the new National Theatre became a battlefield of contending political parties, it did not only engender the metamorphosis of the Theatre's new site where it became an engine of speculation to valorize a whole district's real estate stock, but also transformed the city's landscape of monuments and indeed, opened up new possibilities at the site where the construction finally did not take place. Leaving a terrain vague in the middle of the city was a sign of failed ambitions, but this heavy legacy was soon turned into a unique opportunity.

Administrative fragmentation and a permanent in-between situation

Gödör Klub, a cultural center was established soon after the completion of the parking garage at *Erzsébet Square*. In 2002, an architecture firm was invited to temporarily run the centre before long-term plans about its management come into force.

Originally, the architects' responsibility was to assure the technical functioning of the complex, but soon the responsibility of program planning also fell on the firm.

Negotiations between the building's owner (the Budapest Municipality) and the financing authority (the Ministry of National Resources) were barren: in Gödör's nine years of functioning, these offices had never been run by the same political party, and consequently, agreement was complicated and delayed by contrasting interests. As a result, maintenance, management and programming all remained the architecture firm's task.

Due to the uncertain future of the building and the surrounding park, no private investment was made to upgrade the club: the locale, in an increasingly deteriorating physical shape, remained affordable for all, despite its potential to become an exclusive venue, in the proximity of the most luxurious hotels and shops of the country. Today, more than nine years since its temporary arrangement, Gödör Klub is one of the most popular clubs in the city: on warmer nights thousands of youth gather in the concert halls and on the steps leading to the garage-turned-into-club.

The administrative fragmentation that blocks joint development and renovation operations is a result of deeply democratic intentions. Determined to break with the centralized system of the communist regime, democratic lawmakers burned into the constitution of 1990 the principle of local autonomy, disabling larger cities (and governments) to develop comprehensive territorial strategies. On the other hand, it is striking to think about the successful failure of the National Theatre as potentials born out of perpetual conflicts of interest and administrative fragmentation: the fact that an unfinished, diverted cultural facility can blossom to this extent reveals the power of the public and non-political actors to heal the wounds political struggles left in the city.

Overwriting behavior codes in the public space

If socialist architecture and planning left many buildings and public spaces contested by their users and residents, Erzsébet Square is illustrative of the continuity of built-in contradictions between design and use. The park surrounding the abandoned Theatre construction has witnessed several stages of adjustment, as pressure from users forced maintainers to improve the square's facilities. The park is organized around a small pool situated above the concert halls, and people sitting at the edge of the pool relentlessly break the inappropriate rules of keeping away from the water. Similarly, the different levels of lawn covering an important part of the park encircling Gödör were all built for contemplation, instead of active use. While in the first years of the park's existence, visitors were constantly chased away from the lawn, later on, due to the incapability of the security personnel to keep people out of the grass, the lawn's foundation was improved thus enabling it to accommodate those desiring to enjoy a rare piece of nature in the overcrowded Budapest downtown.

The Western edge of the park saw the victory of citizen pressure, in a similar way. The pedestrian zone between the former bus station building and the elevators of the underground garage was quickly appropriated by skateboards and mountain bikes. Despite the formal interdiction of skating and continuous efforts by the park's security personnel, skaters held on to the benches and other street furniture that provided them with sufficiently adventurous terrain. Within a few years, the square witnessed the renovation of the deteriorated furniture, this time adapted to the specific needs of skaters and bikers, and an entire skating track is envisioned to another corner of the park.

In another social instance, Gödör has quickly become the starting point and often the destination of the tremendous cycling demonstrations of the mid-2000s. Situated at the node of the few operational bicycle paths, and thus one of the rare locations suitable to adapt bicycle movement and parking, it was a central logistical centre of the largest critical mass rallies in the world, where up to 80.000 people gathered on bikes to manifest their need of a safe and elaborated bicycle path system. The great success of these demonstrations made these demands visible to the political class, and through political battles, representatives of the cyclist community found their way into the planning process of bicycle paths.

