

MEMENTO PARK, BUDAPEST

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Abstract: After the 1990 change of the political system in Hungary the Budapest Municipal Council displayed about 40 statues from the former communist and socialist regime in a park. This paper aims at presenting the story of the park from the first idea up to now, giving a parallel analysis of the political intentions, cultural reactions and the changes in the architectural concept and realisation. The twenty-year history of the park is an example of the vague common memory: the way from the first laud opening of the place celebrating the recent change of the political system up to the inauguration of the second phase devoted to the memory of the uprising in 1956 remembered in the silence of candlelight.

Keywords: political change, monuments, statue park, memorial architecture, post-modern irony

I. INTRODUCTION

The Budapest Statue Park opened its gates on 27. June 1993. It displayed about 40 statues from the communist and socialist regime ruled in Hungary for more than 40 years. The official inauguration ceremony – organized by a famous Hungarian film director – expressed the feeling of liberation. The show presented the recent past without anger and study. Thereafter the park attracted thousands of visitors

from abroad and home both and was celebrated as a symbol of peaceful change of political system. Twenty years has passed since then and the place – which in the meantime was renamed as Memento Park – is in the state of decay. Not even the first stage of the construction has been fully completed, while the various plans for the extension were only partly realized. What has happened? Whether the original idea was inefficient? Whether the political background has been changed? Or whether the architectural concept was wrong? This paper aims at presenting the story of the park from the first idea up to now, giving a parallel analysis of the political intentions, cultural reactions and the changes in the architectural concept and realisation. It shall be argued that the original idea based on a temporary consensus was not strong enough to survive during the years of different political interpretations of the past, while the architect's attempt to adapt to the changing political expectations resulted in a controversial solution.

II. LENIN GARDEN

The change of the political system in Hungary was the result of a peaceful process with the sequence of events running from January 1989 up to the first free

elections held in April 1990. When the fall of the old system became evident, the question emerged: what should be done with the statues and memorials erected during the communist and socialist periods. Spontaneous removal of statues and some radical attack against other memorials required an immediate action.



Fig. 1 Lenin. Sculptor Pál Pátzay 1965

The question was put on the agenda in the media. The contributors agreed that statue demolishing must be prevented. However demolishing as a ritual act also raised the question: what was intended to erase? "Is it the period itself? Or is it their [the actors] forced presence in an earlier political system? Isn't it possible that

the common ritual demolishing of statues is – again as always – replaces the democratic struggle?" – a journalist asked. (Sinkó, 1990 : 10) At that time arose the idea that all the embodied residues of the previous regime should be collected into one place. A literary historian suggested collecting all the Lenin memorials into a statue park and he named also the appropriate location, a traditional workers district in Budapest. "There should be set up they all, surrounded with a pretty hedge, arranged by labyrinth-paths. Visitors of the 1995 World Exhibition would crush to see the world's first Lenin Garden. They would pay for that. They would pay even in hard currency." (Szörényi 1989 : 62) The idea, that the socialist memorials should be collected and presented somewhere as a special spectacle became attractive also for political organizations. (J., 1990)

When in December 1991 the Budapest General Assembly put on the agenda the theme, two components of the appropriate solution were certain: the statues must be collected and they should be presented for the wider public. Yet some questions remained open. As the intention was to collect the memorials only from the territory of Budapest, the city had to find a suitable site within its administrative borders. Secondly, they had to make a selection of monuments for the park, and finally they had to answer the most difficult question: what kind of character should this place have? To put the question on another way: How should it express our relationship to the recent past? The first public announcements expressed a slight confusion concerning this last problem. A representative of the Budapest Art Gallery, who was responsible for taking care for the public sculptures in the city, stated that the removed memorials need a "common piety site" in the

future statue park. (Haller, 1991 : 7) The director of the same gallery (also a member of the new parliament) stressed that as the future of the socialist memorials is a political question, the decision whether an item should be delivered into the statue park, delivered into a storage or kept on its present place, should be decided as a result of political consensus. (Kurcz, 1991) This is exactly what happened.

