

Save the Jewish Quarter in Budapest!

„The Jewish Quarter in Budapest survived the World War and the Communist era. However, just now, after the establishment of democracy in Hungary, this outstanding complex of historical building is disappearing at an alarming speed.” – that is how Janos Ladanyi, a sociologist and one of the leaders of the Society “Ovas!” opened the conference on the Jewish Quarter 20th October 2005 in Budapest. Outstanding representatives of the conservation of historical heritage from various countries made presentations during the conference, emphasizing that similar historical heritages are being conserved and restored with great care in cities all over the world. But why is the situation different in Budapest? Why is the demolition of these historical monuments is going on, causing already irreparable damages to the world’s heritage?

- In Hungary there are 7 ministries „responsible” for the natural and built environment – there is no adequate cooperation and coordination among them..
- The Budapest Municipality has little power to influence the developments. Such decisions are made by the district governments. (In Budapest there are 23 districts. The Jewish Quarter is in the 7th District.)
- The principle of subsidiarity stands on its head: a small unskilled body (members of the local government) has the full right to decide about selling the common good (real estate) and (re)zoning the whole territory of the settlement; the professional authorities and the local public can only express their opinion about the land use development and other plans – but the local government can decide against these arguments when their decision does not hurt the paragraphs of the law. However, even if the law is violated, the judicial processes are very slow. Often the final ruling is made, when in the practice already irreversible changes took place – for example, a historical building is demolished and a modern shopping mall is built on its place. (Recently the Ombudsman of Hungary made a 56 page-report – based on the official statements of different authorities – about the illegalities during the building permit procedures of a huge shopping mall in the historical center of the town of Kecskemét. Since then the mall, which destroyed the traditional and highly valuable historical center of the town, already opened and there has been no legal move against either the mayor or the notary of the municipality or any other person responsible for committing the illegal activities and giving permission for the construction despite of wide-spread public protests.)
- Those who will privatize or „develop” have clear financial interests while the public or the experts have mostly immaterial values to protect like cultural heritage, genius loci, silence, a wish to rest in the park or to rear children happily or to be able to afford cheap public facilities.
- In private conversations with developers in Hungary, several of them admitted to representatives of the Clean Air Action Group that about 10 percent of the cost of a new development is used for bribing politicians and the authorities.
- The Annual Report of the Hungarian National Security Office for the year 2004 states that a large part of the money laundering in Hungary is done through real estate developments...

It seems that now only massive and urgent international protest can save at least the remnants of the historical Jewish quarter of Budapest.

Related websites:

<http://www.kidma.hu/ovas/>

<http://www.indymedia.hu/cikk.shtml?x=19018>

<http://www.indymedia.hu/cikk.shtml?x=25625>

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Why did the Clean Air Action Group support the unlawful occupation of a house in Kazinczy street in Budapest?

The background

The Hungarian legislation (legal system) generally is in accordance with the EU law. There are several basic laws for protecting the natural resources and the built environment – the Environmental Protection Law, the Building Law, the Law about the Development of Settlements and about the Regulation of the Settlements, the Rule about Public Participation etc. In a stronger democracy these rules could serve properly the common good. However the legal practice in Hungary does not serve the general interest.

Some of the main reasons are the following:

- There are 7 ministries „responsible” for the natural and built environment – they do not cooperate with each other.
- The principle of subsidiarity stands on its head: a small unskilled body (members of the local government) has the full right to decide about selling the common good (real estate) and (re)zoning the whole territory of the settlement; the professional authorities and the local public can only express their opinion about the land use development and other plans – but the local government can decide against these arguments when their decision does not hurt the paragraphs of the law. The second level (Public Administration Office) can control only whether the decision was lawful. („Small mistakes” in the proceedings of the local government do not alter the decision. Recently the Ombudsman of Hungary made a 56-page report – based on the official statements of different authorities – about the illegalities during the building permit procedures of a huge shopping mall in the historical center of Kecskemét. Since then the mall has been already opened and there has been no legal move against either the mayor or the notary of the municipality.)
- Those who will privatize or „develop” have clear financial interests while the public or the experts have mostly immaterial values to protect like cultural heritage, genius loci, silence, a wish to rest in the park or to rear children happily or to be able to afford cheap public facilities.

