



**BUDAPEST UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND ECONOMICS,  
FACULTY OF CIVIL ENGINEERING**

**Department of Urban Studies**

**Thesis Paper**

**to the PhD Thesis**

**RURAL TOWN CENTRES IN STATE SOCIALISM**

**by**

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Budapest, March 2010

## **I/ GOAL AND ACTUALITY OF THE RESEARCH**

### **1/ DESCRIPTION OF THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE THESIS**

Each more important era has its own buildings designated for use as institutions, buildings characteristic for it, which were either destined from the very beginning to be or became otherwise emblematic. They deliver the message of their age, and express the „contents” and priorities of the era through their functions, frequency, civic engineering and architectural tools.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, series of public buildings, representing industrialisation and civil development have been built up in the various rural settlements of Hungary. State socialism wanted to erect its own public buildings side by side or just opposite to those, to express its own social requirements and to argue in some ways with those built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The municipal and county level administrative institution buildings, the state-owned department stores, hotels and central office blocks were everywhere erected in the vicinity of the historical downtown areas, partly due to functional reasons, partly because this secured a medium for historical continuity. Most of them have not been fully accepted by the towns in which they were. The lack of their connections to their environment, however, dates back to much before. It can be felt only rarely that during the selection of their place or construction an effort was made to search for and to establish context, and this determined not only their past but also present and future adaptation to their environment.

The present thesis examines the urbanistic effect of the most widespread buildings, characteristically destined for use as institutions in and to be emblematic for and to have a focused role in the era of state socialism. The subject-matter of our study is the relation of town centre developments performed in the period of state socialism and their context to the existing town centres.

### **2/ JUSTIFIEDNESS AND TIMELINESS OF THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE THESIS**

The theme of the relation of state socialism to the centre of settlements is unexplored and unprocessed. The analyses of certain individual buildings, mostly from chronological standpoints and linked to the persons of their architects have already been made and published in the vocational literature. Although not many, there are already a few articles on the various periods of state socialism, and also architectural books and memoirs dealing with this period. There have been a few monographs, linked to specific towns, in which in the part dealing with historical town development the period following 1945 was presented on the basis of facts and fairly. Apart from the function of the buildings and, in the lucky case, from the bare names of the architects, these publications mention nothing more, and as a rule, they do not go into deep analyses from the point of view of analyses of urban design.

The manuscript entitled „*Magyar településközpontok*” (Hungarian Settlement Centres) ordered by the by the Ministry for National Development and Economy, completed in 2008 and just being proofread, fills a black hole in this respect. It analyses the emergence, development and operation of the town centres of 15 settlements, discussing also the processes that took place after 1945. (Author: IHRIG Dénes, Adjunct University Professor, contributor: KISSFAZEKAS Kornélia – University of Technology and Economics (BME) Department of Urban Studies, Budapest).

As a rule, due to their physical deterioration, loss of function and ethical impairment a considerable part of the public buildings of the rural town centres, lost by now their contact with the life of the town and their surroundings in the town for once and ever. Most of the local governments of the surveyed settlements have no idea as to what should be the future of these buildings present in their town centres and are out to find a role, something that makes the subject-matter of this thesis especially relevant.

### 3/ OBJECTIVES

When interpreting buildings from the point of view of **urban design**, “context” is a term that always reappears. Obviously enough, the forms of context that can be the most directly felt are the relation of the building with the given built-up or architectural surroundings, and the acceptance or denial of its connection with the neighbouring buildings. However, the context that can be sensed personally is also a part of a town-level context, and part of the system of inter-relations that can be seen only from a distance, in the bigger fabric.

The various scales of context entail various degrees of detail, and different standpoints and aspects shall come in the forefront when analysing each of these.

The impacts of the sight of a building or a group of buildings; its/their place, spatiality in the urban corpus, relation to the urban fabric and its/their contact(s) to space and masses are interpretations of the same contact at a different scale.

