

## Coherent Fragmentation

### Finding and remembering in Central Europe's confused cities

by Levente Polyak

#### 1.

I manage to complete my shopping plans at the market before it closes. Come out of the market hall, I have to slalom between the pedestrians, shoppers with carriers on wheels, bicycles and push-chairs all squeezed behind the boards surrounding the construction site for the new Metro. It is late afternoon, and the jackhammers are drumming away again: the dust rises up into the air, spreading over my balcony, my table, and the hung-out clothes. Once again I think about moving.

I set off to find the bicycle I left somewhere last night. Coming out at the Big Ring, for a while I can follow the tramline, but reaching Blaha Lujza Square I am forced down into the underpass; I manage to fight my way past beggars, leaflet distributors, signature collectors, and the labyrinth of the apathetic employees of 24-hour shops and the elegant staff of carefully-lit boutiques, to get to the other side. At street level again, I make my way between the cavity of the construction site and the partly spontaneous parking lot towards the great socialist department store. The banal metal façade embracing the *fin de siècle* building contains more than just ordinary shops: it is home to a whole series of canteens and bars, on the ground floor as on the roof.

Avoiding the *lángos* and hamburger stalls, I reach the rear entrance, where I am bundled into a lift with a couple of strangers, and we head upwards. A narrow set of steps takes us up to the roof. So far there are only a few dozen people sitting around the dilapidated tables; behind the bar there is still time to prepare for the evening. Above the safety railing that runs around the terrace is an unusual view of the houses of Pest. It is getting dark; the lit towers of the New York Palace rise up above the dulled grey of the roofs with an unlikely sparkle. On the other side is a bare factory chimney, which the floodlight from the terrace turns into a decoration.

#### 2.

The glittering of *fin de siècle* nostalgia, the ruin aesthetic of the transforming urban landscape and the ready-made decorative elements of the terrace blend the divergent segments of Central European urban memory in a unique fashion. To this day, an imagined notion of adventure and spontaneity covers these recently still infamous parts of central Pest. This notion provides a perfect breeding-ground for initiatives that connect dilapidation and an acceptable level of urban impoverishment with an enthusiastic irony regarding the remains of socialism, and make use of all these in the symbolic consumer area of entertainment. Meanwhile the giddy heights of a flat roof, as so often rediscovered by feature films, gives the terrace the big city tone in which urban dwellers are from time to time happy to dip into. The desire for the unusual, for the architecturally ghostlike, is guaranteed by the reassuring proximity of *fin de siècle* luxury, which adventurers arriving from more prestigious districts can turn their backs on.

And equally those arriving from more prestigious countries. The Swedish jewellery designer, as he "tries out" the black and white photos he has bought in a second-hand shop against the raw, run-down wall of the house, is happy he is no longer surrounded by that desire for sterility which rid his home city of its every little mark. The cracks in the walls, the peeling plaster... the jewels of the city, he says.

### 3.

It is true that still present in most Central European cityscapes are the marks of war, often complemented by the superficial symptoms of the change of regime. It is customary to describe the post-socialist urban space as temporary, fractured space laced with boundaries and thresholds. Even in cities changing even more quickly than this "progressing heart", in the spaces left behind by retreating state planning and now being commercialized, entirely divergent functions and modes of use emerge alongside each other almost unnoticed, drawing peculiar boundary lines between the spaces of remembrance and of progress, of informality and of control. The ambivalent nature of these boundary lines is nurtured and recorded by the various emblematic locations and sights of the transient urban landscape, like cavity plots performing new simplified functions and the mature acacia trees many metres high in their corners, and firewalls revealed by the bulldozers' work and giving glimpses of apartment interiors.

Of course fragmentation is not characteristic of every Central European city. Vienna, which at one time - in its compactness, self-examining inwardness, and the quality of its urban spaces and services - can have been the prototype of the Central European city, today, with the continuity of its architectural fabric, represents an exception in the region. Yet Vienna's logic of avenues and rings helps one to navigate in Prague and Krakow, and in Budapest most of all. In Warsaw or Bratislava, on the other hand, we need a car or driver if we are to explore the areas around the old town, not to mention the embodiment of complete fragmentation, Berlin. Yet we can sense the feeling of alienation even we travel in the opposite direction: arriving from the spacious, green Berlin to the narrow, grey and completely commercialized downtown of Prague can sometimes be a claustrophobic experience.

