

Utopian Visions in the Rubble: Constructing a New City versus Reconstructing the Old in Post-war Budapest

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ABSTRACT

The siege of Budapest was among the longest and bloodiest of the urban battles of World War II. It lasted a total of 102 days from October 29, 1944 to February 14, 1945 when the city unconditionally surrendered to the Red Army of the Soviet Union. In stark contrast, Berlin was taken in two weeks, Vienna in six days while Paris and most other European capitals – with the exception of Warsaw – never became battlegrounds during the war. The scale of fighting and destruction was comparable only with the sieges of Leningrad, Stalingrad, and Warsaw, namely the most devastating episodes of urban warfare during World War II.

The physical and human toll of the war was enormous. Hardest hit of all were the public representative buildings that encapsulated the city's history and cultural identity. The Castle District in the Buda Hills overlooking the Danube lay in ruins. Architectural landmarks that defined the Danube skyline were destroyed beyond repair. Yet, the collapsed bridges across the Danube will probably remain the most painful symbol of devastation. All seven bridges were methodically blown up by withdrawing German troops during the siege. The loss of the bridges was also more than just symbolic: they functioned as important arteries of everyday life connecting not only the twin cities of Buda and Pest but the Eastern and Western halves of the country.

Even though the clearing away of debris and rebuilding efforts began immediately after the end of the siege, three years later in 1948 most building activity was still devoted to basic repairs of damaged buildings and infrastructure. The re-

construction of key public buildings was even more protracted: the Buda Castle was completed only in 1966 while the art nouveau Elizabeth Bridge, destroyed in the war, was replaced by a modern suspension bridge in 1964.

Nevertheless, in the eyes of architects and urban planners the havoc wreaked by the war presented a unique opportunity to rectify the urban planning and development mistakes of earlier periods. The few new buildings that began to sprout among the ruins ushered in a short-lived but optimistic era between 1946 and 1949 that carried the promise of a new beginning. Planners and architects passionately debated the need to “build the city anew” as opposed to simply “reconstructing the ruins.” New architectural and urban planning journals, as well as the first post-war architectural and urban planning competitions offered lively forums to these efforts to fundamentally rethink the city.

My paper will focus on the utopian visions that were hatched in these discussions and competitions, and that played a central role in the immediate aftermath of the war before the communist political takeover in 1948 and the coercive introduction of Soviet architectural and planning policies in the early 1950s. First, the paper will show that generating utopian visions in a series of open architectural competitions held immediately after the war in 1945 was, in itself, a significant part of the reconstruction process. Second, it will highlight why and how such utopian blueprints are consequential even if they never materialize, and why unbuilt plans remain an indispensable part of the urban and architectural imagination.

...Tomorrow we'll breathe life into the ruins with asbestos, iron, and majestic granite,
and out with state decorations! with moonlight! with Orpheums!
We'll build enormous skyscrapers and the replica of the Eiffel tower to play with.
Bridges with basalt foundations. New myths on the squares made of ringing steel;
and we'll push screaming, fiery locomotives onto the defunct rails, so they shine and follow their course like dizzying meteorites.
We'll mix new colors and lay new cables beneath the sea, and we'll impregnate ripe, single women so the earth can cradle a new species
and the new poets can rejoice, singing the spirit of the new times in Rome, Paris, Moscow, Berlin, London and Budapest. ^[1]
Lajos Kassák, "Mesteremberek" (Craftsmen), 1914

[1] All translations from the Hungarian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Lajos Kassák, the author of the poem selected as the epigraph for this paper, was likely the single most important representative of constructivism in Hungary and a firm believer in radical utopian futures. It was after the failed Communist revolution of 1919 in Hungary, while living in exile in Vienna, that he came into contact with various radical avant-garde movements emerging across interwar Europe. Kassák's own work shows the closest kinship with Activism, the radical left-wing faction of German expressionism, but he was familiar with nearly the full spectrum of avant-garde groupings including Russian constructivism. His poem powerfully encapsulates constructivism's passionate optimism and faith in social progress driven by technological change and architecture. The journals (Ma, Dokumentum, Munka) Kassák founded and edited played a crucial role in educating the Hungarian art world about these new developments in radical utopian thought. He had particularly strong influence over key Hungarian members and students of the Bauhaus, especially László Moholy-Nagy and the architect Farkas Molnár (Benson and Forgács 2002; Ferkai 2003). Constructivism exerted its influence on Hungarian art and architecture chiefly through the ideas and activities of the Bauhaus, especially in its most radical phase in the 1920s. The legacy of constructivism, which had a strong influence over immediate post-war urban reconstruction plans, is thus intimately tied in Hungary to probing the legacy of the Bauhaus and the universalistic aspirations of interwar modernism.

Hungary and other Central European countries are illuminating in tracing the trajectory of constructivism under socialism because they lay at the crossroads of Eastern and Western influences, being drawn into the political and cultural orbit of the Soviet Union after 1945 while carrying the remnants of Western European intellectual connections from the interwar period (Kulić, Mrduljaš, and Thaler 2012; Zarecor 2011). My analysis shows how these diverse intellectual traditions intersected with local and international political pressures to translate radical utopianism into tangible social reform, particularly through the large-scale transformation of the built environment.

