

The Struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings

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*Trafó – The House of Contemporary Arts – capturing and
being captured by the state*

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Abstract

In this paper I propose to analyse the emergence and evolution of one particular urban cultural space in Budapest, The House of Contemporary Arts, more commonly known by the moniker Trafó. This attempt is part of a larger project that encompasses five urban cultural spaces that have emerged in post-socialist Budapest for the past 20 years with histories that go back well before these times. I regard these urban cultural spaces as part of the global urban phenomenon that sees derelict urban industrial sites revamped into chic post-industrial urban cultural venues. Each of these urban spaces in various ways have re-enacted this pattern, but each instance I argue, presents yet again modified practices and meanings, and thus together they constitute a wider dynamic field symptomatic of a wider urban socio-spatial restructuring of post-socialist Budapest. I approach these urban cultural spaces as representation and synecdoche of the city, as a locus for understanding intersections of broader concerns facing urban residents and scholars alike, including social relations, public space and civic life, privatization and state formation, and economic and cultural globalization. Interestingly, all these cultural centres are public institutions with the state deeply implicated in their formation. Their history is that of over-politicized urban spaces at the intersection of which various power struggles have been waged not simply over their place and meaning in the urban fabric of post-socialist Budapest, but over practices and visions in the larger urban context at the intersection of spheres of influence of state, economic and civil society actors. Their histories, I argue, are embedded in and reflect relevant urban dynamics of Budapest for the past two decades, in particular with respect to urban cultural politics and the urban regulatory context. Their dynamics shed light on the cultural political economy of the city; on the redrawing of public space and publics in a largely post-political condition, destabilizing the public-private analytic division; on various practices forming neoliberal subjects against the larger processes of democratization, neoliberal privatization and free-market creation. All these entail the continuous rewriting of the

role and purview of the state, the economic and the civil society sphere very much complicating any neat analytical formulations and delimitations.

Introduction

For the past few decades one's retinal and emotional experience of cities has shifted and attempts to account for this experience have been often expressed in terms of a structural shift from an industrial to postindustrial society, or/and as part of a shift from a city of production to a city of consumption. One of the most visible changes in the fabric of cities has been the appearance of revamped post-industrial buildings, often transformed into urban cultural centres. These pockets of urban regeneration have mushroomed alongside many other urban developmental projects, presumably intricately related to them, and not least alongside and in conjunction with ruined and impoverished urban sites. Within a neoliberalizing urban political economy urban policies have prioritized economic development and not wealth distribution, area interventions and not universal policies, and individual projects and not a more encompassing planning context. This is best encapsulated by the penchant for 'emblematic projects' that 'capture a segment of the city and turn it into the symbol of the new restructured/revitalized metropolis' (Swyngedouw et al., 2002; 562) with the state as one of the determining actors in the process (Swyngedouw, *ibid.*).

Cities across the world, which have undertaken such urban regeneration projects, have been often presented as conferring on culture, and more particularly, on cultural centres, seemingly, a quite central role. If one thinks of Bilbao's Guggenheim, or Vienna's Museums Quartier, just to name these two very different instances, the question what these cultural sites have meant and done, beyond what the catch word 'urban regeneration through culture' might entail, in their immediate and larger urban context becomes a much more complicated issue to be understood and dissected.

In my analysis I draw on the so-called 'new urban sociology' that has elaborated an explicitly spatialized and reflexively multi-scalar understanding of capitalist urbanization (Brenner 2004, Swyngedouw, Moulaert & Rodriguez 2005) the latter conceived as outcome of the uneven geographical development (Harvey 1990, 2005, 2008, Massey 1995, Smith 1996, 2002). The two major schools within radical urban

studies such as the institutionalist (Amin, Scott, Thrift etc.) and regulationist (Jessop, Jones, Peck, Tickell) have extensively analyzed urban restructuring in relation to recent political-economic changes commonly referred to as neoliberalism offering many insights. However, these macro political economic analyses have not yet addressed in-depth the more specific question of culture, of cultural uses as an essential part of the political economy of cities. Bob Jessop has taken up the question of semiotics in cultural political economy and has indeed argued for the relevancy of a cultural urban political economy. It has been most importantly Sharon Zukin who has compellingly combined cultural and political economy approaches to the understanding of cities among some other scholars who have variously written on recent transformations of the built environment in postindustrial cities as cultural urban strategies deployed in economic development (Boyer 1992; Deutsche, 1996; Fainstein, 1994, 2001, 2008; Low, 2000, 2003, 2006; Soja, 1989; Sorkin, 1992). The inherited institutional frameworks and policy regimes in a post-socialist context where a command economy has been gradually transformed into a market economy have been rarely combined with an understanding of the built environment, with an explicit urban focus (Bodnár, 2001, Szelényi 1996, Tosics 2005, 2006) to name a but few exceptions.