Berlin's "twilight landscape"[\[1\]](#) is at once a breeding-ground for cultural initiatives outside the usual structure. Activities on or flirting with the fringe of society find a home in the marginal spaces that voluntarily conserve fragments and remnants outside the city's neoliberal market structures: that which is run-down, forgotten and unused today appear in our thinking as the places of potentiality.

The way in which Central European societies and cities are out of phase is not an obviously advantageous cultural peculiarity, however: investment capital, which knows Western urban development well and is good at acclimatizing to opportunities in the East, is faster than participants in culture. The transient nature of transforming districts can be capitalized on in few places as well as in Berlin: the quickly completed gentrification brought by new, expensive apartments rising up overnight in the place of run-down buildings has prevented culture from being a spontaneous force in urban planning.

### 4.

Capitalizing on fragments and remnants is not only a possibility for cities but an obligation: the remnants, at odds with one another, haunt the streets and square as much as they do the interiors of houses and apartments. The attitude to relics is not the same everywhere: "The reminders are here, and are certainly deeply lodged in people's memories... but we don't really need ruins as in Berlin or Hamburg, which were left there on purpose. We don't need them," is how Serbian foreign minister Vuk Jeremić talked to the BBC about the bombing of Belgrade in 1999. [\[2\]](#)

In fact it is not clear who exactly is in need of ruins, of raw architecture lacking illusion. The dilemma facing the new Warsaw Museum of Modern Art helps to identify the Western-Eastern position on wildness versus sterility. The building, conceived by Swiss architect Christian Kerez, presents itself in all its raw concrete

reality within Warsaw's urban fabric that is not easy on the eye at the best of times. The wildness invoked to balance the revived sterility of Western cities melts into its natural habitat in the bombed Warsaw. Central Europe produced the aesthetic and products of architectural brutalism in spontaneous fashion, without having to be asked. The firewalls and cavity plots, ruins of buildings and neglected underpasses, these places full of memories, still pop up here and there, but increasingly exist like a plague, in their transience frozen in permanence, right until the day that all faults and telltale signs disappear from the face of the city, until these cities themselves close up into their own sterile presentness.

## 5.

The disappearance of tell-tale signs is accompanied by the disappearance of informalities. In the Belgrade of the start of the 2000s, one always got off the train and set off towards the taxi drivers waiting in front to get local currency in the simplest fashion. An adventure-loving friend of mine continued to insist on his informal routes to things long after the abolition of the embargo on Serbia and the country becoming open to the world, and would not acknowledge the existence of the bank machines and exchange booths springing up all over the city.

On arriving in Bratislava I am given the following instructions: I should look for tram 20 at the station, take it for half an hour, then get off as soon as I see Tesco on the right hand side of the street. This itinerary made me suspicious, but I gave in to it. I got off at Tesco, skirted around the group of buildings, continued on a less than promising earth road, then reached a fence. I am looking for the gallery, I turn in despair to a security guard. Without a word, he points to the little house beyond the fence. I climb over it, bypassing the piles of gravel, and, lo and behold, I reach the gallery.

It often doesn't work without being told where to go: my Budapest reflexes leave me in the lurch in the centre of Sofia, too. A friend of a friend rushes to my assistance, and drags me off the beaten track. He leads me to a district full of old, ramshackle houses. We enter a gate, and rush up the stairs to the second floor, then stop in front of a closed door. This is a private place of entertainment, my host explains, not official. There are a few like this in this area. They only let people in whom they know or who they like the look of. They know my guide, so we can enter the apartment, the spacious rooms of which are filled with Andalusian afternoon music. There are well-dressed young people in the comfy armchairs and couches. I sense it is a privilege to enter here.

Successful navigation cannot be guaranteed by either maps or guidebooks. Central Europe's cities change so quickly that only direct everyday experience can keep pace with the way places come into being only to disappear. I am reminded of the film *Warsaw* [\[3\]](#), where the driver arriving in his truck in the city in winter cannot find anything where it was. At various points in the film he pops up again, asking about street names that no longer exist, and which no one even remembers.

