



The Rediscovery of Our Own Space

Community Building in Teleki Square

Katalin Fehér, Judit Keller, Tünde Virág

THE INITIAL PROBLEM AND



CONTEXT

The Place

This neighbourhood development has taken place in the 8th District of Budapest, which is located on the Pest side of the capital, in the heart of the city. Teleki Square, with its dynamic and noisy atmosphere, is in a multicultural section of the district. Besides the high ratio of unskilled inhabitants and a high percentage of Roma families, new migrants from Africa and Asia are also

settled here, the best Turkish food store and the only Sephardic orthodox apartment synagogue (prayer house) in Budapest can also be found here.



The historical development of the district, also called Józsefváros (Josefstadt), can be traced back to the period of intensive industrialisation of the capital in the 19th century when the area was populated by artisans, the poorer segment of the Budapest Jewry and well-to-do, Gypsy musician families. Since its inception in the 1850s, Teleki Square served as a market place (horse and cattle, second-hand products, food), its atmosphere has been defined by multicultural poverty and deprivation up to present times. In the early 20th century, people travelling to Budapest by rail arrived in this part of the city – due to the vicinity of the Józsefváros railway station – that was the harbour for the poorest rural Jews, Poles, and Galician Hassids. In the interwar years, it was the meeting point of casual labourers, while the market was mostly frequented by Roma women of „Gypsy musician dynasties” who settled in the neighbourhood.



During the 50s, the square functioned as a food market, with ramshackle booths and lots of poor people. The park had its heyday in the 60s and 70s, when many people used its chess tables, benches and resting places. The English term “slum” can most easily be explained to people from Budapest by saying “you know, what’s in the 8th District.” In the 80s, you could find everything here you can expect from a slum area: a high crime rate, prostitution, population change, very poor quality of public spaces, falling real estate prices. By 2013, however, the park had become an uncontrolled, deprived area frequented mainly by homeless people and drug dealers.



Photo 33 Teleki Square



Photo 32 Situation on the square

The political and social context

The municipal government of Józsefváros adopted its first urban rehabilitation strategy in 1998 and established Rév8 Ltd. for the programming and planning of urban rehabilitation. This strategy had but limited effects: it designed three pilot projects for socially sensible urban renewal in three deprived areas. One of these areas was the neighbourhood of Teleki Square, officially called Magdolna Quarter, where eventually the first social urban rehabilitation program of Budapest was launched.

The Magdolna Project consisted of three phases and it was launched in 2004. Besides social rehabilitation, it aimed at the renewal of the building stock and the urban infrastructure. The implementation of the first phase was funded by the local governments of Budapest and the District, whereas the second and third phases of the program was mainly financed by the EU. Community building has also been one of the main elements of the social rehabilitation program - although conceived in different ways in the different phases of the project. Following the rehabilitation of a local Glove Factory as a Community House and the neighbourhood of Mátyás Square as a community meeting point in the first and second phases, the third phase was about the renewal of Teleki Square.



The initial problem

The renewal of Teleki Square is an excellent example of social architecture⁸, which, besides the rehabilitation of the physical environment of the market area was also about the reconfiguration of its functions as a commercial and social centre. The renewal of the market area has been on the agenda since the late 80s due to the growing number of alcohol vendors. The rehabilitation of the public park, the heart of Teleki Square, also became a pressing issue as the park turned into a centre of social conflict between residents and drug dealers, drug users and homeless people residing in the park. It was not only the locals' wish to rehabilitate the park for the public, the public health authorities also prompted the municipality to act due to used needles scattered around in the park. Some residents still remembered the heyday of the park and market in 60s and 70s and hoped for its rebirth.



⁸ The late 1990s witnessed the evolution of a new trend in architecture: small-scale projects for smaller local communities based on voluntary organisation and social responsibility. The new trend has been referred to as social architecture, short for socially responsible architecture. Social

THE STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR INITIAL POSITION

RÉV 8 Ltd.

The municipal government of Józsefváros owned 60% and the municipal government of Budapest 40% of the shares, of the Ltd. whose task was to coordinate the programming and planning of the urban rehabilitation project among diverse stakeholders.



