

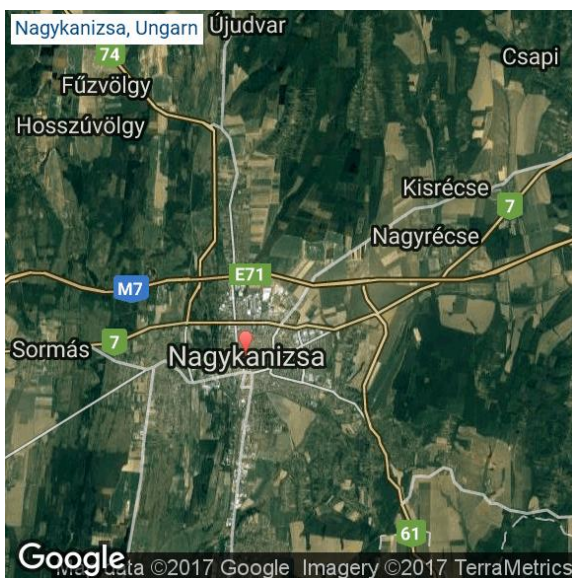


Social Housing Reconstruction Camp

The renovation of social housing units by the tenants.

Katalin Fehér, Judit Keller, Tünde Virág

THE INITIAL PROBLEM AND CONTEXT



Nagykanizsa is a mid-sized town with less than 50 000 inhabitants, situated close to the Western border of Hungary. It began to prosper as an industrial city at the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries with many factories and with the oil industry. The city was also a significant military and railway centre, but declined with the economic transition. The factories closed, some of them after a century of operation. The former factory workers were mostly

left without jobs or had to find employment in the lower segments of the labour market. However, the settlement is in a relatively advantageous economic position due to its geographic position and the economic developments.

At the time of the first social housing reconstruction camp (2010), there were two segregated areas in Nagykanizsa for low-status Roma and non-Roma residents. Citromsziget was a former great military barrack embedded in the urban fabric. It functioned as a social housing estate and provided services for homeless people. It consisted of 100 substandard flats (they have a water supply, but no private bathroom), providing homes to more than 400 people.



The other segregated neighbourhood is Ligetváros, situated at the southern edge of the town, separated from the central areas by an industrial zone (railway buildings and areas, smaller industrial units and warehouses). This area was mainly built in 1916 as a military hospital and later provided temporary shelter for residents migrating from the territories Hungary lost after WW 1. The colony of 110 houses began to function as a housing complex after World War 2, providing



homes for residents of a lower status and later workers of the railway company. After the fall of communism, it remained the main social housing estate of Nagykanizsa besides Citromsziget. In 2001, the colony with a suburban-atmosphere was also completed with 46 newly-built, lightweight social housing units, providing homes for around 400 people.

The political and social context

In Hungary, following the economic transition, the privatization of the housing stock became a dominant strategy for local governments. Nowadays the rate of home ownership is high and only 3% of the housing stock is offered as social housing to be rented below market prices. Besides the shortage of affordable housing, the poor physical condition of social housing also causes a major problem. The most vulnerable social groups (unemployed, unskilled workers, low-income groups, large families, the disabled, the Roma, etc.) were the worst affected, they were those who could not afford to buy their homes from the municipality in the privatization process, even if the prices at that time were not so high. In many cases, these tenements are substandard and run down. The utility costs (and especially the heating) were also relatively higher for these tenants, because of the outdated and run-down technical conditions of the housing estates. Therefore, people living in social housing units are often unable to pay the costs of housing and utilities regularly and so they accumulate rent and utility arrears.

It is especially difficult for such tenants to climb out from the debt spiral. Eviction is a

constant threat –tenancy agreements are terminated or not renewed after a couple of months of rent arrears. The underfinanced local governments who are the owners of the social housing units are interested to minimize the maintenance costs of their social housing stock and thus get rid of their tenements in bad condition and of the tenants who are unable to cope with the high costs of housing. Only a very few new units are built, depending on the availability of EU tenders. The willingness to renovate them is very low – the substandard units are subtracted from the stock of social housing in most cases. This situation indicates that a comprehensive national housing strategy is needed to reconcile the financial interests of local governments and the social aspects towards low-income groups and to solve the deep-lying problems of the housing crisis in Hungary.

