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## Heritage as argument, heritage as authority: Notions and positions in contemporary Budapest urban planning discourse

### Abstract

*Questions of heritage play a central role in the growing public concern about the development plans for 21st century Budapest. What is more surprising about the renaissance of the notion of heritage in Budapest's urban discourse is the way it creates unusual frontlines between political players at various levels.*

*Heritage is often used as an argument when facing the dilemma of whether to renovate deteriorated buildings in historical districts even when costs are high, or whether they should be demolished to make space for new office and apartment buildings as new commercial and demographic impulses for the area. Controversially, the use of the 'heritage argument' occurs on both sides of the debate.*

*The paper aims to analyse the conflicts emerging between initiators of certain development projects and defenders of heritage sites. The significance of these cases is not only that they highlight the different ways the notion of cultural heritage can be used and exploited in the urban planning context, but also that they demonstrate how arguments of heritage may open new paths towards a democratic control of political decisions.*

*„As indispensable as water or the air we inspire, streets are passages of the soul and secret lanes of the memory.“  
Paul Virilio*

### 1 Introduction

In recent times, the discourses concerning Budapest have intensified considerably, and have begun to focus on certain questions that until now were not explicitly articulated at the scale of the city: questions of heritage. Given the debates on post-communist Hungarian society and the transition, it is not surprising that there was little room for discussions concerning local and regional past. Although from the second half of the 1990s onwards, it seems that cities, and especially Budapest, have increasingly become the centre of academic and civic attention; not only because of the successive attempts to revive Budapest's profile<sup>1</sup>, but also through the influence of a growing number

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<sup>1</sup> See Budapest's bids for the Olympic Games and for the title of the European Capital of Cul-

of 'public texts on the city' which have appeared through diverse channels.<sup>2</sup>

The inevitable controversy surrounding the urban rehabilitation process underway in the Inner Erzsébetváros (7<sup>th</sup> district), as well as other reconstruction dilemmas, seem to have recently reached a highpoint. The main participants in the debate represent very diverse interests, and draw upon different systems of arguments and references to legitimacy. Accordingly, much of the debate is about definitions, most notably the notions of 'heritage', 'sustainability' and 'participation'.

The terms urban rehabilitation, reconstruction and regeneration represent diverse attitudes towards urban renewal, and are characterised by diverse relations to the built and social heritage as well as the various opposing definitions of heritage (local culture, function, urban texture or buildings). In the meanwhile, these approaches are also characterised by various interpretations of the criteria of sustainability (social, economic, cultural, etc.), all of which play an emphatic role in the transition discourse in Budapest.

In fact, if one were to trace the different positions and opinions from the debates on Budapest's urban renewal in recent years, one has the impression that one is actually mapping latitudes and legitimations: the structural peculiarities of the contemporary architectural and urbanist public sphere are revealed. In this paper I will attempt to sketch such a schematic map of the current discourse. Outlining the different positions and means also reveals the highly flexible nature of notions such as 'heritage', 'sustainability' and 'participation'. For this reason I will underline the central importance of the heritage-dilemma in the history of Hungarian NGO movements: it is a question, through which the opaque decisions and agreements reached between the political sphere and investors may be subjected to democratic control, backed by an international authority and system of values.

## **2 Collective memory and the urban space**

The question as to why the issue of heritage causes so much contention in the urban dialogue is perhaps better inverted and posed from the perspective of the heritage discourse: why exactly does the urban reconstruction of Budapest evoke the dilemmas of heritage so strongly? If we accept that the notion of heritage evolved throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, parallel to the notion of collective memory, there are several arguments which could explain the this situation.

The transformation of the visual environment is tightly related to changes within the urban communities' relationship with their location. Collective memory, which underpins the identity of a community, is inseparable from the spatial experiences of this community. To describe the interlocking of the collective memory and the space, analogies to individual memory are often invoked. In discussing the memory dilemmas of urban space, Anthony Vidler draws parallels between techniques of spatialising the train of thought used

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ture.