Új irány (New Directions Landscape Architects – UIArchitects)

For the specific project of the rehabilitation of Teleki square, the municipal government contracted the company called Új Irány (New Directions Landscape Architects – UIArchitects), which is a studio founded by young architects and landscape architects in 2000, working on interdisciplinary projects in the form of design groups. The discussion based working method allows to develop a strong

architecture is about the personal presence of architects and involvement of local residents, the innovative use of local resources, cooperation based on the distribution of knowledge and information. It focuses on marginalized communities living in precarious conditions.

concept-based design in all projects. Projects range on a large scale: urban design, interior design, exhibition design and public art. All works are related to the city and the people who use it, which is the starting-point of the urban regeneration and design process.

The inhabitants

The opportunity to participate in the planning process and the design of the public park was attractive for mostly middle class residents who lived in the 19th century apartment houses of Teleki Square. Moreover, they were rather the members of the older generation which still remembered the heyday of Teleki Square, who participated most actively in the planning process. One of the central characters of the locals was Marika, a local pub owner, whose pub served as a meeting point for the participants. It was in this pub where inhabitants established the Partners for Teleki Square Association (Társak a Teleki Térért) that has organized various events for the maintenance of the renewed park through its own [Facebook group](#).

The inhabitants of small single-floor houses in streets surrounding Teleki Square comprise the poorest segment of the local community in the quarter. This group of residents did not react to the call for common planning and stayed away from meetings organized by the other group of residents. Nevertheless, once the rehabilitation project finished, this irresolute group of locals became one of the most active users of the renewed park.

THE STORY

Phase 1 – Launching the dialogue with residents

The tender for rehabilitation, issued by the local government, was won by the Újirány Landscape Architecture Group who had previously worked on the design of one of the most popular recreation areas of Budapest, Millenáris Park and initiated several projects of community arts and actions. Although the mandate was given for the realization of a community planning process, the requirements on behalf of the municipality were limited to five public forums. The planning team however undertook the challenge of a real community planning process and does not seem to regret this decision: “The whole planning process was one great common experience.” – says one of the planners in [a short film documenting the design process](#), pointing out that members of the local community were considered not only as users, but also as fellow designers.



They started with spreading flyers and posters, involving the inhabitants of the surrounding apartment houses. In the first meeting, participants found it difficult to evaluate how much trust they should have in the professionals addressing them, but



they quickly felt that the intentions went beyond an ordinary public forum. The planners and facilitators of the process reinforced this belief by presenting foreign examples of participatory planning and managed to persuade the residents to have a say in the project. "The third time I came down, it was simply because I felt good. (...) By now I would be suffocating if I couldn't tell what I think." – said one of the participants.

The architects of *New Directions* believe in the power of participatory planning that treats the users of the space as equal partners in planning. This also redefines the role of the architect, whose function is to help to create structures from the users' ideas and wishes in this context. The rehabilitation project of Teleki Square was also seen as a therapy for all participants gaining a lot of positive energy from the rich history of the neighbourhood.

Due to budgetary limitations, the professional objective was to create a base structure of a rehabilitated square, composed of high quality, permanent and simple elements, materials that residents can later develop themselves through project funding. *New Directions* was contracted by the municipality to organise 5 residential forums to ask the opinion of the residents. Instead of residential forums, however, the social architects of *New Directions* entered a dialogue with the residents to plan the structure and the outlook of the future square together.



Photo 34 During the Workshop visit

1st Turning point– Community cohesion

The first turning point of the story is about the emergence of community cohesion; i.e. the evolution of cooperation of the residents with each other and with the social architects of the project. Its inception had three aspects.

Phase 2 – Community planning

After workshops held at the community house, the group usually visited the spot to continue planning.

Various other events and common activities on the site were also part of the process. The ideas and desires for the space which had been raised in the first meeting were written on cards and hung on the trees for other people to read. In the process, the team has always placed great emphasis on the presentation and visualization of ideas and results. Modern forms of communication were not left out and the planning process had its own Facebook page, named "What should Teleki Square look like?" Each meeting was filmed and posted on YouTube so that other residents could also follow the

process and join decision-making if they wanted to.

During the work with the locals, ideas were gathered, the park's outline was shaped and a local community took shape. It was an important step at this stage to determine which ideas or desires fitted into the available financial frames, and what compromises (such as using cheaper materials) were needed to keep certain ideas in the plan. "Therein lies the power of collaboration that already we have been able to explain to each other" – says one of the participants.