The initial problem

In 2009, the local government decided to deal with the long-standing set of problems in Citromsziget by emptying the housing complex. During this process, they decided to provide new housing only for those without rent arrears and with existing tenancy agreements (who met their legal obligations). They began to evict the vulnerable tenants without rental agreements and with rent arrears. At the same time, some of the former tenants of Citromsziget moved to Ligetváros, the other segregated neighbourhood of the city in a slightly higher social status. This drew the attention to the threat of further degradation of this area and the reproduction of the former social problems in a new location.



THE STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR INITIAL POSITION

The local government of Nagykanizsa

They decided to eliminate Citromsziget by emptying the whole building complex and changing its functions on the long-term. They took a strong stand against the tenants with rent arrears and decided to solve their financial and other problems regarding the management of their social housing stock. A rigorous procedure was enforced to improve the poor payment practices.

A group of volunteer students (later Social Reconstruction Camp Association)

In 2009, an informal group was formed within the frame of the College for Advanced Studies in Social Theory at the Corvinus University of Budapest. University students coming from different fields of social sciences were in contact with the "People from the Street", a former network of activists working against evictions and homelessness. They had known a particular eviction case from Nagykanizsa (Cirtomsziget) and travelled there to gather further information. This experience led the rather theory-based group to work on a concept that could help the people threatened by eviction and to carry out a program based on this concept in Nagykanizsa.

The tenants of the social housing units

The residents of the social housing units are usually struggling to make ends meet. Many have a limited relationship with the labour market, but most of them are working in the black or grey market segments, for a low income with very uncertain conditions. Tenants are strongly interested in keeping their tenancy and to reduce and pay their rent arrears to secure their long-term housing. In many cases, they are not informed about the administrative possibilities they can apply for e.g. debt management services. Some of them are cooperating with the local Family Care Services, but some are completely left alone with their problems.

THE STORY

Phase 1: Initiating a new model of refurbishing social housing units

The initial visit of the informal volunteer group in Nagykanizsa town was followed by consultations with the local government about a development program in the Citromsziget area. The group of volunteer students proposed that the indebted tenants should refurbish their tenements. The increase in the value of the buildings brought about by the renovations was to be credited to the tenants, reducing their rent arrears. The project would be carried out with the cooperation of volunteers and local tenants, financed by sources identified by the volunteers. The local government was hesitant about the program, but later decided to approve it if the volunteers could obtain the financial

resources for such a large-scale program. However, they did not agree to conduct the project in the original place of the eviction case that brought the concept into existence (Cirtomsziget), but proposed to implement it in the other low-status neighbourhood of Ligetváros.

It was partly because they insisted on their original objective to empty the building of Citromsziget, but they were open to renovate the houses of Ligetváros and upgrade this neighbourhood on the long term. In fact, the program also matched the physical conditions of the one-storied old buildings of Ligetváros better.

In parallel with the negotiations with the local government, the volunteers also started to contact the tenants in Ligetváros to explore their attitude towards such a program. After getting a positive feedback from several families, the organizers were convinced that at least some of the tenants would cooperate after providing more suitable information and after making efforts for their involvement.

After gaining the difficult approval of the local government, the group of volunteers started to prepare the project in Ligetváros: besides looking for appropriate calls for proposal, applying for grants' and writing applications, they also started to enlarge their capacity of human resources: law and architecture students joined and started to work on the practical side of the future renovation. The group also won the support of Habitat for Humanity Hungary (an international NGO working to improve poor housing conditions, with a background of construction experience) in the technical design and management.

Turning point 1

After a far-reaching preparation and negotiation phase, the organizers waited for the outcome of their tenders. Finally, they won the support of the Norway Grants to cover the cost of the renovation.

Phase 2- The first social housing reconstruction camp in Nagykanizsa

The success of the application came as a surprise for everybody. New rounds of negotiations started with the local government and the property management company about the details of the reconstruction.