Architecture always held a special status for constructivists, as they firmly believed that painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts would dissolve into architecture, thereby uniting art with technics (Ferkai 2003:16). In the immediate post-war period of 1945 to 1949, constructivism inspired bold blueprints for the post-war rebuilding

of Budapest and the construction of new public buildings, extending and radicalizing the influence of interwar modernism. But its budding impact was abruptly halted by the communist political takeover that brought with it the aesthetic paradigm of socialist realism from the Soviet Union.^[2]

[2] Constructivism became politically rehabilitated in the 1960s and returned to inform experimental projects for mass housing construction (Molnár 2005).

In the eyes of architects and urban planners, the havoc wreaked by the war presented a unique opportunity to rectify the urban planning and development mistakes of earlier periods. The slowly emerging new buildings in the immediate aftermath of World War II built on the legacy of interwar modernism to radically rethink the structure and function of the city. Planners and architects passionately debated the need to “build the city anew” as opposed to simply “reconstructing the ruins.” The new architectural and urban planning journals, as well as the first post-war architectural and urban planning competitions offered lively forums to these efforts to fundamentally rethink the city. This short period of optimistic experimentation was undercut by a politically motivated shift in cultural policy and artistic expression, dictated by the Soviet Union, which launched an attack against constructivism while calling for a return to historicist, realist, and traditional art forms.

My paper will focus on the utopian visions that were hatched in these discussions and competitions and played a central role in the immediate aftermath of the war before the Communist political takeover in 1948 and the coercive introduction of Soviet architectural and planning policies in the early 1950s. First, the paper will show that generating utopian visions in a series of open architectural competitions held immediately after the war in 1945 was, in itself, a significant part of the reconstruction process. Second, it will highlight why and how such utopian blueprints are consequential even if they never materialize, and why unbuilt plans remain an indispensable part of the urban and architectural imagination.

The Aftermath of World War II and the Promise of New Beginnings

The siege of Budapest was among the longest and bloodiest of the urban battles of World War II (Ungváry 1998). It lasted a total of 102 days from October 29, 1944, to February 14, 1945, when the city unconditionally surrendered to the Red Army. In stark contrast, Berlin was taken in 2 weeks, Vienna in 6 days, while Paris and most other European capitals, with the exception of Warsaw, never became battlegrounds during the war. Hitler had declared Budapest a fortress city that had to be defended to the last man. When the siege finally ended and Budapest fell, the victory proved decisive for the Allies in their push towards Berlin.

The scale of fighting and destruction inflicted on Budapest was comparable only with the sieges of Leningrad, Stalingrad, and Warsaw, the most devastating episodes of urban warfare during World War II. For Budapest, the siege in 1944–1945 was the most destructive of the 15 major sieges the city had endured over its long history, which qualifies it as one of the most besieged capitals in Europe, underscoring its geopolitical and military importance (Ungváry 1998:9). The physical and human toll of the war was enormous. The combined human losses, including deaths, Holocaust victims, and deportations by Soviet troops, amounted to nearly 100,000 people in Budapest (Stark 2000; Ungváry 1998). Overall, the city’s population fell from 1.2 million to 800,000, and in some downtown districts the size of the population

was halved (Ungváry 1998:307). Before the siege, the city also suffered several bouts of heavy Allied bombing, and the cumulative destruction to the built environment was staggering. Nearly 5 percent of the housing stock completely vanished, 6.5 percent became uninhabitable, and an additional 16 percent was heavily damaged. Approximately 36,000 families became homeless (Sipos 2011; Ungváry and Tamási 2006).

Hardest hit of all were the public representative buildings that encapsulated the city's history and cultural identity. The Castle District in the Buda Hills overlooking the Danube lay in ruins. The famous Lloyd Palace and the row of lavish hotels that lined and defined the Danube skyline on the Pest side were destroyed beyond repair. Nevertheless, the most expressive and painful symbol of the devastation remains undoubtedly the site of the collapsed bridges across the Danube. All the bridges were methodically blown up by withdrawing German troops during the siege. But the loss of the bridges was more than just symbolic. They did not merely offer visual accents to Budapest's iconic cityscape, but served as important arteries of everyday life connecting not only the twin cities of Buda and Pest but also the eastern and western halves of the country.

The destroyed Elisabeth bridge in Budapest, 1945 (Source: Fortepan 60155.)



[3] To ensure that clean-up and reconstruction efforts proceeded smoothly, compulsory community service was introduced across the country, requiring four days of community service per month (or the payment of an equivalent monetary fee) from adult citizens (Ungváry and Tamási, 2006: 38).

[4] The reconstruction of the Buda Castle was in part also prolonged for political reasons. For an extended period, it was unclear how the building should be reused. Various scenarios were drawn up including suggestions to demolish it just as East Germans cleared away the Berlin Stadtschloss, or to turn it into the headquarter of the communist leadership until it was decided that it would host cultural institutions. The excavations that started to unearth the medieval remains of the Castle also slowed down the reconstruction process. As the reconstruction took off after socialist realism already vanished, the remodeling also involved large-scale modernist changes especially to the interiors but also to the façade.