Relying on their memories, older residents tried to capture and describe an overall atmosphere of Teleki Square they wished to experience in the rehabilitated park as well. They conducted individual research on the history of the square that helped them to draw a basic conception of what values and functions the park should convey. Participants agreed that multiculturalism and openness, defining characteristics of the original park, should be the underlining features of the rehabilitated park as well. The design, simple and geometric forms, evolved out of this conception.

An excellent example of the planning process and relying on the residents' functionalist motives and the conception they drew together was the shaping of pathways across the park: several discussions took place about what shape the pathways should take, somewhat bent or straight or in zigzag. Residents argued that formal pathways should follow the pattern people take when crossing the park and as a result, pathways eventually had straight broken lines. The three genre

sculptures at the entrance of the park also reflect the decision of the residents, just like the final structure of the park: separate areas are designed for pensioners who like to sit around and chat, for teenagers and for little children in the playground, for dogs, for playing football, etc. – reflecting the multicultural background of residents.



Photo 35 Open workshop on the square

2nd Turning point–The institutionalization of the local community

By this time, "cooperation" had already been the key word in the planning process. In the summer of 2013, residents involved in the planning process formed and registered the "Partners for Teleki Square Association". The establishment of the association can be considered as the pledge of long-term sustainability of the project and the community.

Phase 3

The legal form of an NGO, in addition to providing a good framework for various common events, gave a sense of ownership to its members. The local community hopes that ideas dropped from the plan due to financial constraints can



later be implemented through future applications for grants or other resources. These may include for instance a stage and some more expensive playground elements. The work of the Association and the responsibility they take is recognized by the municipality. A contract was

local community not only took part in an open space development process funded by the European Union and ordered by the local government, but it has also taken control of the best use and further improvements of the square and in an area where alienation and hopelessness were the dominant attitudes earlier.



Photo 36 Playground on the square

The words of a participant from the short film reflect this clearly: "Everyone is afraid of participatory planning because a public forum is a messy stuff. (...) But I think that this is very different, and I think even the local authority will take courage, especially seeing the success. (...) And residents can also see that they may substantially affect the developments. Yes. Let's do this everywhere!"



Photo 37 Activity on the square

prepared to give a legal framework for the Association's park maintenance and development activities. Another plan was that the local government would make a common space available for the Association, which can give space to additional community programs and meetings.

The attitude of the residents during the community planning process and the responsibilities they took as described above are quite unique in Budapest. The



CONCLUSIONS

The story of the renewal of Teleki Square can be regarded as a success story not only from the perspective of the rehabilitation of the physical environment but also from the rehabilitation of the community that emerged during the planning process. The most powerful way "to tell the story" would be from the perspective of the inhabitants, relying on the sequence of this parallel process of rehabilitation with an emphasis on the community. From the perspective of game development, the sequence of

community rehabilitation can be grasped through the following aspects:

- i. Residents see flyers, hear news of first meetings from neighbours
- ii. Residents, rather sceptical about the project go to the first meetings "to see what is this about"
- iii. "It really counts what we say and what we want": Residents begin to realize their own potentials in planning as urban architects treat them as equal partners. Thus, the residents' self-consciousness is strengthened as they experience a positive reinforcement of the value of their participation in planning. Positive reinforcement of the significance of their ideas and wishes was the most important aspect of community development.
- iv. This further deepened their insights about "how to cooperate" (what are the tools of association) and residents actively tried to find common solutions together to conflicting issues (e.g.: such as the locking of the park and the employment of a park guard. Some residents thought it was unfair not allowing homeless people sleep in the square, others argued for safety and the preservation of better hygienic conditions for children in the park's playground. Eventually, the residents themselves agreed and recommended to have a park guard and locked gates for the nights.)
- v. Residents spontaneously begin to use participatory tools of democratic decision-making. Through their active involvement, residents gather social capital (improved relationships, extended contacts), human capital (architectural knowledge, budget planning and how to match goals with resources as well as a know-how of using participatory tools of democratic decision-making.
 - listening to each others' opinion
 - building up their argument, reasoning
 - getting encouraged by seeing others' reactions to their arguments, getting reinforcement from agreements
 - building consensus, try to find common solutions together to conflicting issues
- vi. A sense of ownership emerges along with the community of participating residents
- vii. Residents establish the Association for maintaining cooperation and the sustenance of "their" park. The renewed park becomes the symbol of the multicultural nature of the district as poorer families, who did not participate in the planning, also begin to use the park, adopting a sense of ownership from the park planners.