From the aforesaid the present thesis discusses those three layers that are the most definitive from the point of view of urbanistic connections. These are:

- **urban corpus context**, as one of the characteristics of the position in space of the institutional developments of the existing (old) town centre and the new one;
- **urban fabric context**, the connections of the building to the city structure and the built-up environment, that is, its relation to the urban fabric;
- **urban design context** (co-textus<sup>1</sup>), that is, the spatial and volumetric relation of the building to its direct environment.

**A tool of the essay and, simultaneously, also one of its goals was the definition and exposition of the above mentioned main layers of the diversified context.** A tool, inasmuch as the context-based analysis of the various scales of the examples offered by the building works completed in the town centres of the settlements selected as samples allow comparison and typologisation. Goal, on the other hand, as the analyses applied demonstrate that one of the reasons for the failure of the analysed epoch regarding its urban design can punctually be the lack of this multilayer context.

**The multi-layer (urban corpus/urban fabric/civic design) context analysis applied as a method, can be deemed also a new tool that can be used as sample for analysing the connections of town centres and housing estates as well.**

### 4/ METHODS OF ANALYSIS

#### • Tools Used

The essay is based on two different approaches and two different directions. The **processing of urban literature, materials found in libraries and repository of plans** helps us to get acquainted with the theoretical and practical part of the relation of the era to its town centres, the sub-periods of this **epoch** and the characteristic trends. A summary of all these can be found in **Chapter I** of the present essay.

Beside this, it was inevitable to explore the actual events, to survey the actual building works performed in the towns chosen, the basic tool of which was the **cognitive processing of Hungarian towns as case studies**

#### • Selection Criteria of the Case Studies Assessed

County seats were chosen to be included in the survey as they were privileged towns having better development opportunities than most other towns but having, in principle at least, equal treatment to each other. The 18 settlements selected thus by objective “sampling” form a group of heterogeneous

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<sup>1</sup> In textology context is interpreted as a term concerning the communication environment and composed of physical, social and mental manifestations while co-textus is the term used for the lingual environment of the words making up these manifestations.

composition: taken their sizes, roles, history, landscape and architectural values they represent a luckily diverse case (Budapest, which is a unique sample in privileged situation it not included among the county seats tested, as its size and internal development tendencies cannot be compared to any other Hungarian town.

A short description was made for each town chosen to be included in the survey including a objective description of public buildings having a decisive or important role from the point of view of the era examined. When determining the circle of these, the primary selection criterion was that they should be centre-forming buildings having an important role from the point of view of the town centre or the town itself.

In addition to processing the relevant urban literature, as basis of the case studies I have made personal visits to the sites and inspected the most important plans used for town planning (master plans and detailed land use and building plans) The town descriptions as “work part in support of the survey” are to be found in the **Appendix**.

- **Processing Tools Used in the Study**

After their building history was explored, illustrations presenting the built-up fabric and town structure have been made for each town. The goal of these was not to find the strict edges of the historical cores of towns, but to give a graphical emphasis to the public squares, urban fabric, urban structure that make the town centre recognizable. In addition to the series of maps representing the town-scale context, by magnifying various details thereof, a separate series of drawings shows the urban design situations that frequently occur according to a set of criteria described hereunder.

- **Definition of the Scope of Buildings Analysed**

The primary standpoint in selecting the specified buildings (the ones shown in red on the drawings) was whether the new construction had any important effect within the existing town structure from the functional, structural or architectural points of view, i.e., the basis of the analyses was not the architectural quality of the buildings but their role in the urban system.

The goal of the drawings thus was to demonstrate the **relation of the most important building projects (characteristically public buildings) accomplished in the town centres in the given area to the urban fabric, the town structure and their immediate architectural surroundings.**

## **II/ FINDINGS OF THE ESSAY - THESES**

### **1/ INTERPRETATION OF THE TERM “TOWN CENTRE”**

**Town centres are not compact, closed units.** As time passes, they change their shapes, boundaries, internal architectural accents. The roles played by the different parts of town centres change too. Sometimes town centres expand towards new territories in a spontaneous, sometimes in a controlled way, form new poles, and simultaneously, points that have been of importance in them before, become less important for a while or change function. The extent of the town centre changes, and due to the reflections of institutional developments and the changes in the internal connections in the town structures connecting them, its boundaries change from time to time. **This means that the territorial extension of town centres cannot be circumscribed by accurate boundaries.**

## 2/ INTERPRETATION OF THE TERM “CONTEXT”

**A/** Urban context can be defined as the **multiscale system of relations**, created through the spatial connection and the connection in time between the building/ group of buildings created in response to a given situation and their place within the environment in which they have been set up.