Through this project I hope to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which culture, economy and politics have been redefined for the past few decades in this particular post socialist context in the light of the marketization process, no doubt one of the most important processes in post socialist countries. Against an overwhelming and abstract notion of marketization, of market making an ethnographic approach to these urban cultural spaces will allow for a more precise understanding of the changed role of the state, the commercialization of culture and urban space, and their entanglement with cultural and urban policies.

I conceive my approach in terms of a preoccupation with the relations between space, culture and political economy of the city. I am interested in how urban space is produced, what kind of culture is being expressed in the built environment, whose culture is being promoted, to what ends, and what social, political and economic rationalities get constructed along the production of space as part of the recent socio-spatial urban restructuring. In this respect I find cultural political economy as a cultural perspective on the city that also takes material-economic matters seriously

approaching social processes as co-constituted by cultural, political and economic processes quite inspiring and helpful to my endeavor.

In this paper I propose to look at the historical emergence of one particular urban cultural space known as Trafó, at the sociopolitical ideologies and economic forces involved in its production, including the role played by cultural entrepreneurs, state officials in its formation, the social use of the place, and its associated symbolic and affective meanings.

Contrary to widespread assumptions about the hollowing out of and the demise of the state, Trafó's history presents a more nuanced and dynamic picture of a continuously evolving relationship between state and capital and society. I start from the idea that "actually existing socialism and welfare systems in the West should be conceived not as fundamentally different social formations but as importantly different variations of the general state-interventionist form of twentieth century world capitalism" (Moishe Postone, 1993) A far from monolithic or static post-socialist state has emerged out of the socialist state, one that has variously steered and intervened in the movement of capital, but in a way that best served the interests of the always dominant political parties. The changes of the Hungarian socialist state into a neo-liberal capitalist state show that the state does not vanish, but that its main logic transforms, and those parts that are thought to strengthen it dominate the political process. The recent debates on and changes in governing in the wake of the 2010 elections need to be seen in light of this and that the new modes of neoliberal governances are not, by far, more democratic or participatory but seem to point to more exclusionary, authoritarian and intransparent political structures, actor-constellations and policy-making.

No alternatives and independents in the new urban politics after the 2010 elections?

'When the Alliance of Free Democrats took over cultural politics twenty years ago they turned the order of values on their head and with this they caused unbelievable destruction. The task of the current government is to turn the order of values back on their feet'. (Iván Markó, Magyar Hírlap)

This remark by one of courtiers to the current right wing establishment, and who is rumoured to get Trafo, was made apropos of the looming changes with respect to

changes around Trafo and it well captures the widespread view among right wing politicians and supporters of the former liberal and left wing urban cultural politics.

After months of rumours and speculations the decision to hand over Trafo, a more alternative cultural urban space in Budapest, from the municipality of Budapest to the state has been eventually made. The new deputy-mayor of Budapest responsible for cultural and educational matters has announced that Trafo will indeed belong to the state, but declined to reveal any details about its further functioning, whether a profile change will occur or not, or who will be in charge, with the excuse that once the cultural venue has been declared to become a state institution, the city does not possess any further information on the details of its future functioning. However, he refuted the rumour, which has been circulating for months by now, that Trafo will be merged with PeCsa.

In the wake of the 2010 general elections a right wing government replaced the socialists securing a two-third parliamentary majority. In the subsequent local elections the right wing contender defeated the liberal mayor who governed the city for 20 years.

The new political establishment has been accusing the former government of pushing the country to the brink of ruin by inflating the public debt to record heights with its laissez faire attitude and with a corrupt and venal cohort at the helm. Under the welcome pretext to remedy this situation the conservative government has taken an unprecedented series of anti-democratic measures, sanctioned by the two-third parliamentary majority. Among others it has rewritten the constitution without any consultation with and participation of the opposition or of any professional interest groups whatsoever, drastically curbing the rights of the citizens, criminalizing poverty to an unprecedented degree, and virtually ending all balances and checks on its power. In the current political climate several replacements have taken place and top and mid and rank-and-file positions have been filled with people supposed to be loyal to the present government.