<sup>2</sup> Fejős (2005).

by antique orators, and communal memories tied to spatial configurations.<sup>3</sup> Vidler cites the orator Quintilianus: "...when we return to a place after a considerable absence, we do not merely recognise the place itself, but remember things we did there".<sup>4</sup> Quintilianus and his system of reminders, a system that was widely prevalent in his age and was reborn in the Baroque, links the elements to be remembered to rooms of an imaginary house, which can be processed in a certain order, i.e. as reminder-signs, along which the train of thought unfurls. In order to recall the speech, it is one only need recall the places. The art of memory therefore requires "places, either real or imaginary, and images or simulacra which must be invented".<sup>5</sup>

The potential fictive or imaginary character of the place, which serves as a starting point for remembering, is a very revealing moment: it strikes at the roots of the problem of the constructed nature of collective memory and cultural heritage, which I will later return to when considering the branding and transformation of places through their renaming. The question of the fictional nature of memorials and of the discursive transformation of joint collective and individual memory lead us to concerns of urban marketing and identity, whose actuality would be difficult to question.

Amidst the intensive reconceptualisation of memorials and urban memory after the fall of the Berlin Wall, remembering and forgetting are often considered as crucial elements of collective identity. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs offers detailed explanations for the interconnections between the collective memory and the place.<sup>6</sup> Accepting the statement of August Comte, that people's mental equilibrium depends on the stability of everyday objects in the immediate environment, Halbwachs sees the consistency of spatial surroundings as a necessary condition for the continuity of collective identity. Halbwachs' starting points are Durkheim's concept of the collective unconscious and his notion of the 'morphological fact', referring to the urban environment as a crystallised network of routes and a materialisation of movements, along which he can describe phases of the interaction between place and community. "A place occupied by a group is not like a blackboard on which we write and afterwards we wipe off the signs and figures from it. The place preserves the imprints of the group, and vice versa", writes Halbwachs.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, while "a human group lives for a long time in a milieu adapted to its customs, not only his movements, but also his thoughts are composed according to material images represented by external objects."<sup>8</sup> Halbwachs concludes that "the collective memory leans on spatial images."<sup>9</sup> As such, the stability and identity of the community depends on the consistency of the surrounding images.

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<sup>3</sup> Vidler (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Vidler (1992): 178.

<sup>5</sup> Vidler (1992): 178.

<sup>6</sup> Halbwachs (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Halbwachs (1999): 196.

<sup>8</sup> Halbwachs (1999): 200.

<sup>9</sup> Halbwachs (1999): 200.

### 3 Memory in post-communist Budapest

The role of physical space in supporting collective memory complements and strengthens or extinguishes the significations brought into effect by discursive practices describing the city. The cultural heritage of the city is thus crystallised in the interaction of physical places, buildings, streets and squares, together with pictures and stories. The public texts dealing with Budapest and the narrative nodes established by them prefer to characterise Budapest in the function of the past. Both the thematic emphasis on the past and the interpretation of the present in the context of the past are typical themes of Budapest narratives, and this fact undeniably affects the concepts of heritage articulated in relation to the city.

Post-communist cities are often portrayed as spatially fragmented, and this disintegration appears also in the temporal dimension of urban memory. The ambitions manifested by the removal of the memorials or the renaming of streets could be described as a simultaneous culture of spatial erasure and temporal oblivion. Processes of forgetting and erasing are nevertheless effectuated by a selective memory, which simply omits periods that are wished to be forgotten and picks up previous stories with which it can formulate a continuity of narration and identity.

Presumably all cities possess their 'Golden Age', their unshakeable reference points, which politicians like to refer to in periods of crisis and reorientation of identity. These myths of the golden age embody highly compound structures of hope, which are nevertheless often very similar to each other. Two books published in recent years illustrate this clearly, each featuring critical strategies for two rather different cities: Mike Wallace's "A New Deal for New York" (2002) and Robert Juharos' "How should we build Budapest?" (2005)<sup>10</sup> Without going into details, it is noticeable that both studies project ideals of economic and cultural success, together with social justice and a transparent, democratic public policy into a certain period of the past, and propose the transformation of the present administrative system by remodelling this past image. For New York this Golden Age means the 1920s, while Budapest looks back to its fin-de-siècle. Although the interpretation of the turn of the century as the glorious era of Budapest is based upon sound historical evidence ("In a rare historical coincidence the year 1900 was simultaneously a turning point and a heyday in the history of Budapest, in a variety of ways"<sup>11</sup>), the aspirations to restore fin-de-siècle Budapest are predominantly formulated in the dimension of nostalgia.