**B/** The **urban context** consists of several factors and can be interpreted on several scales. The superimposition of the various levels of urban context is impossible that is, the levels are the various interpretations of the same thing, with the differences in interpretation coming from the difference of scale. Scale is the factor that determines interpretation of the context.

**C/** The quality of the enlargement of town centres can be secured by the fulfilment of the requirements of context on all three levels of **urban corpus (D)**, **urban fabric (E)** and **urban design**, although certain cases of spatiality in the *urban corpus* may have regular consequences on the urban fabric and certain *context-situations of the urban fabric* may create the prerequisites for certain fundamental situations of urban design between the urban elements, but the three levels of context shall not be embedded into one another by all certainties.

**D/** The scale of the **context of urban corpuses** is a means suitable for analysing the spatial position of the new buildings/groups of buildings within the existing built-up areas or their relation in space to other territorial units (in the present case: to the existing town centres).

*The relation in space of the new constructions to the town centres affects the operation of the town centre, the internal lines of forces and in certain cases, also its extension. Accordingly, when establishing the place of new constructions forming town centres it is fundamental to examine the town corpus level context, that is, to assess the relation in space of the new construction with the existing built-up area, especially the town centre.*

**E/** At the scale of **urban fabric**, the relation of the building/block of buildings (defined by the street structure, ratio of built-up and free areas, plot structure) to the urban fabric can be examined. The urban fabric context is the scale of the inclusion of the building/block of buildings into its/their environment.

*When watching the map of the town from more close, in this new scale other interpretations of the context shall become more apparent. At this interpretation level of the context, the fabric, internal structural order of the enclosed/adjoining new territory, the type of build-up and the summarized relation of all these to the equivalent elements of the accommodating fabric shall show the existence or absence of context and the quality thereof. If a faulty decision is made on the level of spatial context it shall not certainly result in a conflict at the level of fabric context.*

*There are several fabric responses to that and the same spatial position or arrangement both within the newly built-up area and as far as its relation to the existing one is concerned. From the possible combinations, the essay deals only with the situations that have occurred in the case studies assessed.*

**F/** The scale of the **urban design context** demonstrates the direct connections of a building with the adjacent buildings and the spatial impact of the adjoining elements of the town such as squares, and streets and that of bulks/volumes..

*The third level that is analyzed within the town structure is that of civic design context, something at the border line between civic design and architecture. This is the scale, the magnification, in which the term civic engineering may get a most concrete and complete real form, in which the buildings are*

*presented in their concrete forms and with their actual elevations, meaning that the context indeed becomes spatial and three-dimensional.*

### **3/ CONTEXT LEVELS OF TOWN CENTRES IN THE STATE SOCIALISM**

**A/** In state socialism the main characteristic of the new town centre constructions in the spatial context or in the context within the urban corpus was that they were built in the close proximity of historic town centres, sometimes even as an inclusion thereof, and frequently by the arrangement of several new buildings in a block (group) of buildings.

**B/** At the level of the context of the settlement fabric, the town centre constructions performed in the era of state socialism, a stage following socialist realism characteristically kept the route of the existing elements of the town structure, i.e., the streets, but they redefined the blocks and the plot structure. As a result the ratio of built-up and empty territories as well as the cubic capacity/air space ratio of public places and the scale of the new buildings has changed. As the size of plots is also a measure of the scale of civic engineering, the impact of the institution centres could first and foremost be understood in having disturbed the existing town scale. The change of scale in the street-block ratio, that is, at the level of plane morphology obviously had its impact on the height (elevation) morphology conditions, as well.