In conjunction with personal changes, which have been largely completed by now, an attempt at a complete overhaul of the current state apparatus is taking place the end of which is hard to be predicted. The complete administrative, regulatory system is being rethought, restructuring the relationship between Budapest and the state and the

smaller towns, of the districts of the capital to the municipality, and reshuffling the counties and regions. There is a plethora of initiatives, policy recommendations, regulations and laws all advanced by the governing party, which at this stage all point towards a consolidation of this governing elite's grip on power.

One aspect of this frenzy of consolidating one's grip on power is the obvious preoccupation with symbolic and affective practices of place making, of control of visual images, most immediately noticeable in the renaming of streets and public squares; Roosevelt square becoming Széchenyi square and Moszkva square renamed Széll Kálmán square, in changing or disciplining the directors of the most prestigious cultural institutions etc. This happens against a larger context of economic and cultural globalization when the promoting of culture to cities in its various guises, such as a Guggenheim museum, or a Tate Modern, or as the preservation of architectural landmarks or various forms of cultural heritage, as a cultural strategy of economic development points towards an entrepreneurialism as a speculative construction of place in the sense that all these strategies are meant to attract and promote flows of mobile international capital and tourism through branding and selling an attractive city to investors and visitors.

"The turn of the century are the years of development, of industrialization, Budapest is born at this time, and immediately becomes a really big city, a bit bigger than itself" (Péter Esterházy, p. 195, my translation).

"Everybody was born at that time; Joyce, Musil, Broch, Rilke, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Einstein, Picasso, Wittgenstein, everybody who mattered was there at their cradle, "tout Paris" . The so-called Hungarian classics come from that time, too; Ady Endre, Babits Mihály, Móricz Zsigmond, Juhász Gyula, Kassák Lajos, Bartók, Kodály. At the turn of the century everything worked out beautifully. Before the world collapsed, everything just worked out beautifully." (ibid)

In March 2011 a roundtable discussion took place about the necessity to rethink the mid- and long-term urban development strategies of Budapest, gathering planners, architects, mayors, journalists etc. with the aim to define the future vision, the brand that can sell Budapest well to tourists and investors.

One of the participants' remark somehow resonates with the Esterhazy quote above, when remarking the fact that Budapest, although often compared to either Vienna,

Berlin or Paris, in fact, resembles only two cities and those are Barcelona and New York. And it does so with respect to the fact that Budapest just like Barcelona and New York was built during one, one and a half generation. 'Budapest as a concept is the creation of the wonderful period between 1867-1918, when out of two small towns a fantastic world city was born'. (P. Szucs Julianna, Mozgovilag, 2011) Whether this is a rhetorical flourish or not, the historical core of the city is indeed made up of buildings constructed during the aforementioned period and presents a fairly intact and well-preserved turn-of-the-century eclectic architectural heritage. For the past year it was around this architectural and cultural heritage that a series of demonstrations (most of the times gathering 20-100 people only), petitions and discussion have happened, situation that is rather new in Budapest as most people show little else than indifference at the prospect of some buildings being demolished or about urban politics in general.

In the summer of 2010 a real estate developer invited Foster & Partners to design an iconic building in the historical centre of the city, a kind of skyscraper housing offices and a luxury hotel in the form of a zeppelin hovering above the city, building which would have entailed the erasure of five historical buildings. A huge debate reaching a wider public ensued raising questions of accountability, transparency and democratic participation among other things. The young conservative mayor of the district turned out to be quite supportive of the project, despite earlier vociferously arguing for the contrary, for the preservation of the built heritage against any land speculation. It was not only the zeppelin, but also the idea of designing a museum quarter, then a new bridge cum shopping mall linking Pest and Buda - which would hopefully improve the market prospects of the real-estate development known as the Millennium City Centre owned by the same real estate mogul who would own the new shopping mall on the bridge – that brought to the public attention more than even before the fate of the built environment, and it showed more starkly than ever that this was about social and cultural conflict, about economic and state might and about the right to the city in general. As quickly as it reached public awareness the whole issue subsided, crushed by other more pressing concerns.