Consequently, the narratives of post-communist Budapest, i.e. both the inter-war and the socialist periods, took the flourishing fin-de-siècle Budapest as their main point of reference; this took shape most spectacularly in the renewal of the café culture, that is, the concept of the "Café City".<sup>12</sup> It is predictable that in a 'passé-ist' atmosphere of this kind references to the past would also generate antithetical discourses, devoted to proclaiming the 'voice of progress'. These discourses include the dilemma of high-rise buildings and

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace (2002) and Juharos (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Lukacs (1991): 7.

<sup>12</sup> Fejős (2003).

skyscrapers, otherwise evident in every city, or the debates on architectural signs.

The importance of introducing these ideas lies in the fact that these are the positions and action-reaction mechanisms, amidst which we can develop a system of co-ordinates, a system formulated between the value-poles of past and future, heritage and progress, context and development; and a system whose significance is greater than that of the local scale. More precisely: this is the context in which questions of urban heritage may become the distinguished media of community participation and democratic control.

#### **4 Urban reconstruction in Budapest**

A large part of the urban rehabilitation that already began in the 1980s is intrinsically urban reconstruction. The significant physical deterioration of the housing stock in the inner districts of Pest was accompanied by a decline in the inhabitant's social status. The fragmentation of the post-communist transitory urban space is mainly due to the high autonomy accorded to local municipalities by the Constitution, effectively obstructing any possibility of an integrated metropolitan urban planning. In the administrative decomposition of the decision-making competencies, the duty of urban rehabilitation was shifted to the individual districts and can only be marginally channelled and fostered by the Budapest City Council supporting programmes. In this legal and economic environment, certain local municipalities found the suitable necessary resources for renovation and reconstruction works earlier than others and they often pursued different methods and goals.

Thus the municipalities of Józsefváros and Ferencváros (8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> districts of Budapest), although effectively bringing about an entire population change through the demolition of large blocks of dilapidated buildings and the selling of land parcels for public-private-partnership, have mostly managed to preserve their historic housing stock in the areas close to the grand boulevards, and have sparked a process of gentrification by attracting entertainment and cultural functions to the area. In contrast to this strategy, in the second half of the 1990s, the municipality of Erzsébetváros (7<sup>th</sup> district of Budapest), disregarding its own block-rehabilitation traditions from the 1980s, launched a reconstruction programme in its inner area that aimed to significantly change the existing housing stock. It is partly the central location of the neighbourhoods concerned and the high profile of the projects which have lead to conflicts analysed in the following pages.

Another component of the fragmentation of urban space is the ambiguous process of privatisation, generating partly repainted facades, scantily renovated floors and marked differences in conditions between different parts of the housing stock. The privatisation law, which prohibits the selling of certain apartments in monument buildings, coupled with the municipalities hesitation in restoring key buildings resulted in the further deterioration of municipality-owned buildings.



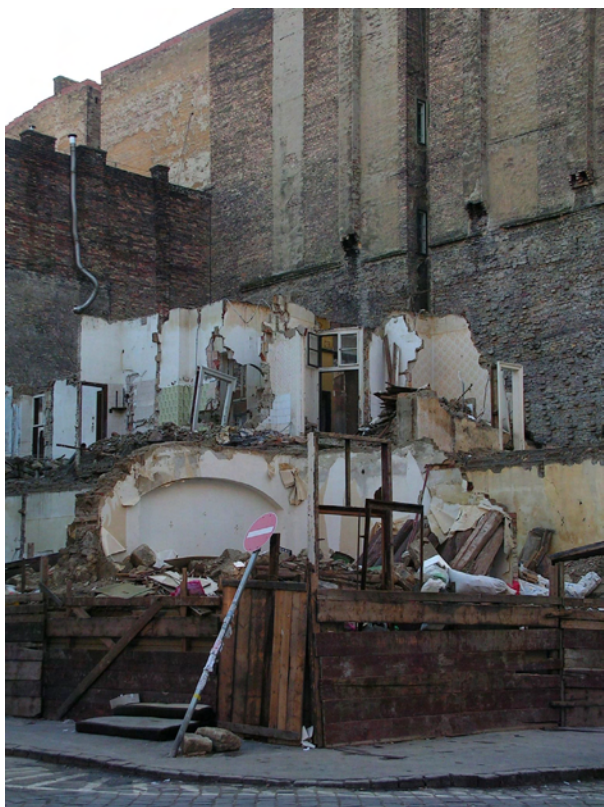


Fig. 1:  
Demolition in the historical centre of Budapest  
Photo: Levente Polyák