After a detailed discussion the Budapest General Assembly decided “on the fate of works of art with politically content situated on public spaces of the capital” on 5 December 1991. (A Fővárosi Közgyűlés, 1992) The participants fixed that “statues with an unacceptable political content must be removed from the public spaces” as a general principle. This approach ruled the further discussion; however the debate showed different standpoints on how to construct a barrier between the new beginning and the old regime. Some members of the General Assembly intended to remove all the memorials set up during the previous 40 years, while others suggested making differences. The minutes of the General Assembly shows that the delegates referred on the people will, when they took this or that stand. The public mood was really ambivalent concerning the recent past. A contemporary research – made already after the political decision – had shown that approximately 50% of people would have let the memorials of the socialist period on their original place, and even the majority of the other 50% would have kept them in the statue park, while only 4,5% voted for their final demolition. (n.n., 1992)

III. STATUE PARK

The session of the Budapest General Assembly also decided about the area where the memorials should be

placed, but except mentioning it as “statue park” any reference can’t be found in the minutes concerning the expected character of the park. After the site – an empty land in the outskirts of the city, in Budatétény – had been selected, the next step was to create an architectural plan. The Budapest Art Gallery which was responsible for the project invited six architects for the competition but finally only three of them submitted an entry. The winner was Ákos Eleőd, a young architect, only 31 at that time.¹



Fig. 2 The entrance of the park

The original tender is not detectable, but from the general situation, from the above mentioned minutes and from some further published interviews it could be said that the main demand was to display the statues in a neutral way. The opinion of the architectural jury explicitly refers to this presumption. “The statues to be demolished are autonomous art works consequently during their placement – independently from

their previous function – as a main principle the most impartial, objective approach deserved by a historical document should be applied.” (Kurcz, 1992 : 7) The director of the Budapest Art Gallery evaluated the winning project for the same reason, namely that it concentrated on the display of art works and the surrounding architectural environment played only a secondary, service role. (Kurcz, 1992) However the low implementation costs were also mentioned as an advantage of the design, because the budget of the whole project (including the demolishing, transporting and re-erecting of the memorials) was limited. The director stressed that the park was created not to judge the previous regime, neither to present it ironically but to remember it without anger, to keep a memento of a period of 40 years.

Turning now to the architectural solution it was on the agenda in the media from the time the result of the architectural competition was announced. The different articles mainly repeated the architect’s words, who published his full architectural description in 1993. (Eleőd, 1993) According to this text the ruling element of the polygonal site is the Road which starts between the walls of the reception building and leads straight to the end wall. The Road is crossed by three walkways, each having a shape of an endless circular motive like the number 8. Each item has a different function such as the “endless walkway” of liberation monuments, the “endless walkway” of heroes of the labour movement and the “endless walkway” of further memorials of labour movement.



Fig. 3 Axial composition

In the geometrical centre of the composition there is a circular flower bed, with a five points red star in the middle, recalling the shape of the flower bed used to be in the geometrical centre of Budapest. At the end of the Road there is a three meters high blank brick wall with two statues in front of it: the two Soviet Captains, Ostapenko and Steinmetz who used to sign two main roads into the town Budapest, representing the act of goodbye. The entrance of the park is a huge 40 meters long bare brick construction, a coulisse without perpendicular walls behind. Statues of Lenin, Marx and Engels are placed into the two side recesses, while the

columns of the main part are crowned by a tympanum. The main gate out of the three is always closed. On the wings of the bronze door the lines of a famous Hungarian poem are engraved: "One sentence about tyranny".



Fig. 4 Inside the park. In the foreground the statue of a Soviet soldier, sculptor Zsigmond Kisfaludy Stróbl 1947

The above listed elements of the project were repeated in the reports announcing about the statue park and were usually completed with the final sentence taken from the architectural description: "Not irony – memento". However the architect already in his first concept couldn't escape from a kind of irony. He planned to display three cars in the visitors' car park. "Three parking lots are always reserved; the cars are fixed, screwed, paved there: a Pobeda (1950-1960s), a Chaica (1960-1970s) and a 'new type', so-called 'box like Volga' (1970-1980s). It should be stressed: each car is impeccable condition, cared,

maintained and clean. They are not wrecks but exhibition objects belonging to the statue park." (Eleőd, 1993 : 61) The exhibition of the cars already exceeded the original concept that is the collection of the political memorials of a period, and expressed a personal memory, though perhaps a common memory of contemporaries. The Soviet brands of the Volga or the Pobeda, like some further relics of the era (with an increasing price generated by a temporal interest) recalled the socialist everyday life.