However, the question of the future of Trafó, have resurfaced again and again, and the new Budapest city council have dealt with the subject on several occasions. One thing has become clear, though; this supposedly more alternative urban cultural space does not seem to easily fit the conservative ideology of the current establishment. It either

has to change its profile under the current leadership, choice that it is difficult to explain, or under a new leadership it will be something else. Either way it will cease to be Trafó as it is currently. The issue seems to be clear: the former Budapest leadership supported smaller and independent theaters and more alternative urban cultural spaces. The current leadership wants none of these.

Trafó is the result of years of work and lobbying on the part of its current director. It is also the outcome of an urban political context that for twenty years was led by a liberal mayor belonging to the Alliance of Free Democrats, one of the four parties that forged the democratic transition. No matter which party captured the state the capital was run under a liberal leadership for twenty years. The political parties which dominated state institutions did affect the urban politics of the capital and many times it complicated their smooth functioning, nevertheless the liberal free democrats managed to keep the capital till 2010.

A post-industrial cultural urban space builds up a narrative of a subversion

Mills, granaries and electricity

As a electric power transformer, Trafó's history goes back to the turn of the previous century. Three out of the five urban cultural spaces I proposed to look at are found in the ninth district of Budapest. In this piece as I already mentioned I focus on only one of them, namely Trafó. The other two MuPa and CET, the latter still under construction, and seemingly one of the first iconic buildings of the city, lie in the area of Ferencváros, where at the turn of the previous century rows of modern mills, granaries and warehouses used to be.

The most decisive period in the urban development of Budapest, and Ferencváros, the ninth district of Budapest, is considered to be between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century.

It is in the first quarter of the nineteenth century that crop and grain merchants start to get settled in large numbers in Pest, considered an important commercial centre. In the hope for larger profits these merchants start investing their accumulated capital into milling, making it the leading sector for the Hungarian industry for decades. The rows of the modern mills replacing the boat mills along the Danube become the symbol of the capital by the second half of the nineteenth century. The name of the

‘stomach of Budapest’ given to Ferencváros is partly due to the large number of mills which makes Budapest the second-largest grain-processing centre of the world by the turn of the century. The first large mill, Concordia, is built in 1867, followed by the Mill of Millers and Bakers of Budapest (the main shareholders being millers, bakers and flour merchants, employing 200 workers at the end of the century), the Gizella (400 people in 1896) and Király (Royal Steam Mill Hedrich and Strauss its modernization reaching into the 1990s, today called Ferencváros Mill), and Hungaria in 1893, today protected as a listed landmark building. The former Concordia Mill functions as the Museum of Mill Industry.

The late 19th century also means a rapid progress in electrical engineering after centuries of scientific curiosity and electricity becomes the driving force of the Second Industrial Revolution. Electrical transformers greatly influence the electricity-supplied industry, allowing for the economic transmission of power over long distances, generation to be located remotely from points of demand. The big majority of transformers used today rely on basic principles discovered by the three engineers at Ganz corporations – Ottó Bláthy, Miksa Déri, Károly Zipernowsky. One part of the former Ganz buildings is reopened as the Millenáris cultural and scientific centre in 2001.

The would-be Trafó (The House of Contemporary Arts), the electric transformer in Liliom Street was built in 1909 by Grestenberger Ágost and Arvé Károly (the first generator in the area was built in 1893 in Kazinczy street 21 – today The Museum of Electricity).

It was modernized in 1934, modified and extended sometime after 1945, and it was in the 1960s that the building closed and fell to neglect. In 1961 the building was nationalized, and in 1978 the Budapest Liquor Company took over the maintenance of the empty building. In 1989 the Hungarian Credit bank purchased the decayed powerhouse, and then Metra Limited Company, bought and used it for some time as a shop doing some renovations on some of its parts thus slowing its rapid decay, reflecting the ‘ground-floor capitalism’ of the time - the rapid establishment of shops (Tosics, 2006), even outside the downtown. It was during this time that squatters discovered the place and moved in before the municipality eventually bought it in

1994. It was during these years that that an agreement seems to have emerged on revamping the powerhouse into a cultural venue.

