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Social-Mindedness and Aesthetics: Municipal Housing in Budapest and Vienna in the Early 20th Century

Belated industrialization in Central Eastern Europe resulted in an urban boom in the late 19th century. The demand for industrial labour encouraged a steady influx of migrants moving to the cities from the countryside. The capitals soon faced the kind of problems - congestion, disastrous health conditions etc. - which capitals and industrial centers of Western Europe had faced earlier in the century. Often relying on the models of cities like Paris and London, large-scale urban planning began in Central Europe, too.

Because of their sizes, and because of their manifold central functions, the twin capitals of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Vienna and Budapest experienced the most rapid growth in the region. In 1867, by the so-called Compromise, The Habsburg Empire was transformed into the constitutional Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Its two halves, that is, Austria and Hungary began to enjoy a high degree of autonomy in political, economic and cultural affairs, and they got a free hand in how to handle ethnic minorities living on their territories. Austria and Hungary each had their own independent parliament and government.

The Austro-Hungarian Compromise strongly stimulated the development of the two capitals. Vienna remained the imperial capital, growing dynamically in the period. Budapest grew even faster. Between 1867 and 1914 the population of Vienna increased from over 800, 000 to over 2 million; that of Budapest from 270, 000 to about one million (if we also count the suburbs.) Budapest was, in fact, the fastest growing capital of Europe at the time. This enormous increase was the result of the expanding economy and the influx of in-migrants who found employment primarily in industry. Budapest abandoned its former, subordinate role, and became an emerging national capital, a kind of second center of the empire, eager to compete with Vienna. In Vienna, urban planning focussed on emphasizing imperial greatness; in Budapest, the goal was to express the cultural and economic power of the Hungarian nation. So grandiosity and magnificence were the aims that had to be achieved in both cities - sometimes at any cost. Urban planners concentrated mostly on the street network, on representative public spaces, and on public buildings; the state financed all this with enormous sums.

Compared to public buildings, residential housing was a somewhat neglected issue. Residential building activity was entirely in private hands. Because of the huge demand caused by in-migration, constructing rentable blocks of flats was considered to be one of the most profitable forms of enterprise in the late 19th century in both Budapest and Vienna.

For those investors who commissioned blocks of flats, the main thing was how much rent profit they could derive from their real estate, and little attention was payed to the apartment standards, except for those living units which were meant for the upper middle-class. The landlords' assumption was - rightly - that they would get relatively more rent income from a larger number of small-size, low-standard flats than from fewer spacious and elegant middle- und upper-middle class dwellings. So the typical apartment building contained a few elegant apartments looking onto the street, and several one-room flats (that is, one room and a kitchen) overlooking the inner courtyard of the building. These one-room flats, usually small and badly lit, were the typical dwellings of working-class families. Very often 4, 5 or more people shared such a place. The typical Budapest block of flats had thus two characteristics. Firstly, the social makeup of tenants within one block could be quite mixed; a surprising mixture of families with entirely different social backgrounds could live in one and the same building. Secondly, the attractive facades, which - in the spirit of

historicism - often imitated palaces in past historical styles, were often in striking contrast with the apartments hiding behind them. In Vienna, social segregation was more pronounced.

Not only individual buildings bore the mark of investors' indifference toward the quality of tenants' lives, but entire neighbourhoods too. The proper balance between buildings and free space, buildings and green areas was often forgotten about. Between the mid-1860s and the mid-1890s, when investing into real estate was considered to be an excellent business, block after block was erected, and, especially in Budapest, investors wanted to utilize every square meter of would-be residential districts. In the process, no one really thought about establishing little squares, public parks, playgrounds, or at least about building in a more spatious way.

It is typical of the period that building regulations were mostly concerned with the exteriors of the buildings, but demanded little as far as the residents' living conditions were concerned.

As a result, by the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the majority of Budapest's population lived in cramped, dark, unhealthy apartments. Health conditions and mortality rates duely reflected this situation. In Vienna, the general picture looked relatively better, but working-class housing was very poor here, too. In Budapest, even a large part of the middle class lived below their own standards as far as their apartments were concerned. The strikingly large number number of coffeehouses, which were later remembered with great nostalgia, was in a sense a result of this situation. As contemporary authors often pointed out, the reason why middle-class people spent so much of their time in cafés was the fact that they considered their flats too modest-looking and unsuitable for social life.

After 1900 a slow but steady inflation began. Besides, the construction industry did not keep up with the growth of the population, so rents began to rise steeply. Especially working-class families suffered; many of those who were unable to pay their rent were evicted and landed in the street. By 1908 the housing crisis became constant. Tenants' protests and housing boycotts, many of which were organized by the Social Democratic Party, threatened with social upheaval.