With regard to the architecture of the park, its strength lied in the modest post-modern elements used for the expression of the character of the period. The project – as the architect stated in the description – "intended to articulate the criticism of the ideology promoting the realization of these statues with the atmosphere of the park as a whole, with the emphatic use of some elements." (Eleőd, 1993 : 60) Indeed the above presented layout and some further details are all taken from the well-known vocabulary of monumental architecture, but they are used with some post-modern distortion. The symmetry in the arrangement of the main elements like the walkways, the huge gate and the reception building just like the axial main road all evoke classical monumental architecture. On the contrary other elements like the road with a dead end, the coulisse character of the entrance wall, its simplified details and the fencing of the whole site, which – except the entrance and the end wall – is made of a steel mesh, break the rules of monumentality and put it in brackets. Architecture recalled some signs of monumentality, while the crowd of the statues – deprived of their singularity – worked against monumentality. The project successfully balanced between irony and memento. It is not surprising that while after the

opening an expert denied any ironical content present in the park (Szűcs, 1994), a decade later another scholar interpreted the project as full of irony (K. Horváth, 2005).



Fig. 5 Opening ceremony of the park

“First national meeting of socialist statues” – this was the official title of the opening ceremony of the Statue Park at 27. June 1993. The inauguration was part of the so-called Budapest Farewell (Budapesti Búcsú) series of events, a newly invented ritual on the occasion that the Soviet army troops left the country in June 1991. The film director who was responsible for the ceremony was well-known for the Hungarian public from his movie entitled *The Witness*, which presented the tough time of the communist period of the 1950s with sarcastic humour. Therefore first the film was banned and then presented only in clubs and later cinemas but in a cropped version. Still many phrases from the film became widespread and used in private conversations. The costumed actors of the opening ceremony copied the movie: soldiers, pioneers, workers, while the loudspeaker broadcasted march music. The public could feel again back in time, but this past seemed now not depressing but ironic because the

audience knew that those times were over for now and ever. The June event expressed the feeling of a happening, looking ahead not backwards.

The construction works of the Statue Park were not fully completed by the day of the opening – the park was re-opened for the public only at the end of the summer – however all the leading newspapers reported about the official ceremony and praised the park as the symbol of the peaceful change of the political system. A reporter quoted the vice-mayor who evaluated the park, as which “shows the Hungarian society’s adult attitude to the past”. Hungarian society succeeded in changing the political system without trauma and massacre so the park is an act of breaking with the tradition of denying the past from generation to generation and demolish its immobilized stone or bronze representatives – he said. (Kurcz, 1993 : 4)

IV. WITNESS SQUARE

The public reception of the statue park was positive during the construction works. Only a few critical reviews were published in cultural journals, namely that the selection of the items for the park followed not artistic but political considerations, consequently the artistic quality of the works displayed in the park were diverse. (Rózsa, 1993 and Wehner, 1993)

The reports reflected the official consensus; however some remarks and especially the illustrations – demolished, dismantled statues lying face down on the ground – suggested a gloat over the fall of the symbols of a hated period. The voice of doubt and criticism became louder after the opening: whether the realised solution judged the socialist period authentically. “Are we saying now goodbye to our past? Why not? But

which past is it and whose past is it?" – put the question a journalist when she reported about the opening ceremony. (Bori, 1993 : 8) The relaxed and thorough assessment of the communist-socialist regime hadn't been done by that time and the ceasing of the temporary consensus which characterised the first years of the new system didn't help either to come to an agreement concerning the recent past. "Today when the past era is used only as a source of slashing with political arguments both as pros and cons, it is impossible to decide what can be accepted and what can't. We don't know yet, weather our politicians made the right decision in the emergency case, when – as it was possible to save their physical existence only this way – they expelled just these statues from the public spaces" – expressed his doubts a historian. (Póttó, 1994 : 34)

Beyond the lost political consensus economical problems also played a role in the emerging problems that the statue park had to face. The Budapest Municipal Council covered only the construction costs and the management was left for the Budatétény district council, which soon leased the institution to private operation. Considering the unique character of the park and that – as it had been decided already before the change of the political system – the World Expo should take place in Budapest in 1996, the park promised to be a profitable enterprise. The government cancelled the Expo project only in 1994, but due to the weakening economical state of the country it could be counted on it in advance.