The political and infrastructural support of the district's industrial heyday was long gone when, after years of neglect, around the middle of the eighties the early nineties feeble signs of development began to emerge, before it gained momentum by the late 90s and reached its full impact under the district mayor, who ran the district for 20 years until losing the local elections in 2010.

At the beginning of the nineties squatting appeared in some districts of Budapest. One such instance was in Ferencváros in Liliom Street. Several newspapers in 1991 wrote about the French squatters in Ferencvaros Liliom Street 41 and many people these days too reminisce about the funny, carnivalesque look this part of the street took at that time. When one thinks of the dull decayed grey concrete and brick buildings in a socialist city one may get an inkling what impression the colorfully painted bus hanging from a lamppost might have made on passers-by, not to speak about the artistic performances going on inside.

*“A place opened in Budapest a couple of months ago. At the beginning I liked this f***empty building, the discarded burnt out bus hanging from a lamppost, the huge cellar system. But then my enthusiasm faded as I realized that all the squatters, the anarchists, the alternatives are just a bunch of primitive scum. This is a really alternative place for self-realization, which amounts to painting band names on the wall. There was a stuck-up snob monkey – a French guy and the entire squat - like old good anarchists - were continuously adulating him. Yes, these manful anarchists are spiritually on the same level as an average housewife kowtowing when the American relatives come for a visit“. (a passer-by, newspaper clip, Trafó)*

“People living in Ferencvaros are rubbing their eyes with disbelief. A French artist group with quite a startling look have solved their housing problem in Budapest in an astounding way: they simply singled out an out-of-use building and just moved in there.Most of the people in the neighborhood welcome these strange newcomers, but there are some hostile reactions too. Their exhibition a couple of meters away from the squat has been burnt down and the “intruders“ have been called upon to leave.“ (Czene Gabor, 1991, Junius 12, szerda, Mai Nap)

If one looks at the period preceding the opening of Trafó, the single most publicized event in the history of the building, besides the various changes in ownership which went unnoticed, was the illegal occupation by a French anarchist group, later followed by Hungarian squatters. The squatting-interlude not only altered a bit the atmosphere of an otherwise quite silent and deserted street breathing life into it and preparing it for its future gentrification but it lifted the house out of total obscurity. This was how the would-be director of Trafó heard about it and who, just like many others, had been looking for a place that could accommodate artistic performances for quite some time.

This is one of the several parts of the district that has undergone massive regeneration, with entire streets and their hidden courtyards getting a full facelift by 2010. Ferencváros presents one of the most dynamic urban developments of the capital for the past 2-3 decades, although one would not necessarily consider it the prime location of Budapest to be developed and up-scaled. It is not exactly the downtown of the city, neither the rich hilly inner districts, and yet it has succeeded in performing one of the most visible changes in the urban fabric of the city. Its success is largely attributed to its entrepreneurial mayor who ran the district for almost 20 years as a free democrat similarly to the liberal mayor of Budapest. He managed to procure funds for renovating the bulk of the housing stock in the district, plus he supported the up-scaling of Ráday street.

The squatters' time was the harbinger of new beginnings, which in the case of Trafó meant 1998. However, some years had to pass after the squatters had left for the house to open as a centre of contemporary arts and become what it is in fact up to these days.

Cultural critique and opposition

The structural link to the early twentieth century industrialism easily lends itself to constructing Trafó in terms of a post-industrial urban cultural space. However, what really made Trafó into a cult place was its alleged link to a subversive, oppositional culture which dared critique the authoritarian Kádár socialist regime.

Trafó is the legal successor to the legendary Young Artists' Club (FMK) on Andrassy boulevard. The Club/ FMK (Fiatal Művészek Klubja) established by the Budapest City Council in 1960 was initiated by KISZ - the Young Hungarian Communist

League – (Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség) itself established in 1957, March 27. It was set up with the intention to offer a place for Hungarian artists and intellectuals and it had acquired along the years the reputation of an underground cultural hub in the capital by the time it was closed in the 90s. Considered by many to have significantly contributed to the emergence of the Hungarian artistic underground, it was also one of the most closely observed cultural venues, and György Aczél himself the most influential person in the cultural policy of the Kádár era regarded it as a perfectly safe valve of expression. (true, by the eighties it was already possible to criticize the regime). It was a place which was more tolerated by the political establishment than other similar cultural venues such as the Almásy Hall, the old Mozgó Világ, Tilos az Á, Fekete Lyuk supposedly more avant-garde and critical of the political and cultural establishment.