**C/** In the era of state socialism the town was many times approached as a piece of art to be composed. Certain buildings were arranged to close urban axes, as a vertical or sometimes a horizontal emphasize on it. In this context the role of the building as a “*sign*” was much more important than its relation to its immediate environment, the neighbouring buildings or the adjoining public territories. This means that in many cases **civic design context** was subordinated to the role the building had as a spatial emphasis, a role resulting from its position in the urban corpus or within the town structure.

### **4/ IMPACT OF THE LACK OF MULTI-LEVEL CONTEXT IN STATE SOCIALISM**

**A/** The “look” of Hungarian town centres is typically the result of constructions completed following the era of socialist realism. The approach of these constructions was characterized by the double negation and denial of historical heritage. International modernism wanted to abolish and rewrite traditional town planning and architectural principles, while state socialism undervalued the cultural and social heritage of the past, and the system of town structure relying on traditions and property relations, and both neglected the importance of urban context. In the majority of cases, in constructing town centres of the era of state socialism the simultaneous effects of these two processes could be observed and the two supported one another: the town planning principles characteristically came from modernism, and the state socialist building law and practice secured the tools (expropriation, building ban for several decades, prohibition on introducing changes, etc.)

**B/** The era of state socialism disregarded and violated the unwritten composition principles that were traditionally applied in townscaping for several centuries:

- in many cases those for not the institution buildings of an emphasized role that gave the vertical emphasis of the town;
- in many cases the emphasizes of civic design were shifted from the town centres to other places, transforming thereby the message delivered by the position of the central functions of the town within the town structure and its symbiosis with mass formation. The highest building in town was not certainly marking the centre of the town, and it had no particular role within the functional cast, either. It was simply used like a formal means.

### III/ LIST OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE THESIS

- *Négyszarkú város avagy Budapest utópiák 1945-ben (The Town of Four Angles or Budapest-Utopies)* – In: Utóirat/ Magyar Építőművészet / 2006.6
- *Dilemmas Apropos of the Role Changes of Hungarian Town Centres after 1945.* In: Periodica Politechnica Architecture 2008/2. p 67-72
- *A magyar városközpontok átalakulása a II. világháború végétől a rendszerváltásig.* (Transformation of the Hungarian Town Centres from the End of WW2 Until the Change of Régime) In: Építés-Építészettudomány 36. 1-2. Akadémiai Kiadó, 2008 jún. (proofread periodical of the Academy of Sciences, and registered in the Scopus data base)
- *Magyar településközpontok.* (Hungarian Settlement Centres) (manuscript) by: Ihrig Dénes (as fellow and author of pages 22-44 and the parts with town analyses and the materials covering the periods following 1945) BME Urbanisztika Tanszék (BME, Department of Urban Studies), Bp.2008.

#### OTHER PUBLICATIONS

- *A Tulipán-vita* (The Tulip-Dispute) In: Periodica Politechnica – 1998
- *Építészek az Európai Unióban (Architects in the EU)– 85/384 CEE sz. direktíva (Directive No. 85/384CEE* In: Műszaki tervezés (Technical Planning) - ÉTK/2004 (XLIV)1
- *Stílusgyakorlat (Style-Practice)* In: régi-új Magyar Építőművészet / 2006.1
- *Only What is a Must for Authenticity* régi-új Magyar Építőművészet/ 2006.4
- *A rejtett lehetőségek háza – Roosevelttér 7/8 (House of Hidden Opportunities Roosevelttér 8/8)* In: régi-új Magyar Építőművészet / 2006.5
- *La città e il fiume* In: Architettura in-Formazione - Palazzo Gravina - 2006/ n.22
- *Speciális fejlesztési programok–( Vállalkozási alapú lakásfejlesztés).* In: „Településfejlesztés” BME-Egyetemi jegyzet-Bp.2006. (Special Development Programs - Entrepreneurial Housing Development) (Settlement Development)
- *Újraértelmezve (Re-Interpreted)* In: régi-új Magyar Építőművészet / 2007.3