

Dilemmas apropos the changing roles of Hungarian town centres after 1945¹

Kornélia Kissfazekas

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Abstract

For decades, the centre embodied the identity and spirit of the city, as a witness of historical continuity and the physical and mental elements of the common past, but also catering for the needs of the current city community.

Nowadays, along with restructured norms of society and forms of communication, new institutions emerge, which often find their place outside of the historical city centre but at the same time incorporate and influence the living soul of the city community. This is the driving force behind a redefinition of the city centre itself.

Keywords

city centre · identity · housing · public space · urban renewal development concept · strategy

Development of the Hungarian cities from 1945 on mirrors global phenomena, but also has distinctive features. Reorganization of municipalities and centrally set priorities did not only change the natural classification of towns but also modified the role of centres and the balance inherent in them.

On an order of the central ruling authority, several new functions were implemented in the city structure which not only disturbed the architectural balance of the centre but often gave a new interpretation to the overall structure of the city.

The newly emerging buildings and architectural elements gained a "symbolic" meaning and initiated a profound change in the earlier cityscape and its organisation – often also in the historical silhouette of the city.

Being aware of the urbanistic contradictions generated by decisions made "recently" – that is the tension between contents and form, theory and practice – we may identify the phenomenon as one of those described by L. Mumford some 40 years ago:

"Time clashes with time within the historical boundaries of the town. As urban edifices tend to survive the functions and goals that had originally fashioned them, the town occasionally preserves for the future what has been arbitrarily rejected or discarded by a previous generation. This phenomenon, however, also involves an aspect of "assets": future generations inherit misapplied things that should better have been rejected, yet they had taken a tangible shape in the town which bears their marks, much in the same way as the human body passes on a wound or disorder of bygone days in the form of a scar or a recrudescence rash." [5].

I.

The town centre as a concept has had the very same meaning for centuries: there was no need to define it or to describe its contents. It was unambiguous for everyone: when talking of the centre people meant the core, the heart of a town, the area where every basic institution necessary to supply its residents was located. The place where the past of the community was concentrated, including each materialized and intellectual

¹ The following study is intended to be a résumé preceding a more extensive research project.

Kornélia Kissfazekas

Department of Urban Studies, BME, H-1111 Budapest Műgyetem rkp. 3., Hungary
e-mail: k_f_k@freemail.hu

component of the historic recollections accumulated throughout generations and inherited by those to come, as well as all the institutions feeding the social, communal, consumer, spiritual and intellectual needs of “present-day” urban life. It is the bearer of the town’s identity as well as that of its spirit – moreover, it functions as its symbol, a witness of its historic continuity. The awareness of the shared past of the community guarantees its significance (this is an idea simply and clearly phrased as the town “exists because it remembers”), and performs an outstanding role in the pulsating urban life within a certain period.

It used to be a centre in the widest possible meaning of the word – concerning its geometry, functions, operation, spirit and influences.

However, we are now being puzzled by this concept. Being at such a loss, we tend to identify the historical cores of towns with the centres of settlements, yet one may suspect it is not a result of an actual and factual conviction but that of the “compulsory” respect for the heritage of the past that we have been trained to. The complexity of the concept of a town centre that had been and has been attributed to it cannot be applied to several cities any more. The utilization of a city has undergone radical changes as a result of partly spontaneous, partly vigorous and deliberate processes of city development and constructions. With the re-organization of social traditions and social contacts, new types and forms of institutional systems have appeared: they are not necessarily located in the historic centres of towns, yet they tend to consciously resonate with the day-to-day expectations of the period vigorously absorbing the social energies of the city. Besides public buildings, the communal spheres texturally co-ordinating them and functioning as important scenes of urban life have also been re-interpreted. All this may inspire us to re-consider the concept of the town centre itself.

The statement by J. Labasse [4] – saying that the centres must function in order to evoke the feeling of belonging somewhere, which is the very basis of communal and civic spirit – has transformed itself. As new centres – using time and operating effectively, as well as being actively used – have been formed or created deliberately, whilst the aforesaid contents conveying the feeling of spiritual and intellectual belonging were consolidated as related to the historic roots, to the traditional centres of towns that had already lost their life-blood. The powers of town centres present in a previously concentrated way have disintegrated and by now fallen to pieces. Social events were given or found for themselves new locations “lacking a past”: urban communities took possession of them as a justification of their acceptedness.