At the same time, the organizers frequently travelled to Ligetváros to get a better knowledge of local residents and inform the people with rent arrears about the opportunity and its conditions. Regular visits to the families strengthened the personal relations that the project could rely on later. Several people could become leaders among the locals and their support motivated other more sceptical tenants to join the program.

Renovations of the first two houses started in April 2010. In the first phase, two buildings were renovated with 4 flats each. During the four weeks of the construction work, 37 local residents and numerous volunteers participated: 70 volunteers organized by the volunteer groups, from which 40 were involved from Habitat for Humanity. In August, during the second phase, the group renovated another building with 4 flats with the participation of 25 residents.



The Norway Grant only covered the costs of the renovation; the organizers were working as volunteers. Other resources were also needed as unexpected costs appeared. Based on the network of the organizers, individual donations came to complement the grant and hard efforts were also made to get sponsorship from several construction and other companies. The program was a great success regarding the reduction of a significant amount of rent arrears. 5600 forints² were written-off from the residents' rent arrears for a day's work. Thus, during the whole construction, arrears were reduced by 1.6 million forints (more than 5000 EUR). This was a relatively high amount considering that the Norway Grant provided 11 000 EUR. Besides its effect on the direct reduction of rent arrears, the program also proposed sustainability: most of the reconstruction works focused on improving insulation – thus the almost 100 years old, energetically inefficient buildings were transformed into nice and efficient buildings.

The success of the concept was also indicated by the cooperation of the local tenants and volunteers, who worked together and got to know each other very well. The program hosted volunteers from abroad, which meant a great experience for the locals.

The project reached the attention of the media and it was documented by several articles and TV spots.

² Approximately the daily wage of an unskilled worker.

Turning point 2

After the reconstruction camp completed the works, the project got many positive feedbacks as an innovative bottom-up project with a real impact. The concept won the Sozial Marie grand prize in 2011 (by the Unruhe Private Foundations), which awarded socially innovative projects in Central Europe since 2005.

This success motivated the informal group of organizers to institutionalize their activity and carry out other projects. The Social Reconstruction Camp Association was founded in 2011. Their activity aimed to fight housing poverty paying special attention to the deteriorating social housing sector. They also conducted smaller programs at other locations.

Phase 3 Second housing reconstruction camp in Nagykanizsa

In May 2012, the newly founded Association returned to Ligetváros. The application for funding supported a new project with a similar concept, but with a more professional background and more complexity. This time, the Association hired a full-time employee to organize the program – her work was still supported by a group of volunteers (members of the association). The program was integrating smaller side projects related to energy efficiency or to household economics (people could hear about small tactics to reduce everyday costs). A playday for children and several community events

(e.g. campfire) were organized as well and a more extended monitoring was introduced.

The approach of the local government changed a lot this time, they became very cooperative and quickly sided with a new round of renovation. The association also succeeded to get more financial commitment from the asset management company (owned by the local government) – they invested into the renovation of the social housing units. With this, the Association achieved their general objective to change the attitude and practice of local governments in a cooperative way.

The reconstruction was also preceded by a phase of informing and involving the local tenants. It was easier this time because of the embeddedness of volunteers. They could also involve the same households again (besides others), indicating that even though the one-time opportunity of the 2010 camp helped many people, the structural problems of employment and other issues still hindered the long-term elimination of indebtedness. During the construction, a building with 9 flats was renovated with the participation of 31 local residents. Having carried out a successful campaign for donations (Donate only a square meter of insulation!), the association could insulate the roofs of other three buildings' during the reconstruction camp.

CONCLUSIONS

The social housing reconstruction camp, as a bottom-up initiative aimed at providing an opportunity to tenants struggling with a

debt spiral and to change the policy and practice of social housing management. The project proposed a sustainable solution intervening into a structurally burdened social problem of housing and energy. It was very successful in the short run, combining different aspects of improving the life of low-status people living in a segregated neighbourhood and contributed to the renewal of a decaying neighbourhood. It opened the place, focused the attention of the local government as well as the general population on the problems of the residents.

The project made the issue of social housing visible and important through the media campaign and the involvement of many volunteers.

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