The extent of the destruction is also made palpable by the fact that, although the clearing away of debris and rebuilding efforts began immediately following the end of the siege, three years later, in 1948, most building activity was still devoted to the reconstruction of damaged buildings and infrastructure.^[3] It was a memorable event when the city government threw a little celebration on April 20, 1948, claiming that there were no longer any unrepaired roofs in Budapest (Prakfalvi, 1999a: 8). The reconstruction of some public buildings was even more protracted: the renovation and remodeling of the Buda Castle were completed only in 1966, while the art nouveau Elizabeth Bridge, destroyed in the war, was replaced by a modern suspension bridge in 1964.^[4]

Meanwhile, a few new buildings began to sprout among the ruins, ushering in a short-lived but optimistic era between 1946 and 1949 that carried the promise of a new beginning. For architects and urban

planners, the destruction caused by the war contained a silver lining. Namely, the severely damaged urban fabric also presented a unique opportunity to rectify the urban planning and development mistakes of earlier periods. Virgil Borbíró, a prominent architect and important figure in the reconstruction, remarked that “during the painfully long fifty days of the siege, in the darkness of the air-raid shelter and in the midst of resounding explosions, we often pondered what exactly might have gotten destroyed from Budapest. We had secretly hoped that at least a couple of buildings that did not fit the cityscape would disappear” (Borbíró 1945:50). Planners and architects talked frequently about the need to “build the city anew” as opposed to simply “reconstructing the ruins” (újjaépítés instead of helyreállítás) (Fischer 1946).

Constructing a New City versus Reconstructing the Old

It was against this backdrop that large-scale physical devastation and lagging reconstruction were increasingly viewed as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to fundamentally rethink and recreate the city. Influential architectural and urban journals such as *Tér és Forma* (Space and Form) and *Budapest*, which resumed publication in 1945, included a growing number of contributions to the discussion on whether Budapest should be merely restored or built entirely anew. Advocates of radical modernization emphasized how pre-war Budapest, just like other large metropolises, had been a product of real estate speculation that completely disregarded the hygienic and social needs of city dwellers, how the city had lost contact with nature and become unlivable, how the modernization of outmoded neighborhoods was impossible without reforming land ownership structure, and how the fact that housing was built to last for several generations was actually an obstacle to progress (*Tér és Forma* 1946; Major 1946). They uniformly agreed that the extensive damage caused by the war should be seen as a call to create new and better (more functional) structures in place of destroyed buildings that were replete with shortcomings (Major 1946:197).

Reflecting this zeitgeist, the reconstituted Budapest Council of Public Works (Fővárosi Közmunkák Tanácsa),^[5] the agency in charge of planning and coordinating the rebuilding effort, together with the Budapest municipal government organized several architectural design competitions to envision the future Budapest. The entries were dominated by radical blueprints fashioned in the spirit of interwar modernism and constructivism. This is not surprising given that key members of the new Council of Public Works were also well-known representatives of the Hungarian Modern Movement, with József Fischer, the president of the Council, incidentally heading the Hungarian section of the legendary CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture). Key architectural competitions organized over the course of 1945 and 1946 included a competition to design high-rise housing settlements along the Danube bank in Pest (Magdolnaváros) that also proposed flat and building prototypes for mass production, as well as the complete overhaul of the badly damaged hotel row along the Danube in the city center.

However, the most ambitious, so-called idea-generating design competition (Újjaépítési ötletpályázat) organized in 1945 called for master concepts that would radically reimagine the structural foundations of the entire city, not just offer practical blueprints for the reconstruction of war damage. Many of the entries were lost, but the surviving

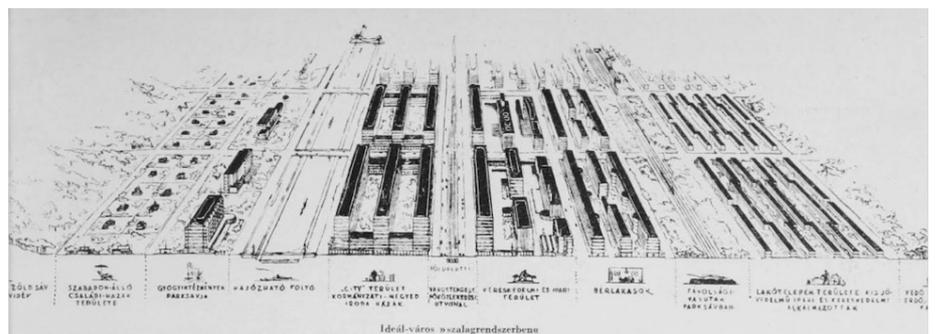
[5] The Budapest Council of Public Works was established in 1870 and modeled on the English Metropolitan Board of Works to aid the development of the united Budapest that emerged from the official merger of three constituent towns (Buda, Pest, and Óbuda) in 1873. It was the most important institution of urban development until World War I and is largely responsible for the development of Budapest's key landmarks, including several bridges, the Parliament building, Hero's Square, Andrássy Avenue, and the underground railway. Its influence waned in the interwar period, and after a brief period of renewal following World War II it was dissolved in 1948 (see Déry 1995; Kocsis 2009; Preisich 1998).

[6] The interwar period generated several similar modernist urban plans, Le Corbusier's "radiant city" (1933) being probably the best-known example, but there were local Hungarian precursors as well (Rácz 1941).