The local citizens’ civil groups often appeal against the decision of the authorities or turn to court but generally in vain, because these processes are very slow, and while the process is going on, the development is often finished, and then (according to our experiences) no court will order its demolition. Everybody agrees that things have to be changed, but, because of the 2/3 majority necessary to modify the law on local government and because of the unbelievable influence of some real estate interest groups, nothing changes.

That is why the Clean Air Action Group supports all kinds of demonstrations and other actions which are carried out legally and which aim to change the situation. Something must happen before it is too late!

The case of the squatters

The Centrum Group, an informal group of about 50 young persons, occupied a house in the Kazinczy street in the former Jewish quarter in the 7th District of Budapest on the 30th of September and the 1st of October. The district mayor and the local representatives of the 7th District have been forcing a plan for many years: to demolish the old smaller buildings and to build in even the backyards at least partially (80% built-in area and 6 level intensity – instead of the existing 4-5). The explanation: less intensity is not economically viable for the developers and neither the local governments nor the residents (local inhabitants) have the money to rehabilitate the area – the public places and the old houses.

The Centrum Group has chosen a small two-storey house which has been empty for several years, with broken windows and full of litter. It is still a public property, the owner of this house is the local government. The squatters started to clean the house and the yard to make use of it they planned to accomplish a youth center. They thought that they could clean up and renovate the house without financial support of the local government if only they would not need to pay rent for it.

In this beautiful old building there had been a kosher butchery. Later, the committee dealing with persons returning from the Nazi concentration camps also had had its offices here. The squatters were shocked when they found heaps of documents describing the fate and sufferings of these people. These documents will certainly be destroyed if the house will be sold by the district government and demolished.

The Hungarian laws are very strange. The local government can sell all the public assets as if it belonged to the representatives sitting in the local government, but it is totally unlawful when a civil group would keep an estate in public ownership and use it for the public good. The local government can demolish a historical building, but a civil group has no right to maintain and renew it. A developer can build in its place any modern building for private purposes, but a civil group has no right to put its voluntarily work into it and operate it on a non-profit basis.

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BUDAPEST'S OLD JEWISH QUARTER

Some Thoughts on the Rehabilitation

(Outline for a study)

*„A building is determined by two things: its use and its beauty.
The use belongs to the owner, the beauty belongs to everybody.”*
Victor Hugo

The old Jewish commercial Quarter of Budapest is a place of particular importance for the city, for the country and even for the world. This exceptional inner-city Quarter—fallen into oblivion and exposed to decades of decay—is being singled out for demolition, rather than renovation. With the destruction of Budapest's historical and cultural buildings, many local residents will lose their homes and memories. To make matters worse, the planned new office and residential buildings are of very low quality and only based on the profit-interests of large-scale investment companies.

One wonders, what would happen if the basic principles for renovating the Quarter were based on honouring its unique features? Instead of destroying the enchanting streets, special atmosphere and traditional functions—which even today characterize the historical Jewish Quarter—the right approach should search for ways to develop the Quarter through investments that respect the existing local architectural and cultural values.

Many other large European cities have found creative solutions to the challenge of renovating their decayed Jewish Quarters so that they honour the ancient Jewish culture. Each and every city thought and acted similarly: they did not destroy buildings haphazardly, but rather attempted to supplement the decaying or desolate buildings with interesting and appropriate new buildings. As a result, they did not open the way for mass-scale, low-grade developments that lack character, and only bring profits in the short run, but rather allowed the new development of an urban landscape that respects and strengthens the historic, religious, and cultural heritage. This approach to urban renewal has consistently led to economic and social success everywhere.