Inequalities as a result of privatisation is a common problem scattered throughout the city. On the contrary, the persistent dilapidation of the housing stock after the political changes, the evolution of an aesthetics of the transitory urban space, embodied by the crumbling plaster, created an emotional climate where questions of traces, memory and heritage are shrewdly formulated. The contemporary sensibility that recently inspired numerous artistic approaches to find the essence of Budapest's character on vacant lots and firewalls, responded squeamishly to a situation in which it rightly saw its references, traces and signs endangered.<sup>13</sup> Alongside this, the public urban discourse saw the presence of the concepts of rust-aesthetics and heritage being intensified.

Even in the context as described, it is not evident that the dilemma of heritage should bring to the fore the sentiments of collective dissatisfaction with the role of citizen participation in the decision-making. In the following section I will outline a couple of case studies and give an overview of the processes where the question of

heritage has become a primary medium of intervention in investment projects which are claimed to be illegal or offending collective interests.

## 5 Motorway on the Danube banks

The panorama of Budapest seen from the Danube was nominated to be a World Heritage site in 1987 by the UNESCO; it was the first world heritage location in Hungary. When in 2003, the mayor of Budapest announced the expansion of the motorway on the Danube bank, supposedly necessary for the construction of the new sewage plant in the south of city, the general consternation was understandably great. Beyond the slightly paradox emphasis on the environmental goal, the main argument for the expansion was to facilitate car traffic without decreasing route capacities; an argument that suits the concept of the 'liberal city'. The announcement was followed by wide indignation: the expansion of the motorway into four lanes would result in the total isolation of the Danube from the city.

The plan met with vast criticism and generated a significant civic movement, stimulating a great number of counter-arguments relying upon specific, often foreign examples. That said, this movement wasn't precisely formed in order to preserve a certain 'heritage'; it rather aimed to maintain the relative accessibility of the river from the city, to keep the possibility of the creation of a pedestrian riverside space, open for various activities, instead of rendering

<sup>13</sup> See for example Michael Rakowitz's "The Visionaries" exhibition in Trafó Gallery, or the project of Peter Belez and Anikó B. Nagy for the Hungarian Pavilion for the 10<sup>th</sup> Venice Architecture Biennial.

it exclusively for fast circulation. The particular relevance of this case lies in the fact that of the many voices of extensive protest, it was the voice of the Budapest World Heritage Foundation (BVA)<sup>14</sup> that happened to be heard.

In the autumn of 2003 the BVA turned to the Paris-based organisation UNESCO with a letter, in which it expressed complaints concerning the project planned in the core area of the Budapest world heritage site. The protest of BVA focused on the expansion of the motorway, which, in their interpretation, altered the world heritage 'scenery'. Following the appeal, UNESCO experts visited Budapest and formulated suggestions, in which they explicitly argued against the motorway expansion and for the exclusive reservation of the quays for pedestrians. This proposition had obviously no obligatory force, opposing the decision of an elected leading body of a sovereign country. The pressure exerted on the City Council was much more a factor of the prestige-element of the argument: the UNESCO warned that they would withdraw the World Heritage title should the motorway expansion go ahead. This penalty would represent a huge failure that any city council could probably not afford to undertake. Effected by the warning, the mayor launched the elaboration of several alternative plans, but finally gave up the idea of the modification of the quay.

What makes this case particularly interesting is that the BVA managed to raise a rather practical issue – initially appearing in the political dimensions of the use of space – to an ideological level. In this case it succeeded in mobilising 'universal' values, in the defence of which it could rely upon an international authority. The expert group of the UNESCO entered the originally purely local conflict in a rather curious way, achieving the status of a predominant player in urban politics and shortcutting the dispute, which was one originally directed at questions of economic sustainability by the City Council.