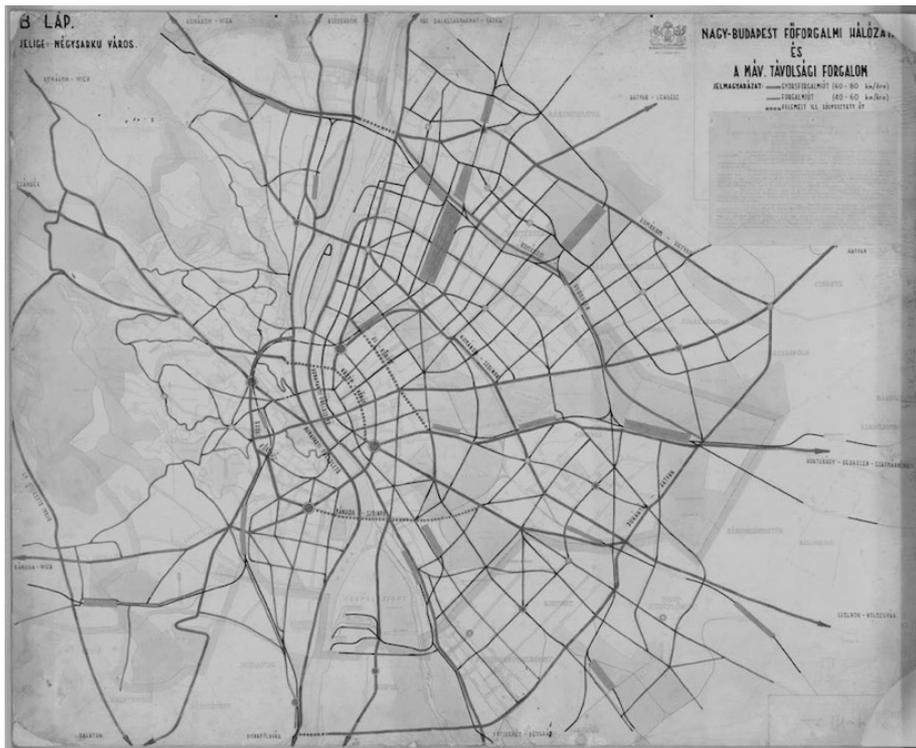
documentation, which includes the summary assessment of the jury, reveals that, overall, the entries were quite eclectic. Some contenders simply ignored the architectural nature of the competition and submitted philosophical or moral treatises or, in one case, a poem (Vadas 1985).^[6] Even some of the more strictly architectural entries were at times not simply daring but phantasmagoric, like the one that recommended clearing away the entire Castle Hill. Yet the two competition entries that were awarded a divided first place and given broad press coverage were architecturally sophisticated, bold, constructivist-inspired plans for radically restructuring the city.

The first winning entry, by architects László Acsay and György Masi-revich, proposed a fundamental break with the traditional radial-concentric structure of Budapest in favor of a more rational and logical organization in the spirit of modernist functionalism. The architects foresaw the creation of a "strip-city" that involved the large-scale redevelopment of Budapest along the north-south axis, dividing it into single-use zones (residential, industrial, green areas, institutional) running along the Danube (Morvay 1946a, 1946b; *Tér és Forma* 1944–1945:11, 1947:2, 1947:10; Sipos 2011; Vadas 1985). The various north-south zones running parallel to the Danube would have served to rationalize and strictly separate key city functions, which were to be determined in relation to the strip's respective distance to the river. The strip immediately adjacent to the Danube on the Pest side would have served as "the city" housing government institutions and office buildings. In comparison, the strip bordering on the river on the Buda side would have been turned into a spa-wellness-medical service zone, capitalizing on the abundant thermal springs, historical baths, and accompanying health care facilities in the area. The next zone in Pest would have served commercial and industrial functions, while its counterpart in Buda would have been turned into a low-rise residential sector. These were to be followed on both sides by a green strip developed by linking and extending already existing parks into a continuous green zone. The areas lying beyond the green belt would have been home to high-rise housing estates in both halves of the city. Transportation networks were planned to mirror the functional division of the strips and mapped onto a strict grid pattern, allowing for easy horizontal and vertical movement within the new rationalized urban system. Each zone was to have its own transportation channel in the form of an expressway with some cross-zone connecting roads. As the architects noted: "Just like in a department store, the elevator takes you to the floor where the relevant goods are to be found. The soothing rationality of the grid—in other words, pure geometry—will surpass the chaos of mazelike development" (Ferkai 2003:148, see also Ferkai 1997). A high-speed urban rail would have run parallel to the expressways, and the architects envisioned the establishment of no less than seven airports, somewhat overestimating the forthcoming growth in post-war air traffic.

Rebuilding Budapest as a "strip city." (Source: Morvay 1946a:23.)