During these years, municipal administrations - under the leadership of socially-minded, determined mayors - began to adopt new roles in both Vienna and Budapest. Social welfare measures were introduced, and several other policies, designed to alleviate the difficult situation of the working population, were initiated. In Budapest, large-scale social housing projects began, partly financed by the state, accompanied by the construction of several schools, hospitals, social and cultural institutions. Mayor of Budapest Istvan Bárczy (1906-1918) and his team of advisors considered it important that the new buildings - including workers' housing - should meet high aesthetic standards.

These reform-minded urban politicians at the beginning of the 20th century began to think differently about the city's inhabitants. They thought that even the lower classes have the right to live in an aesthetically pleasing environment. So they thought that the buildings which served the practical needs of the city's population - for example, schools, housing estates, or even shelters for the poor - should be designed with the utmost care. Mayor Bárczy, in fact, was often criticized for this practice; his critics in the city hall found it unacceptable that an elementary school or a hostel was to be built with that much care, and that the mayor commissioned the best architects and artists to have such projects completed. Mayor Bárczy and his team were clearly influenced by contemporary ideas of Art Nouveau, a movement which declared that aesthetic beauty should not be the privilege of the upper classes but should belong to everyone.

In the following section, I would like focus on one example, the Wekerle housing colony, which was built between 1908 and 1930 at the outskirts of Budapest, and which reflected a totally new approach to the housing problem. The establishment of the colony was

the direct consequence of the housing crisis that peaked around 1908. It was a joint effort of the Budapest municipal administration and the Hungarian national government; the key figures in the deal were the aforementioned Mayor Bárczy and one Prime Minister of the period, Sándor Wekerle, after whom the colony was named. Both politicians realized that it was time to break with existing practices: the private housing market was unable the satisfy the demands, and public funding was necessary in order to solve the housing problems of workers and civil servants. For the first time in the city's history, state-subsidized and municipally funded housing projects began. The owners of the new flats were not private persons but either the state or the municipality of Budapest. National funds were allocated for this purpose, with the approval of Parliament. Act 29 of 1908 ordered the building of 10, 000 workers' apartments, and determined how much money should be devoted to that purpose. The Wekerle colony was built as part of this larger plan.

The Wekerle housing colony was a pioneering project not only because it was the first publicly funded, large-scale social housing estate in Hungary. It was also one of first planned garden cities in the region, one of the largest in Europe at the time. The founder and theoretician of the garden city movement had been Ebenezer Howard, who published his programmatic work - later titled "The Garden Cities of To-morrow" - in 1898. In this work, he designed an ideal garden city with satellite towns; this complex of settlements, in his opinion, would combine the advantages of urban and rural lifestyle, without the drawbacks of the overgrown and unhealthy industrial metropolises of his time. Howard's book had a great influence in Europe, probably because by 1900 everybody had become aware of the anomalies of urban life, and many were seeking alternative solutions for city development. The garden cities established in Europe at the time were all different in one way or another, and none of them embodied exactly Howard's somewhat utopian concept. But many of the architects who designed these were clearly influenced by his ideas. So were the planners of the Wekerle colony.

Two great competitions were conducted for the Wekerle colony: one for the general plan, and one for individual buildings. The winning general plans were all used: the final result was a synthesis of all of them. The variety of individual buildings included one-storey semi-detached houses and smaller apartment blocks. The planners found it important that the housing colony should have a recognizeable style, but they considered variety an important factor too. The individual buildings types all have something distinct and unique about them. In general, the aim was that the colony should be as close as possible to a real town which had evolved organically. This is why the main square was important; this is why the planners wanted to avoid purely rectangular blocks, and created various street types; this is also why they preferred a variety of building designs instead of achieving a kind of monotonous "housing estate" look.

The character and quality of this environment had much to do with who the colony was built for. The great majority of the working population which lived in Budapest and its outskirts at around 1900 had not been born in Budapest but in the country, typically in small towns and villages. The assumption was that country-born workers and white-collar employees would appreciate a living environment that had the atmosphere of a small town. The Wekerle colony was not self-sufficient in the economic sense - as Howard had imagined his ideal garden city to be -, because its inhabitants worked in Budapest and commuted every day; nonetheless, it was designed to be a large independent unit with its own shops, market, nursery and elementary schools, parks, churches and later cinema. It also included work facilities for women. This was the first time in Hungary when a large urban area was designed as a whole, complete with all the facilities and institutions its inhabitants would need.

The character and quality of the buildings also reflected a new approach to social housing and to living space. The flats, which were built primarily for workers and to a lesser

extent for lower-middle-class civil servants, were still not huge, but they have to be assessed in contrast to the typical one-room worker's apartment which I described earlier. Apartments at the Wekerle colony had relatively spatious, rooms, the sun shining in from all sides; the semi-detached houses had their own gardens; the streets were all lined with trees, and public parks were established everywhere at the focal points of the area. All in all, it was a healthy environment for adults and children alike. It also offered the opportunity of a degree of self-sufficience: people had a chance to grow vegetables in their back gardens. This could be particularly important at the time of inflation, when food prices were rising, or, as it later turned out, at the time of war, which brought along severe food shortages. The most striking about the whole enterprise is how much care was put into workers' housing. This was indeed entirely new.