“Although it was a good little place, the city’s freest place, policeman did not really step in here, as the place was run by the police“. (Deák Laszló). This quotation succinctly expresses the contradiction at the heart of FMK’s existence, the complexity of this urban space, its freedoms and limits, in the otherwise far from monolithic and increasingly slackening grip of a state from almost total control to the liberty to virtually say and do anything. Only the politically absolutely critical exhibitions were banned at FMK by the eighties, for instance, under the pretext of a leaking pipe. In FMK’s place now at Andrásy 112 one finds the chic private gallery Kogart, which attempted to recreate through an exhibition in 2005 the be-gone greatness of FMK, without much success.

The other famous urban cultural venue during socialism, the Almásy Hall opened in 1983 and it was one of the biggest investments of the 6th 5-year plan. Initially (1976) it was planned to be a pioneer house before the decision in 1982 to turn it into a recreation centre (Almásy téri Szabadidő Központ). In many respects it was much more of an alternative place than FMK or PeCSa, true, it started operating in the eighties during a politically less repressive decade. The place housed the first album of Első Emelet, which in 1985 introduced the Dire Straits concert. The year 1987 was the most eventful when Club 2000, Bonanza Bonzai started and then in 1988 The Almásy Hall got involved in the year’s scandal when a Dutch group consisting of ten people performed stark naked at a time when nudity was seen by the establishment as a serious affront to socialism.

In 1994 the decision was made to establish the House of Contemporary Arts in the former electric transformer house in Lilliom Street. The idea came from Gyuri Szabó, then the chief organizer of PeCSa/ Petőfi Hall. The municipality initially decided to sell FMK real estate on Andrásy boulevard. With the money it could thus renovate the electric transformer house at Lilliom Street, which would then be offered to FMK. The plan was that the municipality would announce an open call for the position of managing director once this custom had been adopted in the quickly democratizing regulatory field. However, the Budapest Assembly left the decision to the next board of representatives, which eventually adjudicated the place to PeCSa (Petőfi Hall), the Youth Recreational Park of the City Council that opened in 1985, which is the other important predecessor of Trafó. Gyuri Szabó arrived there in the same year after graduating from the Karl Marx University of Economics and after years of being part of the team running the Közgáz Club (the economics university club). PeCSa first of all housed music concerts, as it still does, but in the second half of the eighties it organized more and more foreign dance productions, experimental video evenings, performances too that slowly became more widely known especially thanks to the foreign support it enjoyed. Till 1989 contemporary dance was a hardly tolerated genre and the funding of these productions was rather difficult to secure and when it happened was due to foreign financial support. The long-term goal was to eventually get state or municipal support. It was precisely the financial support of some foreign foundations that in the end helped procure the much wanted public support.

It must have been the summer of 1991 as Gyuri recalls that the Dutch state's Matra Fund programme was looking for Hungarian artistic initiatives to support for a three year long period. It was a unique opportunity for an independent artistic production, as it is still is, to get funding for such a long period. The other novelty consisted in the programme asking for a three-year old financial plan. It took two years to produce a plan that was deemed acceptable. The other condition imposed by the programme was the acquiring of a building. The Ministry and the Budapest Local Council were still pointing at one another when the Dutch threatened with the refusal of the financial support. At this point Gyuri came up with the idea of a virtual institution and this is how the Workshop Foundation was born, core part of Trafó up these days.

The Workshop Foundation (Műhely Alapítvány) was established with the aim to provide support for independent artists. It rented spaces for rehearsals, ran educational programmes, sent local artists abroad etc. It started with a 3-year long financial

support by the Dutch Matra Fund, by the Theater Instituut Nederland, followed by the Soros Foundation and Pro Helvetia. The manner of support favored the introduction of a project-based operation. In 1994 the foundation eventually set up its own office. It was at this time that more artists in the city were looking for permanent venues. This search for a stable place was probably fuelled too by the municipality's announcements about the intention to find a new building for FMK. As dance was rather of a stepchild among the performing arts, and since there were more and more dance productions that the FMK building could not really accommodate either, it became a matter of necessity to find an appropriate place. Both the artistic circles and the architectural profession agreed to find a new location, idea that got the support of the new mayor. Although opposing voices on the part of the FMK leadership seemed to curb the enthusiasm of the municipality, the decision to find a new venue was made.