The second winning entry by Aladár Münnich, labeled the “four-corner city” (Négyszarkú város), also introduced the strip principle but did not carry it to the same extreme as the blueprint by Acsay and Masirevich. The plan’s main aim was to rectify the limitations of the historically grown city by modernizing and rationalizing urban structures and infrastructures. Münnich wanted to achieve this by relieving the small and overburdened traditional city center and decentralizing the city. He did not completely erase the concentric-radial structure of historical Budapest but tried to update it by introducing multiple centers: four “corners” within close range of the Danube and seven new centers in the outskirts and suburbs, linking various parts of the city into a pattern resembling crystal frost. This polycentric structure would have then been combined with the logic of largely monofunctional sectors running in north–west and south–east directions on the Pest and on the Buda side, respectively. Similar to the “strip-city” plan, one sector in Pest would have been developed into the “city” with hotel high-rises on the Danube bank, commercial buildings, and a row of skyscrapers for government buildings along a new traffic artery. Just like Acsay and Masirevich, Münnich envisioned a medical-recreational sector in the Buda hills by the Danube and a low-density residential sector for most of Buda. Industrial production would have been moved to the southern fringes of the city, and mass housing would have been erected beyond the skyscraper ring. He also inserted green belts in between each functional sector and additional radial green wedges where urban topography allowed for it.



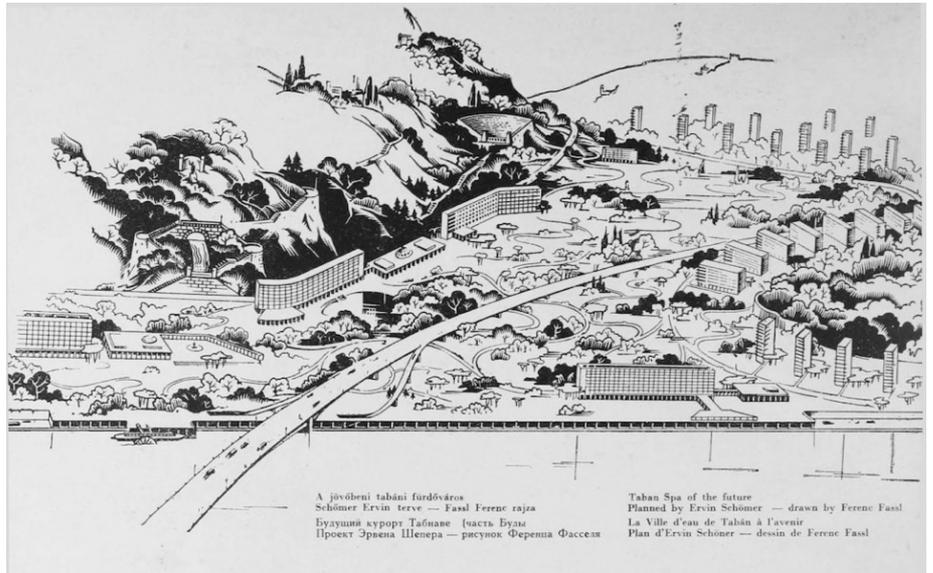
Map of the “four-corner city” with traffic arteries. [Source: Budapest City Archives, BFL XV.17.d.322a/120.]

Given the modernist-constructivist leanings of the “four-corner city,” the competition entry devoted extensive attention to the organization of urban transportation. Münnich expected a dramatic rise in car traffic and planned the construction of a number of expressways to follow the crystal frost pattern of urban centers and subcenters. His most ambitious suggestion was the establishment of a sunken expressway sandwiched between the two main concentric traffic arteries of the city (Kiskörút, Nagykörút) surrounded by the new row of skyscrapers hosting government offices. Münnich also argued that decentralization actually enabled the expansion of the small-scale

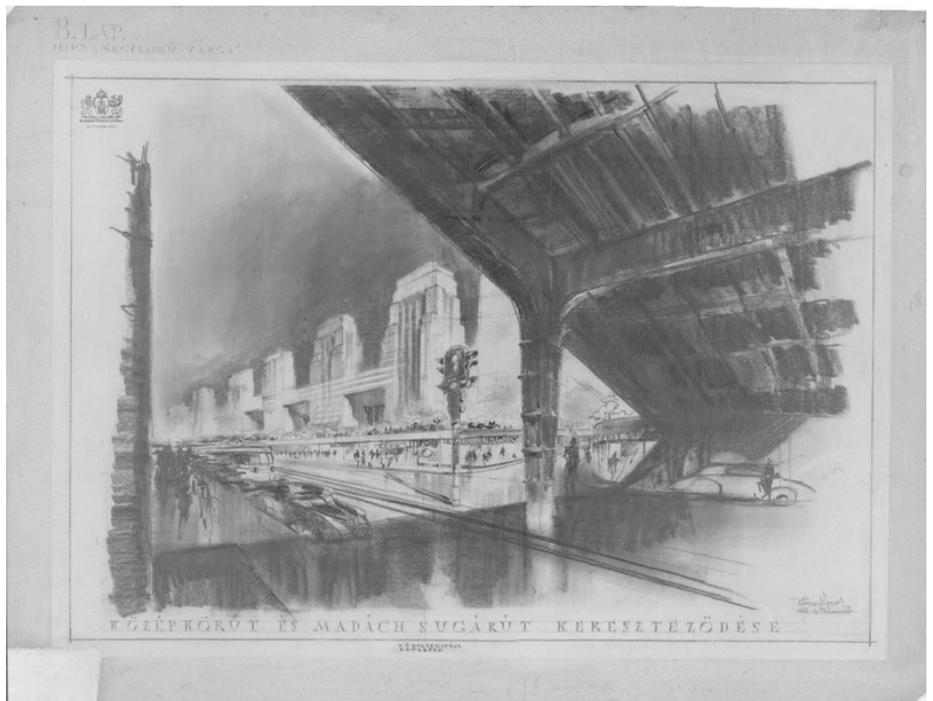
The "spa city" in the Buda hills.
(Source: Borbíró 1946:98.)