It has to be added that the colony was not simply a pleasant place to live but it represented - and still represents - high standards in terms of its architectural value. It was not designed by one individual architect, but by a team of several outstanding architects of Hungarian Art Nouveau. The fact that it was planned by a team allowed a great degree of variety; on the other hand, though, cooperation ensured that the colony would have a distinct style as a whole.

The Hungarian version of Art Nouveau was inspired by folk architecture. In the highly nationalistic atmosphere of the turn of the century, young Hungarian architects and designers were determined to find a distinctly national style. They were greatly inspired by peasant art and architecture, which they considered to be the most authentic source of the nation's "spirit" and traditions. They combined the inventions of international Art Nouveau, becoming popular at the time, with the lessons they had learnt from this organic tradition; they experimented with how to transplant time-tested solutions of peasant architecture into a modern urban environment. The Wekerle colony is the most extended example of how such experiments could be successful.

In Vienna, there were no housing projects of comparable dimensions before World War I. Although several important social measures were initiated under the controversial Mayor Karl Lueger (1897-1910), extensive housing policies were not yet on the agenda.

The great period of social housing came after World War I, under a new Social Democratic municipal administration. Besides the problems inherited from old Vienna, the city's new leaders were faced with an ever-worsening housing problem. After its defeat in the war, the Habsburg Monarchy was dismembered, and the remaining Austria came out of the peace settlement as a small country with very limited resources. At the same time, a large number of people fled the lost territories, and wanted to settle down in Vienna.

Even though the Social Democrats were the opponents of the earlier Mayor Lueger politically, they continued to develop Vienna along the lines he had represented as an urban politician. In Red Vienna, as the Socialist-dominated capital came to be called, social welfare became a high priority, and housing was one of the most important elements of the Socialists' welfare program. Between 1920 and the mid 1930s almost 60,000 new flats and thousands of detached houses were built, primarily for workers. This was financed partly by loans, and partly by taxing the wealthier classes to an unprecedented extent. Municipal building activity in interwar Vienna was characterized by principles similar to what Mayor Bárczy and his progressive contemporaries set up in Budapest. Social-mindedness was combined with high building standards; the aim was to create healthier, more pleasant-looking living environments for working people, places which also fit in with certain communal ideals.

In the early 1920s, garden suburbs with detached or row houses were proposed and built in Vienna, too, but his type of settlement was finally considered too extensive, and urban planners decided on larger, three- or four-storey blocks. These could be constructed on empty

lots in already developed districts, where the necessary infrastructure had already been established. These blocks were large, and they usually surrounded a spatious inner area which was large enough to be a kind of inner park. Because of their large size, these communal residential buildings were later called superblocks. The structure of these buildings was designed to foster communal sentiments. Not only the park-like inner yards served this purpose, but also the various communal facilities that were included into these buildings, which the tenants could share.

The superblocks were designed for a working-class population, and they were to address the assumed needs of this social stratum. The apartments never exceeded a certain size, not only because the architects were expected to seek economical solutions, but also because they took as a starting point the typical pre-war worker's apartment. That kind of apartment, similarly to its Budapest counterpart, usually consisted of only one room and a kitchen; that was the space that families, often including four or five children, had to share. When superblocks were built in the interwar period, individual bathrooms were not considered to be an absolute necessity, either; instead, architects designed communal baths for the whole building.

But, although the apartments were not intended to be luxurious, they were healthier, better-lit and often more spatious than the one-room dwellings in old pre-war tenement blocks. The architectural style of the superblocks varied from modernist to somewhat more traditional, but what is remarkable in every case is that the outer facades as well as the inner courtyards of the buildings were designed with great care. The little parks or gardens which occupied the inner yards were well-groomed and pleasant, and they were quite suitable for children living in these buildings. Some of them included a playground and a pool as well. Sometimes it is stressed that the superblocks expressed the political ideals of Socialism, not only because they embodied certain communal values, but also because they looked like large fortresses of the working class. One of them named Karl-Marx-Hof is a case in point.

The new ideals which inspired social housing in Budapest and Vienna gradually permeated Central European architecture by the 1920s. The examples I intended to show in my lecture can be compared to several other, similarly successful experiments in the region - for example, the various *Siedlungen* (housing estates) in Germany in the Weimar period. These colonies, housing projects and garden cities may look very different in terms of their architectural styles, but the guiding principles behind their establishment are similar everywhere.

For a Central Eastern European coming from a post-Communist country, studying this venerable tradition of communal architecture is not without a lesson. The notion of housing estate has rather negative connotations in this region: late Communist governments commissioned and realized monstrous examples of such projects between the 1960s and the 1980s. Today, it is important to remember the original intentions and the progressive spirit of those architects and city planners who created the first important housing developments. Many of these were, and some of them still are, pleasant and liveable urban environments which are able to satisfy the needs of today's city dwellers.