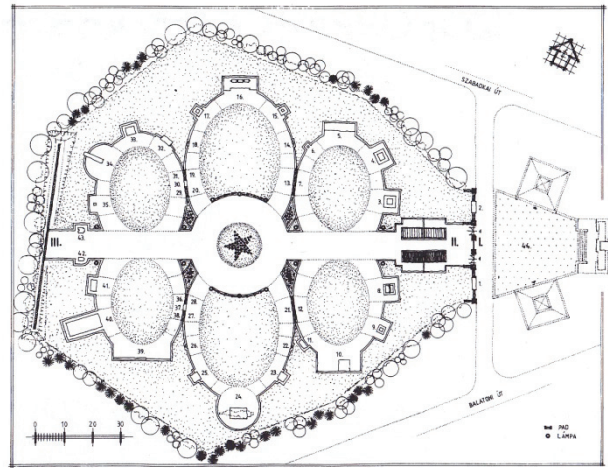


Fig. 6 Plan of the park already including the first version of the Witness Square

Bearing in mind this possibility the architect expanded the program already in 1993 with the intention to add something attractive to the simple statue collection. (Szarvas, 1993 : 8) He planned a touristic and cultural centre in front of the entrance gate. The three elements of the new composition were arranged symmetrically to the main axis of the park, but they occupied a much smaller area. The architect called the created small place as Witness Square with reference to the film, *The Witness*. One of the two side buildings included the catering spaces: cafeteria, beer-bar, snack-bar and confectionery with a restaurant and also a stage for casual performances on the first floor. The opposite building contained the usual tourist services such as: change office, tourist office, souvenir and art shops etc with galleries on the first floor. Finally the

architect planned a grandstand in the axis of the composition, an open air stage for shows, classical and rock concerts. This way – according to the architect – the whole project would have included a threefold function: an artistic-leisure centre, a tourist centre and a historic memorial site. “In the video rooms a permanent show of contemporary and recent documentary and feature films would be presented ; to help the Japanese tourist group in understanding that all that they can see here is more than just a ‘gag’.” (Váradi, 1994 : 23)

The enlarged architectural concept was published on several forums, but the plan appeared only in an architectural journal. The sketch shows only the symmetrical arrangement and doesn't tell anything about the buildings shape, character or material. The architect intended to separate the two parts of the project: “The Witness Square in front of the Statue Park is a harsh counterpoint to it. The park is not for actions, but the Witness Square is!” (Váradi, 1994 : 23) However he couldn't escape from the symmetry ruling the whole plan. The two parts didn't become real counterpoints: the shape of the new square was deduced from the post-modern monumentality of the original project, while the wide range of planned activities questioned the primacy of the park. The planned extension didn't make clear the memorial character of the park. Lack of political will or instruction the architect focused on the demand to increase the attractiveness of the place. The proposal for the extension would have pushed the project toward a tourist destination, as the chief architect of Budapest warned. “It would be good if this statue park would be kept in memory not only as a special Eastern-European ‘Disneyland’.” (Schneller, 1994 : 24)

V. MEMENTO PARK

The architect's proposal for the further construction was not accepted and the park was kept in use in its unfinished state as when it was passed to the public in August 1993. The theme re-appeared in the media only in 1995 when the entrepreneur who managed the institution held a press conference on the decay of the built elements. (Markó, 1995 and Lócsei, 1995) The Budapest and Budatétény Council both stopped sponsoring the project after it had been inaugurated, and the ticket sales alone didn't cover the costs.

A new opportunity presented itself for the extension when a right wing government came to power in 1998. The architect prepared a new plan for the Witness Square on request on the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage which he unveiled at an exhibition in 2001. (N. Kósa, 2001) Based on the architect's words his new plan only completed the one he had suggested already in 1993. “I would like to create a place, which on the one hand follows the metaphor that had been initiated earlier but which on the other hand contrasts the existing park. It should be noted that the statue park is not a funny, Hully Gully place, but it has its heavy silence. On the contrary the Witness Square is an active and interactive square, where you can buy even a Khrushchev t-shirt.” (Magyar Narancs, 2001) Not to mention that the Khrushchev t-shirts probably went out of fashion by 2001, the analysis of the second extension plan presents that the character of the Witness Square was pushed towards a museum concerning its content and architecture both. The idea of the art centre was kept, but the theme of the planned artistic events aimed history. “We create an artistic centre, where thematic events can be organized such as the Stalin-

Rákosi exhibition which took place in the Buda Castle. Contemporary films and newsreels could be presented in the movie room” – listed the architect. (Magyar Narancs, 2001)