[7] One unique feature of the "four-corner" city plan was that Münnich tried to closely coordinate urban design elements with local, urban, and regional institutional and governance structures. He proposed the idea of a "central block" (főtömb), a variation on the "neighborhood unit" (Mumford 1954), to denote a roughly 1,600-square-meter area. This area would have been closely integrated with urban transportation nodes (so that nobody would have to walk more than 400 meters to get access to the city's transportation networks) and provided the formula for the planning of public, social, and commercial services within the block.

Traffic node in the "four-corner city" with governmental skyscrapers in the background (Source: Budapest City Archives, BFL XV.17.d.322a/120.)

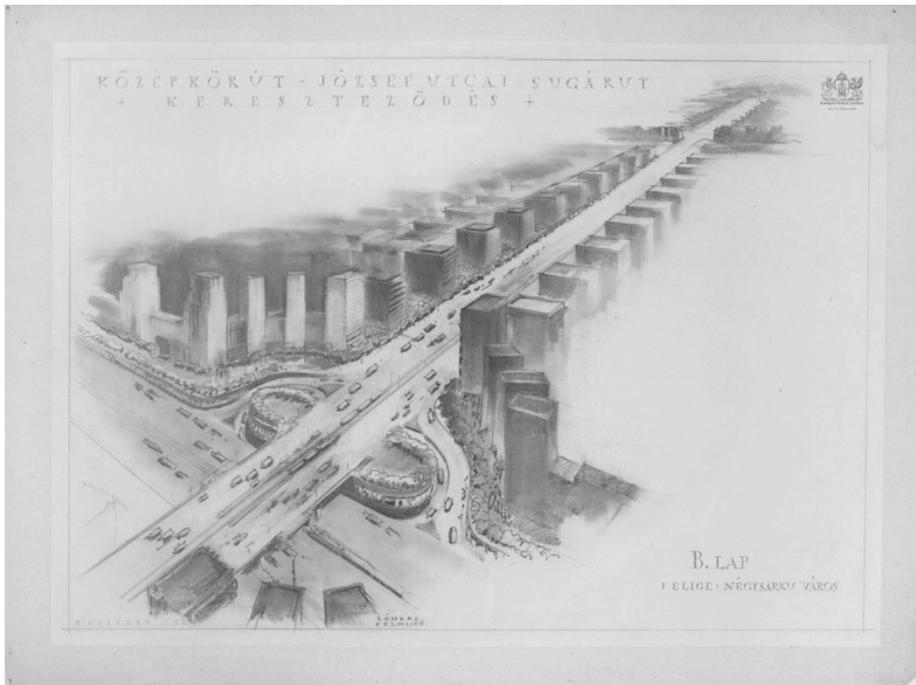


historical center of Pest, the Deák Square-Erzsébet Square area, into a representative urban "forum." This monumental new square "would have served as the site of public celebrations, recreational area as well as an outdoor car park" (Vadas 1985:54)^[7].



Undoubtedly, both winning entries were more utopian than pragmatic. But the loud call for radically updating, rationalizing, and modernizing the pre-war city, the fascination with increasing mobility and car transportation and its far-reaching impact on the urban fabric, as well as the spell of a geometric aesthetics and strict functionalism that characterized the urban visions disseminated through the competition provide a clear testimony to the constructivist zeitgeist of the immediate aftermath of the war.^[8] Endre Morvay, the journalist who introduced the two competition winners to the broader public on the pages of the premier city journal, *Budapest*, cautioned against jumping to conclusions about the unfeasibility of the blueprints for the future Budapest. He noted that the reviewed urban plans "will not appear utopian if we recall how, when a hundred years ago Széchenyi presented his fantastic dreams about the Hungarian capital, right

[8] Some commentators (Vadas 1985) even argued that the competition entries were in part so radical because they overestimated the extent of destruction in the city, as the competition was organized before the full assessment of the physical damage caused by the war was concluded and publicized.



One central corner of the “four-corner city.” (Source: Budapest City Archives, BFL XV.17.d.322a/120.)



The main urban “forum” in the “four-corner city.” (Source: Budapest City Archives, BFL XV.17.d.322a/120.)

after the devastation of the ‘Great Flood of Pest’ and the failed War of Independence in 1848, nobody else dared to believe that Pest-Buda would one day emerge as a true metropolis” (Morvay 1946b:72).

Although none of the competition entries came close to realization and new construction was still on a very small scale, the competition designs both captured a new optimism for the future and outlined the general intellectual direction for architecture.^[9] Indeed, emerging new buildings also reflected the aesthetic and structural principles of architectural modernism that permeated the winning competition entries. Bus stations, government buildings, and trade union headquarters were erected in a modernist style in marked contrast with the interwar decades when modernism was employed overwhelmingly in residential construction. This bolstered the hope of architects that modernism would finally become the dominant architectural language of public architecture. The types of buildings that were considered

[9] In architecture and urban planning, unbuilt designs can be as influential as projects that never materialize. The best-known constructivist example is probably Tatlin’s Tower, the Monument to the Third International, designed by Vladimir Tatlin in 1919.

the most important public representative buildings, such as trade union headquarters, were also politically meaningful; they meant to signal the political democratization and social inclusiveness of a new post-war society (Prakfalvi 1999a, 1999c). The best examples of this transitory modernist period between 1946 and 1949 are the central bus station in Erzsébet Square, which was the first post-war modernist building to receive landmark designation, and the headquarters of the Hungarian Construction Workers' Union (MÉMOSZ-székház, Fig. 8). However, with the rapid rise of the Communist Party, increasing Soviet influence, and the onset of the Cold War, 1948 brought a critical turning point in Hungarian politics with important repercussions for architecture and urban development.