## 6 The SZOT Hotel on Rózsadomb

The SZOT<sup>15</sup> Hotel, rising from the contours of Rózsadomb<sup>16</sup> since the 1970s, has been an important target of investors' aspirations from the beginning of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the permission for its reconstruction was only issued in March 2005 by the local government of Budapest's 2nd district, opposing the standpoint of the Budapest Planning Council (BTT) and the Cultural Heritage Office (KÖH).<sup>17</sup> In June 2005, the Budapest World Heritage Foundation took out proceedings against the building permit at the Budapest Public Administration Office (FKH), on the grounds of violation of the law and public interest. According to the BVA's argument, the planned construction seriously wounds the world heritage panorama, as it is located immediately above the Danube side area. ICOMOS supported the BVA's objections<sup>18</sup> to the planned extension of the building's volume because of its unacceptable effect on the world heritage site. The FKH did not accept the BVA's petition,

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<sup>14</sup> Budapest Világörökségéért Alapítvány.

<sup>15</sup> Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa: National Council of Trade Unions.

<sup>16</sup> The Rose Hill is one of the capital's most prestigious and most expensive residential districts.

<sup>17</sup> Somlyódi (2006).

<sup>18</sup> ICOMOS is the 'backstage institution' of the UNESCO, local authority in world heritage issues.

declaring that the BVA may not be treated as a client in this legal affair. The NGO therefore turned to the Budapest Court in order to be accorded recognition as a legal client.



Fig. 2:  
The contours of the  
SZOT Hotel in the Buda  
landscape  
Photo: Mihály Vargha

The action of the Foundation was based on a European Union law, which was also adapted to the Hungarian legal system as the law n°LXXXI/2001. The Aarhus Convention, initiated by the United Nations, declares that the public have a right to participate in decisions concerning environmental issues, stating that "it is everyone's duty to protect the environment for the benefit of present and future generations". To give this force, the convention prescribes the right of organisations of public utilities to pursue litigations in the case of disapproval of resolutions. By referring to the Aarhus Convention, the BVA managed to halt the construc-

tion by the spring of 2006, and won the process in July 2006. This case may prove to be exemplary in that it shows the potential of NGOs to object to large-scale private investments, which are generally considered to violate public interests.

## 7 The historic Jewish District of Pest

The debates that has arisen around the urban reconstruction of the Inner-Erzsébetváros have compressed and somewhat summarised the standpoints developed hitherto. This is the reason why the conflict between the local municipality and NGOs fighting to save certain buildings from demolition has gained such symbolic significance. The history of the reconstruction of Erzsébetváros after 2000 exhibits several changes in direction and highlight some rather unusual frontlines of power.

The development plan elaborated by the municipality and containing a great number of demolition orders, was signed in 1999 by both the mayor of Budapest and the Cultural Heritage Office. In 2002 the Andrassy Avenue and its 'buffer zone', including the neighbouring streets of Inner-Erzsébetváros were nominated to be a World Heritage Site. After acquiring the title, it seemed clear that the district should revise its heritage strategy, however this did not come about. On the contrary, the demolitions in the world heritage area went on, attracting growing public attention and discontent. In 2004 the KÖH placed the quarter between Károly boulevard – Dohány – Klauzál streets – Klauzál square – Csányi – Király streets under temporary protection, and later in the same autumn it was ascribed the status of an 'area of architectural heritage', assuring it greater protection. To prevent further demolitions in spring 2005, the KÖH nominated 51 individual buildings to be scheduled monuments, however in the case of those buildings where demolition permits had



already been granted this provision proved to be ineffective. Similarly, even when the whole area was given the status of a 'heritage area', also in 2005, the step was still not enough to invalidate the already granted demolition permits.

As with the earlier cases, a turn for the better was first brought about when the Óvás! Association<sup>19</sup> turned to the UNESCO in order to protect the world heritage site, and publicly requested the mayor and the Minister of Culture to take action. Following the appeal, the UNESCO mobilised the same weapons previously used and again warned of the possible withdrawal of the World Heritage title. Bowing to international pressure, the mayor of Budapest and the Minister of Culture both entered the discussion on the side of the Óvás! Association, resulting in a rather odd configuration of confrontation.