In this way a string of centres moving apart and polarizing was born that – in a fortunate case – have sprung from or are related to the historic core at least spatially.

This is one of the most exciting topics of 20th-century city analyses: how can the existing building stock of a town with historic values, structural, dimensional and architectural restrictions possibly live up to the radically changed expectations those

“modern” urban communities fairly different from one another both socially and lifestyle-wise would have for them.

According to Mumford, one of the tokens of the vitality of historic towns lies in the fact that they were locations of meetings and challenges, the scenes where “interactions and transactions, proposals and reactions” in all possible senses of these words took place with the appropriate intensity and continuity. These were naturally organized around the centre, attracting the lines of forces. What could a centre offer to its inhabitants if it has lost a significant proportion of its previous roles and cannot sustain the former concentration of its intellectual and functional powers and their harmonious co-existence?

II.

The present-day phenomena of historic town centres are accompanied by functional disorders all round the world and could not be excluded from the development of Hungarian towns and cities either. However, these processes have had special and different interpretations and colours due to political and administrative interventions after 1945. As a result of centrally controlled external intentions aimed at development, the process of town development more or less typically organic received a “foul blow”. The reorganization of public administration and the central definition of priorities did not only change the relations between settlements, but also re-interpreted the former roles of their centres as well as the internal emphases co-existing in harmony up till then, which – more often than not – also meant a restructuring of towns and cities.

The present-day structure, operation, development and architectural image of Hungarian centres of towns and cities had been influenced crucially by changes taking place after World War II and belong to some characteristic groups. To define the periods bringing about significant interventions characteristic of their transformation is highly informative – not only from the aspect of the periodization of the actual physical processes, but also because they reveal changes in the professional attitudes related to the interpretation of the concept of town centre as well as to their – physical-intellectual – rehabilitation.

Analysing the period between 1945 and 1990 one may discover decisions made centrally and mainly with political considerations typical of the era, even though they were on the decrease with the passage of time. From 1989–90 on, the effects of the changing market conditions were obvious and also in the historic town centres, resulting in the appearance of new “city building” components and functions, as well as raising almost the same stereotyped issues of city structure, civic design and society in each location concerned.

- Between 1945 and 1954 the functions of Hungarian towns and cities were radically reorganized due to the modification of administrative boundaries: the changes in the size of administrative units went hand in hand with those of the conurbation and the number of the inhabitants of each town and city.

The new system of administration was approved in 1954 involv-

ing a re-interpretation of the hierarchy of the Hungarian system of settlements. According to the new type of categorization it was a must to establish a new institutional system as well as to “develop” the existing one. Buildings representing the regime and also in a symbolic way, conveyed political content of course as they had been designed according to set standards following a programme centrally defined as far as content and dimensions were concerned. The new buildings were positioned in the town centres where they tended to seriously disarrange the existing scale and proportions of their surroundings as the common criterion of their architectural and civic design devices was the utilization of imposing blocks and masses to suggest power.

The demand for large-scale home-building became a burning issue after the war, so the overwhelming majority of energies devoted to civic design were concentrated on the construction of apartments. At the beginning of reconstruction the bulk of zones marked for large-scale home-building were on the outskirts of towns as it seemed easier to utilize outer vacant lots than carry out demolition in the centres. This is why an eccentric development of residential areas was typical of the first 15 years after the war. Being characteristic components of civic design, buildings of the housing estates transformed the image of Hungarian towns and cities appearing typically with the launch of production in Hungarian panel factories in the 1960s. As a result of the apparent loss of function, the physical and spiritual “depreciation”, but primarily because of the change of attitudes in their evaluation, historic centres in many Hungarian towns and cities have fallen prey to a massive home-building tendency armed with practical and social arguments looking for suitable construction sites. In the wake of construction spreading out from the centres, new inhabitants appeared in towns like settlements: they were typically people moving in from the countryside without urban roots and links, lacking the often mentioned “family” or historic recollection and – being their users or misusers only – they had no relation of whatsoever with the location. As a result of a “consistent” location of housing estates the new town-dwellers concentrated right in the centres or their immediate environs, which resulted in a contradictory co-existence of population-concentration unprecedented till then. Throughout the reconstruction phase it was typical to create vacant lots for the new homes by razing the historical building stock. The presence of the (prefab, panel construction) housing estates of buildings with 6-8-10 storeys right in the heart of the historic town centres or in their immediate surrounds has become a usual sight, an almost indispensable visual component in the majority of Hungarian towns and cities.