The headquarters of the Hungarian Construction Workers' Trade Union (MÉMOSZ-székház), 1948-1950. (Source: Fortepan 39759. Photograph: Nagy Gyula)



Political Markings of Urban Space, Communist Takeover, and Expanding Soviet Influence

Meanwhile, the immediate post-war period also brought about significant transformation in the symbolic marking of urban space. There was strong pressure to physically highlight sweeping political changes – the fall of fascism and the Soviet Union's military triumph over Germany and its allies – in public space. Several Soviet war memorials were installed in prominent public spaces with astounding rapidity following the end of the city's siege. Three major memorials (in Szabadság Square, Vigadó Square, St. Gellért Square) were inaugurated already in 1945 as part of ritual May Day celebrations while the most monumental ensemble, the Liberation Monument on top of Gellért Hill, was completed by 1947. These memorials were typically ordered and in part erected by the Soviet military. The Hungarian government was simply expected to rubber-stamp the decisions by issuing decrees that officially "commissioned" the memorials while also picking up the tab for the materials and execution (Pótó 2001).

This first generation of Soviet war memorials in Budapest were actually part of a larger trend across Soviet liberated Europe that meant to clearly delineate the new Soviet zone of influence (Fowkes 2004). The Liberation Monument on Gellért Hill (Fig. 9) and the war memorial in Szabadság Square best capture this geopolitical significance and the extent of direct Soviet involvement in the process. In case of the

Liberation Monument, the sculptor, Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl, was handpicked by the head of the Allied Control Commission, Marshal Voroshilov, who extensively discussed plans for the monument with the artist while assigning Soviet advisors to supervise its construction. It was also Voroshilov who moved the site of the monument to Gellért Hill, being dissatisfied with the other two locations suggested by the City Council. The new location on top of Gellért Hill is supremely visible from afar and is the site of the fortifications that were built by the Habsburgs after the crushing of the 1848/49 Hungarian revolution and war of independence. Similarly, the memorial in Szabadság Square was placed in the heart of the government district, just across from the embassy of the United States, in a public square in which several irredentist monuments had been erected in the interwar period.^[10]



Postcard from the 1960s showing the Liberation Monument. The statue of the Soviet soldier in the middle was removed from the ensemble in 1993 (Source: köztérkép.hu)

[10] Incidentally, these two memorials are virtually the only ones that remain in place, as most Soviet war memorials and public statues associated with communist rule were removed after 1989 and transported to the "Statue Park" set up outside Budapest as a repository for communist urban relics. The Liberation Monument has actually managed to shed its communist connotations and become a popular symbol of the city. The statue of a Soviet soldier that was part of the ensemble was removed while the monument was symbolically transformed in a public art performance in 1992 and rechristened the Statue of Liberty (Boros 2004). The Soviet war memorial in Szabadság Square, however, remains contested and has been the target of repeated anti-communist attacks.

Beginning in mid-1948, the political turmoil of the immediate post-war period came to an end, as the communists systematically eliminated their political opponents and consolidated the remaining political parties into the Hungarian Independent People's Front, which they thoroughly controlled. In August 1949 a new constitution, based on the Soviet constitution, declared the People's Republic and ushered

in the Stalinist period. The communist political takeover in 1948 brought with it swift and all-encompassing institutional centralization and the introduction of socialist realism in architecture and urban planning. The Budapest Council of Public Works was dismantled in 1948, and its remains were incorporated into the Department of Public Works within the Budapest Municipal Council. Local district governments in the city were reorganized into local councils in 1950, following the Soviet example. The municipal government of Budapest lost its autonomy and became subordinate to the national government and the Communist Party. It had no direct control over its own tax revenue and development plans. All resources for everyday operation and development projects were allocated by the state in the framework of centrally planned five-year plans. This situation eventually led to constant conflicts between municipal government officials and state officials with the latter usually disregarding urban planning expertise and ignoring the need for integrated and long-term planning at the municipal level. The new City Council also began renaming key city streets to mark the communist takeover. Street names deemed politically incorrect (e.g., commemorating religious institutions or figures) were changed to evoke left-wing political associations drawing inspiration from the history of the labor movement, Soviet historical figures and place names, or honoring anti-fascist activists.

Architectural design and planning were also nationalized. Private architectural studios disappeared, and architects were integrated into large state-owned architectural and planning bureaus that were organized following a functional division of labor. There was, for instance, one national architectural bureau for the design of housing, one for the design of industrial buildings, another for public buildings, and yet another for modular and prototype design.