*Fig. 3:  
New constructions in the  
Inner-Erzsébetváros  
Photo: Levente Polyák*

From an analytical point of view, the most interesting side of the conflict is perhaps the peculiar discursive space constituted by the arguments belonging to the diverse positions occupied in the debate. Juxtaposing interviews and declarations, one can note that concepts of 'heritage', 'sustainability' or 'community participation' have simultaneously taken on contrasting significations in this discursive space according to the speaker's actual goals. The cornerstone of the local municipality's official rhetoric arguing for the demolitions, are social sustainability, pragmatism and the district's tradition of perpetual transformation. György Hunvald, the district's mayor, commented on the KÖH's preservationist steps in an interview: "The municipality has received a fatal checkmate, because after the declaration of the area's heritage status, investors have now disappeared".<sup>20</sup> In his view, the strategy of monument protection equates to a purely passive participation in the rehabilitation; it does not hinder the worsening condition of the buildings. Hunvald stressed that as a consequence of the KÖH's decisions, the municipality was no longer able to move 3000 people out of their comfortless flats, and it could not build new housing either. Referring to the NGOs' activities in the interests of preserving historic tissue, Hunvald also pointed out that local habitants would may also undertake initiatives to assert their rights to better living conditions, which are currently threatened by the actions of NGOs in support of the area. Hunvald contrasted the municipality's concern with the social problems of the district with the NGOs' one-sided focus on heritage: "I am not only considering the bricks and mortar, but also the 10-12 thousand habitants within whose fortune is very important to me".<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The name of the Óvás! Association means protection and protestation in the same time.

<sup>20</sup> Hunvald (2004).

<sup>21</sup> Hunvald (2004).

In the face of the NGOs' opposition to the demolitions and new constructions in the name of the district's heritage, the concept of 'local tradition' gained alternative, often contradictory significations, as an interview with the local representative András Hont illustrates: "...the protesters are as narrow-minded as the municipality leaders when they sell individual lots, uprooting these from their natural tissue, the blocks. They see the buildings and not the city. For the character and function to remain the same, identical to what was previously there, many things must change".<sup>22</sup> The criticism as formulated by the municipality was thus oriented against 'intellectuals from elsewhere', placing ideological values before pragmatic needs and cramping the development of the district.

Even investors who stand to profit most obviously from the demolitions have curiously evoked traditional values of the quarter in their advertisements: in the middle of the endangered area, on the fences of the construction of a considerably oversized residential building complex, one could read: "noblesse oblige".

The NGOs protesting against the demolitions, primarily Óvás!, were trying to attract attention to the social and economic dimensions of heritage in their declarations: "Budapest is one of the cultural capitals of Europe, even without the distinguishing official title. This cultural status is partly due to the built heritage of the city. This is what gives a continuous setting to its constantly changing cultural life. This is what offers its inhabitants the feeling of home. This is primarily what makes it attractive for tourism."<sup>23</sup> Beyond this, the rhetoric of Óvás! implicitly stressed the importance of the democratic values and the transparency of political and professional decisions: "The scandals, abuses, illegal demolitions, the constructions which absolutely do not fit the cityscape, the burdening of the environment and the failure of legal reforms lead us to direct the attention of concerned institutions and governmental organisations to this insupportable situation."<sup>24</sup> In the KÖH discourse, the protection of the built environment understandably took centre stage: "Most cities have an individual architectural character that should be protected. In every country the time arrives when we have to define our own limits."<sup>25</sup>

Speaking of the discursive dimension of the urban rehabilitation conflict, the role of denomination should not be forgotten. As with the fictive label attributed to the urban regeneration programme launched recently in the 8<sup>th</sup> district<sup>26</sup>, a significant part of the debate in the 7<sup>th</sup> district focuses on the name of the quarter, lifting the debate into another historical-ideological dimension. These practices reveal techniques of city branding, employed first by the developers, and then by the NGOs. By calling the Inner-Erzsébetváros a 'Jewish District' the preservationist movement embarked on a conscious strategy, directing awareness towards the concentrated presence of an endangered culture and gaining a 'surplus of legitimacy' by opening new links to the heritage

<sup>22</sup> Hont (2004).

<sup>23</sup> See [www.ovas.hu](http://www.ovas.hu).

<sup>24</sup> See [www.ovas.hu](http://www.ovas.hu).

<sup>25</sup> See [www.koh.hu](http://www.koh.hu).