When I arrive in Warsaw, I can immediately imagine that the city provides perfect spaces for the operation of forgetting. In the nineties light green skyscrapers emerged from amidst the sixties blocks that took the place of the historical districts razed to the ground during the war. These towers become part of the exclusive utopian space created in the great business districts of Western and Far Eastern cities: they bring the promise of an optimistic atmosphere, banishing all problems, doubts and memories, a rare thing in Central Europe. The verticality of indulgence is offset, however, by the everyday poverty dominating the streets, and by the raw lack of architectural illusion that spreads all around as far as the

eye can see.

## 6.

Central Europe's common architectural space is thanks to the interchangeable elements of the neo-classicist eclectic style of the monarchy, and the way these are harmoniously at home with one another. In the culture of duplicates, which linked together otherwise competing cities with common interdependencies and points of reference, in each city can be found a small-scale copy, mark or synecdoche of the other. The Europe Courtyard in Bratislava is but a parody of this phenomenon, but at one time whole cities bore the title of Little Vienna, or rivalled each other to refer to themselves as the Paris of the East.

If a city is text, then the Central European city is hypertext: the street names and even parts of cities have no choice but to bear the names of other parts of the region; it is enough to think of Krakovo district of Ljubljana or the Praga part of Warsaw. It is the complete Central European mix of languages, words, signs and melodies which crystallizes in this urban space, with the theatres scattered over the territory of the Monarchy with the design of the Fellner and Hellmer workshop, or the startling buildings of Jože Plečnik. It is perhaps to these temporal and spatial wanderings of symbols that the notion of "radical eclecticism" refers, which the architect László Rajk used to try to put into words Budapest's architectural traditions and sources of inspiration. [\[4\]](#) Warsaw is described by an alternative city guide as an "eclectic cocktail". [\[5\]](#)

This degree of mutual incestuousness of references creates a sensation of homeliness. This homeliness, which so often provokes symptoms of claustrophobia from the art and literature of the region, was later ruptured by the completely delegitimized architecture of post-war modernism. The Central Europe ideology of the change of regime is unable to find an architectural partner for itself, the keyword of 'socialist city' finally loses all meaning and gives way to urban marketing, which increasingly institutionalizes nostalgic attachment to the peaceful, multicultural era of the turn of the twentieth century.

The selective memory of Central European cities does not favour the architectural modernism associated with totalitarian regimes, and so neither does it promote the reception of the contemporary thinking which finds its own antiquity in modernism. Architectural initiatives to connect the environment to opportunities for independent and community innovation seem to slumber between the same parentheses of collective amnesia as certain of the twentieth century's social achievements. The rediscovery of modernism is only taking place within certain professional enclosures, and in urban communities which have no other choice in the way they determine their heritage: Berlin and Warsaw. This picture is only made more complicated by the socialist housing estates coming onto the agenda thanks to state plans to renovate them.

## 7.

So what, then, is the common heritage of Central European cities? The buoyant serenity of the *fin de siècle*, which comforts those adverse to the present with fragile promises of continuity? Or quite the opposite: a continuous transience, in whose endless swirl the temporary status of the post-socialist city can also find its natural place, from which even Vienna, freed from the awkward proximity of the Iron Curtain, is not excluded?

And what is the present for these cities? The sharpening of disagreements, in which the localizability of internal political differences makes national conflicts all the more conspicuous in an urban context? Or the rediscovered diversity in which the deafening twittering of birds in Krakow's Planty gardens, the echoes of the

bells of Gdansk, the patter of hooves of Vienna's horse-drawn carriages, the swish of Berlin's S-Bahn dashing past, the growl of the Vltava dams in Prague, the jingle of the trams in Buda and the strains of a Belgrade brass band all merge into the noise fragments of a single city?

I would like to believe that Budapest is again closely connected to the other cities of the region not just by economic strategies, agreements and highways, but also by wandering people, objects and histories. Perhaps it will simply be the new multidirectional mobility, strengthened by open borders, a human and friendly low-rise look, and the rediscovery of hospitality, which will help the cities of Central Europe to become each other's suburbs and neighbouring districts.

(Kraków, July 2007)

***Endnotes:***

- [1] Boris Grésillon: Berlin, métropole culturelle. Berlin, 2002. p. 278.
- [2] On Europe's Edge. BBC Documentary Archives, 7 June 2007.
- [3] Dariusz Gajewski: Warsaw (2003)
- [4] Rajk László: Radikális eklektika. Jelenkor, 2000.
- [5] Notes from Warsaw. Bec Zmiana, 2007.