It is worth looking at the outcome of this approach in cities such as Cracow, Berlin and Paris. When thinking about the future of the Jewish Quarter, we would like to advance this different type of attitude.

The problems surrounding Budapest's old Jewish Quarter are in many respects similar to those in other historical districts. Therefore, in the first part of the study we seek answers to general questions regarding organization, communication, and ways to finance the renewal of residential buildings and public areas. The experience of other European cities will likely be of considerable importance. For instance, the success of foreign cities' rehabilitation efforts can be used to expose the error in current Hungarian rehabilitation practice. While in reality “rehabilitation” means restitution, renewal, or revival, the practice of rehabilitation in Hungary has meant something quite different: actual urban transformation, or lately, downright destruction. The original goal of urban rehabilitation—to facilitate the renewal of a historical city district by preserving its core characteristics—has been lost. Therefore, the study's second part will deal with the unique features of Budapest's old Jewish Quarter and with the opportunities inherent in these features.

What unique features may assist rehabilitation here?

This place is, primarily and first of all, a traditional and living Jewish Quarter.

The life of this district is distinctively determined by the culture of the Jewish community, which settled here nearly two hundred years ago, and which is still living here despite all the trials and afflictions of history. In addition to its three synagogues currently in use (the synagogues of Dohány Street, Kazinczy Street and Vasvári Pál Street), the central institutions of the Hungarian Jewry (12 Síp Street), the Jewish Museum and Archives, the Heroes' Temple and the Heroes' Cemetery, the Goldmark Hall, and also the town's only ritual baths (16 Kazinczy Street) can be found here. Hopefully, the synagogue in Rumbach Sebestyén Street, closed since 1959, will open again for religious and tourist reasons. As Géza Komoróczy, Professor of the Budapest University "Loránd Eötvös" once said, „The group of the three large temples – Budapest's Jewish triangle – has no match anywhere in the world.”

This place is also the venue of remembrance and homage.

The Ghetto was here, and its victims lie buried here symbolically. The monuments of homage and remembrance of the Holocaust are situated here.

In addition to Budapest's Castle District and City, this Quarter is the Hungarian capital's most valuable location and most frequently visited tourist attraction.

From an architectural aspect, this district is unique and exceptional because of its irregular, zigzag streets. It is different from the town's neighbouring historical districts because its unbroken line of old houses which still exist in many streets. This Quarter evokes the atmosphere of classic Pest by the mysterious tangle of its houses with passageways leading through them, by the oriental magic of its synagogues, by buildings designed by famous architects of the turn of the century, and by the special mixture of all the. When walking in the district, especially in the neighbourhood of the synagogues, one continuously bumps into tourists – despite the degraded conditions which can be seen here. The unofficial, alternative sightseeing tours and strolls organized into Budapest's old Jewish Quarter are always a great success.

This district has been and should continue to be a place of education, culture, entertainment and dining.

Today, several theatres, exhibition halls, special restaurants and cafés operate here, while new ones continue to spring up (Spinoza, Vam Design, Godot, Szóda, Szimpla, Sark, and most recently, AKKU). The Quarter's specialities include the Fröhlich kosher confectionery, the kosher Hanna Restaurant, the Kádár Restaurant and the Carmel Restaurant. This is the only place in Budapest where a kosher pub, a kosher baker's shop and a kosher butcher's shop can be found.

The Jewish Quarter has been and can continue to be an important commercial district – owing to its traditions, the position it holds within Budapest, and the style of its buildings.

With the right policies in place, the Quarter has the potential to increase its commercial appeal. This is particularly true of Király Street, the main commercial thoroughway.

This Quarter has all the ingredients necessary to make it the centre of youth and of alternative culture.

It is not an accident that, until they were forced to leave, the courtyards of the Quarter's unoccupied houses and five alternative cafés were jammed with throngs of young people. These youth were squatting as a means to raise awareness about the Quarter's fate.