In tandem with sweeping institutional transformation, the communist takeover also brought with it a new aesthetic paradigm in architecture and urban planning in the form of socialist realism. Socialist realism had been the dominant and officially approved language of artistic expression in the Soviet Union since the 1930s. It constituted a form of realist art that served as an important communist propaganda tool (Groys 1994). Socialist realist architecture had to be “socialist in content and national in form” while rooted in “progressive traditions.” This usually entailed re-anchoring architecture in a historicist (mostly neoclassicist) vocabulary. In urban planning, socialist realism underscored the need for monumentality, an understanding of the city as a work of art, and the importance of representative composition. The formula to translate these ideas into practice was again borrowed from the Soviet cultural canon. The forceful introduction of socialist realism across Eastern Europe in the early 1950s was yet another sign of the growing political and cultural influence of the Soviet Union (Åman 1992).

In Budapest, the Communist Party and the Ministry of Culture organized a series of high-profile debates meant to reeducate architects and planners while enforcing the key principles of socialist realism (Prakfalvi 1999b, 1999c; MDPKV APO 1951). Architectural modernism was denounced in these discussions as “formalist,” “wasteful,” and “elitist” – namely, inaccessible to the general working population. As the daily paper of the Communist Party, *Szabad Nép* (Free People), declared in 1949: “we want neither the ugly capitalist tenements nor

the formalist buildings that mimic the whimsical taste of American architects. Our buildings should reflect the confidence and taste of our people marching towards socialism” (n.a. 1949). The handful of modernist buildings erected after the war were singled out as the ultimate bad examples of “harmful formalism,” and the architects who designed them were often pressured to engage in public acts of self-criticism regretting their “mistakes.” Hungarian architects reluctantly conformed to socialist realism by turning to a Scandinavian influenced puritan neoclassicism (e.g., the “R” building of the Budapest Technical University designed by Gyula Rimanóczy, Fig. 10) or to the eighteenth-century classicist architecture of the Hungarian countryside (e.g., the building of the College of Applied Arts designed by Zoltán Farkasdy, Jolán Limpek, Olga Mináry, and Géza Mészáros).



The entrance of the “R” building of the Budapest Technical University, 1955. Virág Molnár

In urban planning, socialist realism underscored the need for monumentality, an understanding of the city as a work of art, and the importance of representative compositions. The formula to translate these ideas into practice was again borrowed from the Soviet cultural canon. The central building blocks of socialist realist urbanity – in plans for Budapest, as in Moscow – included the design of a representative main square, a large open area for mass demonstrations (e.g., May Day celebrations), skyscrapers, and a lavishly ornamented subway. The public ownership of urban land was supposed to enable socialist architects and planners to organize these elements into a monumental composition.

The new principles of socialist realism were clearly in sharp contrast with the constructivist visions expressed in post-war architectural competitions and building activity. The primary reason why the ideas and blueprints that emerged in these early competitions were not incorporated into the reconstruction process was not so much because they were utopian but because of the sharp political and ideological turn that began in 1948. The shift also triggered an exodus among modernist-constructivist oriented architects: each of the three award-winning architects from the “future of Budapest” competition left Hungary around 1948, followed by scores of other, some very prominent, like-minded architects.^[11]

[11] Acsay immigrated to New York, Masirevich first left for Basel and Paris and in 1949 also settled in the United States, in Los Angeles. Münnich left Hungary in 1948, just like the famous Olgyay brothers who eventually ended up in Princeton, as Aladár Olgyay taught at the Princeton University School of Architecture from 1953 to 1959.

Conclusion

The massive efforts to rebuild Budapest in the immediate aftermath of World War II carry some general lessons for post-conflict urban reconstruction. Large-scale destruction of the urban environment as a result of violent conflict – wars, revolutions, and sometimes even natural disasters – is also endowed with an opportunity for radical change. It will nearly always pose a serious dilemma between the urge to rapidly restore the city as it was before and the temptation to take advantage of the devastation and fill the void with something radically new (e.g., modernize basic infrastructure, upgrade socially impoverished segregated neighborhoods, introduce significant functional changes for various city parts, and establish new public spaces). But this is a quandary that cannot be resolved solely by building professionals – engineers, urban planners, architects. It should be decided not just on the basis of narrow technical criteria but authorized by a much broader social contract that involves the views of diverse urban publics. This is, for instance, why open, idea-generating architectural competitions – like the ones that spawned constructivist utopian visions for Budapest in 1945 – seem indispensable, even if they produce bold plans that cannot be executed down to every detail. Namely, they will create public visibility and spark public debate encouraging the participation of various groups of urban dwellers (see also Staničić 2018 for the post-Balkan Wars reconstruction of Belgrade).

In a similar vein, extensive urban destruction – increasingly referred to as urbicide since the destruction of Sarajevo in the Bosnian war in the 1990s – usually follows and is followed by political regime change. Thus, any reconstruction effort will be inevitably subject to pressing political demands. These, most immediately, include the removal of the most visible symbols of the ancien régime (e.g., memorials, statues, street names, and representative buildings) from urban space and the swift invention and introduction of symbols for the new regime. The political marking of urban space is meant to solidify the political and cultural vision (e.g., the socialist city in post-1945 Budapest or the “European city” in post-1989 Berlin) of the new state. While architects and urban planners are undoubtedly aware that large-scale urban reconstruction is more than just a technocratic exercise, they continue to be ill-equipped to productively channel the influence of politics into the reconstruction process.

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