



# Relationships between politics, cities and architecture based on the examples of two Hungarian New Towns



Kornelia Kissfazekas

Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Urban Planning and Design, Műegyetem rkp. 3. K. II/93, 1111 Budapest, Hungary

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 10 January 2015  
Received in revised form 17 June 2015  
Accepted 21 June 2015  
Available online 1 July 2015

### Keywords:

Socialist New Towns  
Post-socialist industrial towns  
Socialist realism  
Hungarian urban design  
Public areas  
City centre  
Identity

## ABSTRACT

During the state socialist era, a small number of New Towns were also built in Hungary. Few of these were true 'green-field' projects, as most of them were developed into larger towns from one or more smaller settlements. Nevertheless, we can still call them New Towns, since they were turned into cities of national importance in a short time through a conceptual construction process. They provide many lessons to be learned. The heyday of their construction lasted a few years beginning from the early 50s, the period when Hungary underwent significant changes in political and social values which noticeably left their mark on our built environment. According to the contemporary press, the building of these towns was also a kind of experiment. Today this is well-known. Also, it is clear that these towns should be much more flexible in order to adapt to the many changes of the past 65 years. The following paper analyses the first two Hungarian socialist New Towns to be constructed. It describes the political context, the political and economic reasons behind the construction of industrial New Towns, and their impact on the planning process, structure and architecture of these settlements. Regarding the questions of how a municipality can deal with this kind of historic heritage today and whether it can replace its lost identity with new elements in a very different social political situation, it highlights the role of reinterpretations of central public areas in (mental and physical) urban renewal.

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## 1. Introduction

The history of New Towns has been extensively studied (Merlin, 1969; Merlin, 1980; Merlin, 2000; Osborn pre-1945; Thomas, 1997); however, the experiences of New Towns in Central and Eastern Europe have only recently been brought into focus (Cole, 1990; Prasca & Olău, 2013). These show significant differences from Western European examples in many regards. The motivation behind their construction, the characteristics of the planning and executive processes, and the principles their designs are based on, (not to mention the peculiarities in their management and leadership) are all frequent points of difference. Still, it is not only the differences that make the Central and Eastern European experiences significant. A study made in the early 2000s about EU policy on New Towns named three main groups (Merlin, 2000; Uzzoli, 2013),<sup>1</sup> one group being new industrial towns in former Soviet member states and post-socialist countries. This means that their

number is so significant and their characteristics so unique that they constitute their own group within the European urban network.

In the eastern half of Europe, 20th-century urban construction processes were closely linked with efforts to build up the state's socialist order (Benkő, 2012; French & Hamilton, 1979; Lenart, 2013). The newly built towns, beside their social and economic roles, were also meant to convey a strong political message. In Hungary, this was characteristic of the post-World War II period, particularly in the 1950s.

Hungary did not build as many New Towns as its 'Big Brother', the USSR (Cole, 1990). However, all New Town bear witness to the characteristic way of thinking in urban design and urban development of the period, as they were created to stand as 'ideal' model towns for the socialist order.

There is an ongoing discourse whether the term 'socialist New Town' is correct (Hirt, 2013). This dilemma is most closely tied to the question whether these towns have sufficient unique characteristics, based on which they can be called 'socialist' (Germuska, 2002, 2003; Hirt, 2013). According to Balockaite, one of the most important characteristics that sets socialist New Towns apart from the Western model is the artificially generated sense of identity, which was also part of the socialist ideology (Balockaite, 2012). According to sociologist Viktória Szirmai, the term 'socialist' refers more to the

E-mail addresses: [kissfazekas@gmail.com](mailto:kissfazekas@gmail.com), [kissfazekas@urb.bme.hu](mailto:kissfazekas@urb.bme.hu)

<sup>1</sup> The three main groups designated by Pierre Merlin: 1. newly-founded capitals (irrelevant in Europe), 2. industrial New Towns (USSR, post-socialist countries in Central-Eastern and Southeastern Europe) built as part of an urban development policy, and 3. New Towns built in order to counter urban growth and overpopulation.

political content linked to the demagoguery of the 50s than to their social intent (Szirmai, 1988). However, the term 'post-socialist town' has been well-established and widely used, while the idea behind it, along with its special characteristics, is part of the international professional common knowledge (Kotus, 2006).

In my opinion, terminology regarding Hungary is relatively clear. The motivation for building New Towns was without exception industrial development, driven by the determination to build a social order based on socialism. The decision-making process and priorities were closely linked with the state's socialist structure. This means that they can be called *socialist industrial New Towns* in light of our current knowledge. Nevertheless, the term 'New Town' in Hungary is not tantamount to green-field construction on previously unoccupied land, since almost all New Towns were built by combining existing settlements or by extending them. However, the attribute 'New' is still applicable, because the planned population was 15–20 times the original population, which means that the building goals were considered much more important than the original urban character or spatial structure.