- The concept concerning the development of the network of settlements was accepted in 1970 as a large-scale national directive, one of its main goals being to have each city (Debrecen, Miskolc, Pécs, Szeged, Győr) “... establish or develop their intellectual bases and high-standard institutions providing first-class services for their inhabitants in order to become

centres of the regions of the countryside with the necessary authority” counterbalancing the privileged central position of Budapest. This concept also defined the primary and secondary centres, as well as the functions to be newly located, each being referred to the various categories and uniformly ordained. Some of them would be relocated into the historic cores of towns, partly remodelling or further differentiating the existing functional categorization and operation of towns and cities. Their appearance and forced development inspired designers specialized in town-planning to radically reinterpret the existing urban structure and establish new structural correlations even in those cities where institutions of higher education were located off-centre (e.g. Debrecen).

- As far as the early 1980s were concerned, traffic and transport in the urban centres of historic significance did not play an important role, but later on the issues of releasing the centres, the construction of roads avoiding the centres, the creation of zones with restricted traffic and pedestrian zones turned into a defining component of town development. Besides the fact that the banning of transit traffic meant a serious change for the operation and the life-quality of town centres, it also afforded opportunities for a new arrangement, a new way of utilizing public domains freed from traffic in a more distinguished manner both in time and space as well as for the transformation of the ground-floors of the neighbouring buildings concerning their designs, layouts, architectural and horticultural devices. The tendency of a more complex, so-called value-preserving attitude has strengthened in urban renewal. The more recent designs concerning town centres are results of this attitude proposing more refined steps such as the development of vacant lots and block-rehab rebuilding. However, we must add that the means and forms applied by their architecture and utilization of public domains was much too careful and by no means durable when viewed from the present – what is more, they have become outdated all too quickly.
- The period following the change of the political system in the 1990s may be characterized as that of reorganized interests and market conditions. With the local self-governments forced into individual and independent financial management, the “liberation” of state-owned areas, their privatization and their mobilization in the market were simultaneous with the appearance of urban components imported from abroad and unknown to us till then. New types of models of entertainment, culture (?), commerce, institutions and dwellings appearing then have brought about and are still bringing about significant changes in the operation of several town centres, as well as in their utilization of space, building-site structure, scale and image. Emphasis has been transferred: whilst certain sections formerly functioning as centres (such as state-owned department stores, culture centres, etc.) have lost their attraction and moved out of urban niches or changed

their roles, the recently included institutions have concentrated traffic and institutional functions out of all proportion. Whilst the new type of institutions tended to be introvert and thus drained the communal life of public domains, self-governments realized: their – almost exclusive and single – means of town-modelling that could be executed relying upon their own resources lie in the chances of the renewal of public domains. The reinterpretation of the spaces within town centres, the application and utilization of contemporary spatial components, devices of horticulture and public domains have changed the image and townscape of several Hungarian towns and cities in the past 5-10 years. As a result of this on-going process public domains as potential scenes of urban social life have almost turned into the most important depositories of the future vitality of the historic cores of cities.

III.

Throughout the post-war periods with fairly different characteristics, orientation and precise temporal limits, Hungarian historic town centres functioning in a given location and having basically the same roles for centuries underwent a new, accelerated development history during which the range of their original functions was sometimes widened, sometimes transformed, but more frequently some of their roles were lost..

The loss of function may be interpreted in many ways of course. In the present case *function* is meant as interpreted by Pál Granasztói – that is not only as a field of activities or a range of duties, the compliance of demands with architectural means, but also a concept that may be described with synonyms (such as “factor”, “role”, “meaning”, “purpose”, “function”), the slight differences of which also refer to the non-material contents of the function-concept, that is the multi-layeredness we may think of when considering the historical interpretations of the *town centre*. Being a lot more than just an objective-material definition of the preservation of values, *tradition* is worthy of special attention in this context as it conveys the chance of a variety of interpretations. Tradition is a set of historic, customary, intellectual, spiritual and emotional linkages which is a significant bearer of the uniqueness of a town or a city, the corner stone of its frequently mentioned identity. According to the interpretation by Granasztói referred to here the urban tradition to be preserved is also a *functional* component including ideological, emotional and atmospheric motifs beyond its material interpretation which is present all over the town or city, yet its material and spiritual contents are concentrated in its centres as an essence.