Interestingly, having recognized the importance and charm of the Quarter, several youth communities and private investors have made proposals to purchase the buildings destined for demolition. Unfortunately, the interest shown and the proposals made have always been frustrated by the district government's lack of interest and hostile reception.

What would be needed first?

First and foremost, real protection is needed. *This means that the district government and the authorities responsible for the protection of old historic buildings and monuments need to take seriously the notion of district protection, and not only protect individual buildings listed as protected historic monuments.* Ultimately, entire streets, urban patterns and structures need protection and upkeep.

- In the district there are a great number of vacant lots, as well as new, inappropriate building developments. (New buildings already constitute 30% of the plots in many streets; but in the inner streets this proportion sometimes reaches as much as 50 to 80 per cent). Therefore plans for further demolitions should be stopped. Just because a building is not listed as a historic monument, does not mean that it should be torn down. It is inappropriate that two or three additional stories are built on a two-story classical residential house. Furthermore, it is unacceptable to tear down buildings on streets that are still of a uniform height or where there are many disarranged streets (for example: 9 Kazinczy Street or the demolitions under preparation in Dob Street). Additionally, it is not suitable to unite plots—for instance three plots (23-25-27 Dob Street)—and to give official consent to building developments which do not fit in with the scale and height of the district section, and which are of inferior architectural standard. (Just one example from the many relevant cases: 6 Holló Street, where a seven-storey car park is being constructed between two residential houses – of two and three stories, respectively – protected as historic monuments.)
- In a densely built-up urban district with a narrow street network and lack of green areas, it is inexcusable to increase the density of buildings, which automatically entails further reduction of green areas and substantial increase of motorcar traffic.
- In a protected Quarter so rich in historic monuments and valuable buildings, it is outrageous that new developments are considered worthless low-grade buildings. For example, Holló House, 30-32 Dob Street, and the Eszter House are being constructed in spite of the disapproval of the Budapest Metropolitan Architectural Plan Committee. Furthermore, it is outrageous that only garage buildings will accompany extremely dense residential developments. There should be at least some places which serve other community needs like education, culture, health and recreation.

The danger of further destruction still exists despite the fact that in 2004 the Quarter was named a historic monument area that deserves protecting by both the city and the local government. All the old residential buildings that are not individually protected continue to be imperilled, among others the two two-storey classicistic residential buildings of Dob Street flanking on Gozsdu Court (14 and 18 Dob Street). Plans for demolition of old buildings and construction of “modern” ones are included in earlier plans by the Municipality—and are still in force), but also in recently prepared plans (i.e. since the declaration of the protected status) for some selected areas.

With the destruction of these buildings, the ambience of classic 19th century Pest will be lost forever since the District has some of the last remaining buildings from that era. Consequently, the nature of the Quarter is still in danger, and local residents face the threat of being forced to move out of their homes. Up until now, the architectural plans for the new buildings have not been started. Therefore, it is not too late to influence the process and stop the destruction of old buildings.

Our study will also deal with the car-free question since there are no appropriate plans that would address the issue of moderating or drastically cutting back the motorcar traffic, and hence, realizing the City's car-free goals.

In the case of old districts, and especially in the case of protected areas, the renovation of residential buildings must be given intensive and efficient support. The owners must be made interested in preservation and renovation (e.g. through tax allowance).

In order to ensure that the changes taking place in the Quarter contribute to cultural and historical preservation and to the interests of residents, it is essential that an independent coordinating office that focuses exclusively on the Quarter's future be set up. Significant progress could be made if at least one or two people working in the office while the rehabilitation program and plans could be prepared.

- *On the basis of the above, what can be done to bring attention to the current plans, which are misleadingly called rehabilitation?*
- *What does the term "protected Quarter" mean?*
- *What answer can be given to the recurring question, "from what funds"? How can the necessary capital be mobilized and be made available through state and local government support?*
- *What can be recommended in order to ensure that the Quarter's exceptional features and values can come into full display?*
- *What will happen to those living here?*

Our study, now under preparation, will attempt to find answers to these and other similar questions.

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