These towns have been an inexhaustible source of research for sociologists, who have studied, among other topics, whether their social structure was typically socialist – and if it was, how these towns were affected by change, particularly in the period after the regime change (1989–90). Also a topic of study has been whether there are particular differences in these towns' 'survival techniques', development possibilities, etc. (Csizmady, 2013; Szirmai, 1998, 2013).

Several studies focused on the question of what having a population consisting of young people, often having moved in from the countryside without any connection with the urban lifestyle, meant for the society of New Towns (Watson, 2002). To what extent did this urban community, shaped by young people, cope with different spatial frameworks (Lebow, 1999, 2001)? How did the differences between the traditions and lifestyles of the surrounding rural population and the newcomers manifest? How did the inhabitants deal with the built environment so different from the classic city structure and consisting of new architectural elements – e.g., the lack of churches (Pittaway, 2005)? Other studies examine whether socialist towns have a distinct urban structure and cultural landscape, and whether these can be connected to a certain Eastern European identity (Pittaway, 2005; Pozniak, 2014). This raises the question of how the urban spaces defined by political forces were used and how the users redefined them (Pittaway, 2005). A significant part of social and urban design studies has also dealt with spatial analysis, with particular focus on public spaces (Kissfazekas, 2013b; Lenart, 2013). This spatial context of life in the New Towns – use of public spaces and the cultural landscape – constitutes a common area of interest for several different fields of study (history, sociology, architecture, landscape architecture and urban design). The following paper also focuses on this topic, as recent experience shows that the reinterpretation of public spaces – strongly politicized during the state socialist era – is one of the most commonly used urban development tools in the hands of municipalities.

Contemporary literature found it important to stress that these New Town plans were considered quite experimental, characterized by a progressive urban planning approach. Be that as it may, a very small number of urban planning studies have been prepared since their construction to follow up on the success of this approach (Pittaway, 2005). The studies of Endre Prakfalvi or Andras Ferkai are an exception, analysing the architectural aspects in an artistic context (Ferkai, 1992, 2000; Prakfalvi, 2002; Prakfalvi & Szűcs, 2010).

Researchers are also interested in the unique architectural style of these towns, as well as the similarities and differences between them in each Central-Eastern European country (Aman, 1992;

Kozlova, 1998; Čalović, 2011), but the focus is typically on architectural questions and not on urban design.

The most recent architectural analyses stick to the general assumption that the most important common feature of these towns is use of the so-called socialist-realist style, which makes the time of construction and political context of these towns easily recognisable.

Prior to the discussion on urban design processes (characteristics of urban structure and architectural style) during the state socialist regime, it is necessary to give a short description of the contemporary geopolitical context.

## 2. Hungarian social political background – Central-eastern european context

Faith in the building of a new social order was a strong political expectation in the 1950s. This included a social system built on the might and strength of physical work and belief in moral and physical victory over the 'decadent Western social order' – the result of a struggle in which each engaged country would play its part. By accepting its designated role, Hungary voluntarily (?) committed to changing from an agrarian country into an industrial-agrarian country.

In order to become an industrial power, the already existing industrial facilities had to be relied upon; hence, they were nationalised by taking them from their owners – branded as bourgeois – and declaring them as property of the people's democracy. Even the largest of these facilities became part of the socialist state's industrial policy.

However, a handful of cities were not enough to make the impression of a strong industrial state. Therefore, existing Hungarian mines and new mining developments became the foundation of the new industrial policy (Faragó & Perényi, 1974). From the late 1940s, so-called forced industrialisation was the number-one priority of Hungarian politics and economic policy, as well as the guiding principle of regional urban policies. The ever-important Soviet example made it clear that the key elements of the new settlement network would be those communities with mining and industrial potential (Pittaway, 2005). Regional policies focused on the construction of new towns by shifting the focal points of the network through the intense and artificial development of certain small settlements. The political weight of regions with extractable raw material deposits increased significantly. The newly-drawn industrial axis had a southwest-by-northeast orientation, linking the capital with the only significant mountainous region of the country, which already possessed a network of several small mining settlements. The foothills of the southern Mecsek range had smaller, but still significant mining and industrial potential as well (Figs. 1–3).

Development of mining and heavy industries generated an increase in housing programmes, while the large demand for housing led to the idea of housing estates or – in better circumstances – the construction of New Towns. During the era of extensive industrialisation – between 1950 and 1970 – 80% of the priority projects (called 'over-the-threshold' projects) were focused on 14 Hungarian settlements. One third was spent on the Budapest agglomeration and the first two New Towns, Sztálinváros ('Stalin Town' or present-day Dunaújváros) and Kazincbarcika; while one half was invested in four other socialist New Towns: Leninváros ('Lenin Town' or present-day Tiszaújváros), Várpalota, Tatabánya and Ajka (Compton, 1984).

Obviously, the building of New Towns was not unique to Central-Eastern Europe, but the motives behind their construction were significantly different from those leading to the construction of Western European New Towns after WWII. While in both cases

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