We may accept the definition by Granasztói, meaning tradition is function in the intellectual sense of the word, yet this statement may be supplemented by the idea that function is a tradition at the same time. It is a question of tradition as to what kind of – administrative, religious, commercial – services have been formed as related to the centre and what kind of spatial relations they have developed amongst themselves.

One may also add that with the word *tradition* we like to suggest the uniqueness resulting from the location itself, although the aforesaid “traditional functionalism” of traditional historical urban centres is not a local characteristic changing from town to town, but more frequently a category of concepts locally distinguished and yet stereotyped and based on a system of stereotyped forms. It is mainly the spatial correlations of the buildings in a centre that may convey uniqueness – the idea of “only there and only that way” – in itself as it can be part of the tradition rooted in the location.

How can we relate to the tradition being aware of the aforesaid reinterpretation of Hungarian town centres taking place after 1945? Our job might be somewhat easier as far as we consider historical past, architectural and cultural values apropos of tradition which undoubtedly and without appeal form parts of the heritage to be protected, where historicalness or the architectural/artistic quality guarantees the authenticity of the creative urban component. But how can we interpret the role of our housing estates spreading themselves out upon the centres with a history of almost five decades now which slowly tends to justify their being there? How should we characterize the position of “modern-age” functional components and institutions being positioned in the town centre which is being accepted by the town and its users, as their services infiltrate into the organization and the operation of the town, which means by time it will probably become part of the tradition, yet – because of its architectural/civic design composition it appears as an alien body within its context, and may as well penetrate its image and townscape. As far as ideological function is concerned, it contributes to the development of the awareness of inhabitants as members of a community, yet its spatial system of relations – which will be part of this tradition as well – is questionable. Or quite the contrary: what should Hungarian cities and towns do with building complexes with previous functions of party supervision and other political purposes, the positioning of which into the centre was a demonstrative gesture or an instinctive intention to render them parts of the historical tradition and continuity, which is the same as their intellectual legitimization. The fact that they have lost their functions by now is an ironic contradiction with their typically ostentatious position within the town structure, being alienated from urban life yet having an emphatic presence calling attention. Some of them suggest a sorrowful contrast and the feeling of decay because of their high-standard architectural composition, their recent loss of function and desolation. They form parts of our common historical recollection and tradition, yet by losing their ideological background they have fallen into a vacuum.

What should be the fate of functions of urban dimensions – the heritage of architectural components – positioned at various sections of the city structure as a gesture of the “central volition” which did not only mean the reinterpretation of the city’s operation by relocating the emphasis, but also the upsetting of its architectural equilibrium? Individual buildings, groups of

buildings as well as components of public domains of “symbolic value” have appeared, remodelling the former urban-type utilization of space, the townscape and – more often than not – the historic silhouette of the towns too. The sophisticated tracery and the polished qualities of the vertical architectural components once orientating and marking out the centre from a distance – such as the towers of churches and the spires of town halls – have dwindled away amongst the robust prisms of these emphatic components or enclosed masses of housing-estate buildings towering like solid walls.

Of course several other issues related to the topic may arise, such as the problem of their fate, the contemporary utilization and protection of architectural values in town centres with hereditary historical past, the presence of which cannot be challenged due to their material existence. It is not the purpose of the contents described above to examine the individual components and the architectural objects in their special functions. When analysing the conditions of the centres of towns and cities as well as their role change, it is more important to consider the effects of the presence or the appearance of the buildings in their more extensive environments and their correlations with the existing ones than to regard their individual fates or histories.

Throughout town development there are processes of various intensity influencing each other to a different extent, far-reaching in space and expansive in time and taking place as a story with many threads. Sometimes they support each other, other times they counteract, and in our case they do not only follow their internal (autotelic) regularity, but take on further tints and shades because of the external control mentioned before. Getting to know the intricate and complex phenomena that can be approached from many directions, as well as to study their relations is an exceptionally exciting task. Their complexity, however, does not apparently inspire someone interested in it with the disposition of an “average architect” to undertake the hopeless job of systematizing and interpreting it with an almost mathematical modelling, but to observe some phenomena or some segments interesting for him or her according to personal orientation or selected randomly. This way the system of viewpoints chosen as well as the components removed from their “context” are subjective ones, with the selected emphases being arbitrary – and the author of the present article is fully aware of this fact. Amongst other things, this is what the word “dilemmas” used in the title as a reference was meant to suggest.

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