These stories describe particularly well the way in which banal, everyday civil disobedience has the capacity to overwrite behavior codes built in public spaces by restrictive or inefficient design. In a political culture where citizens are socialized to follow rules imposed upon them, public spaces offer prototypes for the learning process of how to shape and contribute to rules.

The generational gap

If Gödör is a place for entertainment for some, it is a site of survival for others. While thousands of youngsters are gathering in the bars, concert halls, steps and park of Gödör, leftovers of a vibrant night scene are valuable resources for members of another generation.

Pensioners, indisputable losers of the political and economic changes of the early 1990s, saw their pension diminishing with inflation and the rising costs of everyday life. Arriving to the edge of third-world poverty, pensioners disposing of less than the equivalent of 200 euros a month (that is, after paying utilities, often less than 2.50 euros a day) are forced to look for additional income sources. Selling flowers, collecting empty bottles, or simply begging for change, they became permanent actors of the urban nightscape, inescapable reminders of the growing generational gap.

Generational conflicts are a central feature of urban politics. Resulting from uneven processes of gentrification, the districts housing the highest proportions of pensioners are also the ones that accommodate the most important hubs of the city's nightlife. Demographic conditions are easy to measure from the local governments' policy orientations. A campaign in these districts to reduce opening hours in restaurants and clubs was followed by more and more permissive concessions, as a younger electoral population moving in the apartments left vacant by their grandparents started outnumbering the remaining elderly.

If Central European societies, deprived of the continuity of local communities, traditions and social coherence, consist of perfectly isolated sub-societies, the sites where borders between these groups are materialized and their transgressions are effectuated are predominantly the cities.

Development and corruption

Given its highly desirable central location, Erzsébet Square is surrounded by ambitious development plans. At its western edge lies the city's newest pedestrian zone, with moderated car traffic, dubbed the "new main street" of Budapest. Conceived in a mysterious public-private partnership, the street's renovation was financed by one of the city's leading real estate developer, who, in exchange, managed to push through the

elimination of the protected heritage status of an ensemble of degraded buildings, that happened to be his property, thus giving way to the development of larger buildings, before civil and professional organizations intervened.

At the square's southern side, there is another building that is, similarly to Gödör and the developer's properties, left in an in-between state. The former bus station, a modernist icon that was built in barely one year in 1949, has been under renovation for the past 8 years. The buildings are conceived to accommodate a design museum and a restaurant, but due to the unclear structure of responsibilities fixed in the renovation contract and an improbable apparatus of subcontractors, inadequate interventions halt the renovation of the building.

Another site in the square where public money evaporates is Gödör itself. Although the original concept of the park and the club indicated that the gains from the parking garage should cross-finance the cultural activities, instead of this, income from the garage is collected by the Ministry of National Resources, and Gödör's maintenance and cultural activities are financed from other, arbitrarily chosen sources within the ministry, thus allowing money to circulate and, occasionally, to disappear.

Corruption, like in other cities and societies where transition turned into a permanent condition, often short-circuits development strategies, policy considerations and community participation. It is corruption that creates the most painful rupture disheartening democracy, the gap between politicians and the people they represent.

Inertia, path-dependency and affordance

The five tales above are not incidentally complementary; built around the same mise-en-abyme, they are chapters of a meta-narrative that emphasizes the development inertia of Central European cities. It is not by accident, that the question of path-dependency occupies such an important role in the discourse of Central European cities. Competing memory politics; administrative fragmentation and the deadlock of conflicting interests; incoherence between citizen demand, plan, design and realization, ignored civil mobilizations; generational polemics; corruption and non-democratic traditions of various kinds are all repercussions of specific but regionally converging historical trajectories.

To put it another way, the use of cities is about affordances, that is, it is the complex quality of the urban environment that allows an individual or a group to perform certain actions (Norman 1988). In Central Europe this affordance depends on one's social and political status: in some cases the urban environment is restrictive, delimitating, in others permissive and generous, or inviting to overcome the rules. In this sense, social fragmentation in the region's cities is translated into different relations to rules, and this diversity undermines what would otherwise cement a democratic society: the trust in institutions and equal opportunities.

References

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