<sup>26</sup> Magdolna-district, whose name refers to one of the tiniest but well-sounding streets of the neighbourhood

discourse. The name 'Jewish District' was nevertheless harshly criticised from various points of view, either because of its theme-park modality or its historical inaccuracy. András Hont, the local representative, expressed his doubts:

"The questions of denomination and media attention are tightly related. The Inner-Erzsébetváros has never been a Jewish district. It is important to state it, for several reasons. Firstly, this name is foreign to the real traditions of Budapest, foreign to the intellectuality of Budapest, where the Jewish community plays an important role, but not as separately Jewish, but as a form of interaction. [...] The expression is also important from the point of view of the relationship between the city and the district. The Jewish district always means seclusion: state in the state, city in the city, and way of life in the way of life. But Erzsébetváros is not a specific, isolated part of the capital, but Pest itself."<sup>27</sup>

The mayor of the district also argued against the mono-cultural denomination: "The area that is nowadays called Jewish district does not bear the marks of a real Jewish quarter".<sup>28</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

It is not yet certain whether the movement reactivated by the Óvás! Association will achieve the same kind of success as that of the Budapest World Heritage Foundation. While the activists' main goal was to preserve the whole quarter, they have managed to secure protection and attract media attention only for certain individual buildings. The other uncertainty concerns the complexity of the safeguarded and employed notions of heritage. After rescuing Király utca 40., a building that had become symbolic for the movement, Óvás! and the architecture magazine Octogon called for proposals to find a new function for the building. This again raises uncomfortable questions: What do we want to protect? The district, the building, the façade or the collective memory embodied by social practices? Can an empty building, waiting for the 'invention' of its entirely new function, be seen as part of the local cultural tradition? The similarity of these questions to the – rather unjust – accusations by the mayor of Erzsébetváros against the NGOs is not coincidental: they originate from other parts of the city, mainly the hills of Buda, and instead of concerning themselves with the people, they deal with facades and surfaces proclaimed to be heritage.

In all the arguments formulated on the different fronts of the 'battlefield' of



Fig. 4:  
40 Király street, the  
building that became the  
symbol of the successful  
civic resistance against  
arbitrary decisions on  
urban reconstruction  
Photo: Levente Polyák

<sup>27</sup> Belső-Erzsébetváros soha nem volt zsidónegyed (The Inner-Erzsébetváros has never been a Jewish District). Interview with the deputy András Hont András. In: *Mozgó Világ* 2004/11.

<sup>28</sup> Hunvald (2004).

Erzsébetváros, and especially concerning the building of Király u. 40., it is striking to see how the notions of 'heritage', 'participation' and 'sustainability' become objects of arbitrary appropriation and can be fitted into whichever narrative. It does not simply demonstrate the "unboundedness of the notion of heritage"<sup>29</sup>, but also its almost perfect fluidity. Nevertheless, the widening of the notion allows the argument of heritage to open up ways of arguing for other social needs.

The recent example of the Millenáris bicycle track illustrates precisely the emerging practice in which heritage as a 'joint value' may become a most important weapon in the hands of non-government initiatives in legal debates surrounding urban development. On 24<sup>th</sup> May 2006, the Hungarian Bicycle Club held a demonstration at one of the oldest bicycle tracks of the country, the Millenáris, protesting against the demolition of the "cradle of Hungarian sport".<sup>30</sup> The demonstration responded to a governmental decision to demolish the sports complex instead of renovating it. Although in this case it is obviously not so much the building itself that protesters wish to save, but rather a practice, a space of activity, the Bicycle Club turned to the Cultural Heritage Office to preserve the building as a monument and thus protect it from demolition. Apparently they used the notion of heritage as a tool, a pretext to save the spaces claimed by the community, in the name of the preservation of the building.

This example shows clearly how the enlargement and instrumentalisation of the notion or argument of heritage does not necessarily lead towards a superficial façade-politics. It does not serve the blurring of standpoints in a debate, but gives diverse values and interpretative contexts to the social stakes connected to the urban development discussions.

It seems that recently, in the urban discourse in Budapest, it is through the idea of heritage that diverse precedents and practices take shape, a tool that makes heritage the subject of discussion and thus allows or enables democratic participation in urban development and politics. The use of heritage, the visible evidence of the civic dimension of memory, to stand simultaneously against representations of power and commerce, does not only render the urban culture more plural, but possibly also opens new paths towards democratic control.

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<sup>29</sup> György (2005).

<sup>30</sup> Népszabadság: 25 May, 2006.



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