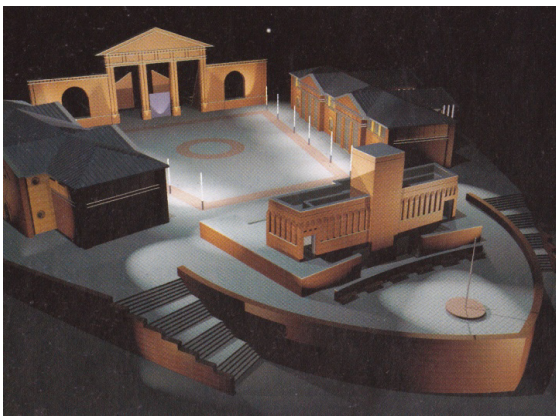


Fig. 7 Rendering of the Witness Square 2001

Concerning architecture the changes were more radical than the changes in the program suggested. The new plan was arranged symmetrically as before, but the three elements surrounding the enlarged trapezoid square grew up monumental and together with the already existing entrance wall they formed a closed open space ruled by the main axis. The two side buildings mirrored the brutality of imperial style with their huge closed masses, with bare brick facade and barred windows – as an art historian introduced the plan. (Wehner, 2001) At the end of the axis the rebuilt grandstand of the Stalin statue stood, with the boots of the Soviet general. According to the architect the result was “a never existed square of a never existed town”. (Magyar Narancs, 2001) But this place referred to

dictatorship using some banal architectural means and recalling the post-modern times which has already long went out of fashion by 2001 even in Hungary. The two direct references – the Stalin boots, which recalled the uprising in 1956 against communism, when the statue was demolished and only the boots were left and the grandstand itself, which was in use until the 1980s during the modest socialist period – confused the different periods of the 40 years under the label of dictatorship. However the professional reception of this second extension plan was good. The art historian, author of the guidebook on the institution – edited still under the title Statue Park – summarised the future plans as following: “The Statue Park and the Witness Square together form the Memento Park, which evokes the communist times, the desire for freedom of the 1956 uprising and the realization of the political change all within an integral architectural frame.” (Boros, 2002 : 56) It appears that scholars who celebrated the project believed that turning the park into a memorial place would rescue it from decay – how could anybody think otherwise that one memorial would serve for all the listed common memories.

Given the above shift in the concept of the extension of the park it seems evident that – although we met the expression “memento” already when the issue was first raised and the first architectural description put this expression into the centre, too – the park was renamed as Memento Park as a consequence of the 2001 concept.²

VI. EXCITING TRAVELLING BACK IN TIME

Finally the architect’s idea was realised, but in a restricted way concerning its architecture and thematic

content both. The pedestal with the Stalin's boots and the barracks giving space for historical exhibition were inaugurated in 2006 on the 50th anniversary of the 1956 uprising, within a small ceremony when people lit a candle in silence. (Csider, 2006)



Fig. 8 The Stalin grandstand and a temporary barrack 2013

With this act the park was connected to 1956 and consequently to the communist years of the 1950s. In addition the Memento Park advertises itself even today as where “the biggest statues of the darkest dictatorship” are displayed, and which “offers an exciting travelling back in time” where “the barrack-documentary explains the political secret service.” It can be said that the park became a tourist attraction which seems to work like a museum but without the authenticity that we would expect from a professional exhibition. With regard to the architectural quality we can't appreciate it either. It might be said, that the

architect couldn't realise his original ideas, but what we see now is neither eternal nor monumental but depressing instead. The brick cladding of the grandstand is still missing, the barracks look like the workers' shed on a construction site and there is no paving on the square. The whole project radiates the atmosphere of transition: something has been started but interrupted and left for decay.

For the fading of the park we can't blame only the architectural concept – namely that it pushed the complex towards a shallow expression of monumentality and that the subtle references of the first Statue Park were turned into a harsh and outdated post-modernism – or the weak, unfinished realisation.

“To construct a barrier between the new beginning and the old tyranny is to recollect the old tyranny” – writes the sociologist Paul Connerton. (Connerton, 1989 : 10) This is exactly what the Hungarian politicians did when they collected the signs of the old tyranny. However they couldn't count with the growing aspirations of the new regime to define itself against the previous one. Now what we see in the Memento Park is neither an authentic museum nor a neutral collection of some statues from the communist and socialist period but it is rather the monument of the peaceful system change of 1989-1990 – in a pretty bad shape.

ENDNOTES

- [1] The organizing committee invited the head of the architectural studio where he worked at that time, but the master passed him the job.
- [2] Neither the official website of the Park addresses this fact. <http://www.mementopark.hu/pages/home/?lang=en>

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