In 1994 a study plan was put together for the municipality about what to do with the house but because of lack of money decisions were suspended for a while. The study plan argued against its demolition and insisted on the preservation of the building and recommended that the house be designated for heritage protection. (Schnell Judit, construction engineer, December 1994). The plan proposed an altogether new function, that of a cultural venue.

But the municipality mired in recession as it was and strapped for cash, it did not have the money for that building. It had money but set aside for something else. The state was entertaining high hopes of organizing the next world exhibition. In the grandiose urban development plan, in the capital's separate budget there were plans for purchasing something equally grandiose for housing the planned contemporary arts centre. After plans to organize the world expo were called off, there were few people left with hopes for a new dance venue. Many felt disappointed with and tired of the continuous indecision of both the ministry and the municipality. Many people gave up waiting, and started making a living somewhere else out of necessity. At the time of the cancelling of the expo the proposal for the Lilliom street building with a feasible architectural plan and a realistic estimation of expenses, with settled proprietary rights - which was not that common at that time - was virtually the only choice left. Moreover the money left over after the call off of the expo would have been enough for purchasing the building in ruins, if there had been a building. However, more than

a year passed before the decision was finally made to purchase the former transformer house.

The fate of the powerhouse in the 80s and 90s well illustrates the urban dynamics of the time, the slow but sure urban socio-spatial restructuring when the state-socialist system was already falling apart, when the state had to increasingly put up with and then openly encourage market mechanisms, eventually getting rid of a great part of its seriously decayed real estate. Spatial changes somehow preceded political changes and already in the 80s a facelift of Budapest's central area took place with the inner city neighbourhood being converted into a chic area with international hotels and high-end retail on the first pedestrian street (Sármány and Parsons, 1998 in Tosics 2007). The frequent change of the ownership of Trafó is highly symptomatic of a chaotic transitional period, of a 'vacuum period' till the early 90s and an 'adaptation period' between the mid 90s and late 90s (Tosics, 2006) when the property system was being re-articulated, the relationship between state, the city and the districts was still being restructured (see for more Tosics 2006, 2007). But it was precisely during this time when everything was still in a flux that the would-be director of Trafó succeeded in acquiring the building.

In 1998 when it opened Trafó was widely regarded as quite special, a unique, progressive cultural venue with the explicit mission to bring to Hungary the best of the contemporary international performing arts, especially dance, and secondly show the best and most innovative contemporary Hungarian dance productions.

Many people recall the opening of Trafó as a huge event in the life of the city, with not only the cultural liberal elite flocking there but also the political elite from the ranks of the socialists and the free democrats deeming it important to show up. Many of these politicians were previously and to various degrees involved in the long process of establishing an appropriate place for contemporary performing arts and when the building finally opened they could bask in the public recognition, in the favorable atmosphere the opening created.

For many artists - and not only for dancers - and non-artists alike, the place came to fill a vacuum in the life of the city and it succeeded in drawing there most of the liberal intelligentsia too at a time when, true, there were not any other similar places. The novelty of the place consisted first of all in the fact it brought mainly foreign

contemporary dance performances, and hence it acquired this aura and reputation of being international, of functioning as a gate to the rest of European contemporary performing arts mainly. The anticipation that surrounded the opening, the narrative about its links to an oppositional past and the preceding years with no suitable house for these production prepared the ground that quickly made Trafó into 'the place', a real urban magnet for a mainly liberal and elite urban audience. The people at Trafó proudly remember that the news of its opening was welcomed even by George Pataki, then New York governor, who was quoted to greet the opening of the venue as if the event had had been relevant in the wider process of the democratization of the society. There is a certificate from the governor's office on the walls of Trafó up to today.

Whose place is it? Whose culture is it?

In 1998 when Trafó opened it was hailed as an avantgarde cultural institution with a mission to accomplish and a past to leave up to, even if the latter was a partly fictitious construct and the links with it creating a series of 'mythic continuities' about which Rosalyin Deutsche averred that they 'deny historical transformations, disavow the persistence of oppressive social conditions underlying apparent change and liberation, and mask concrete social conflicts beneath a seeming coherence (Deutsche, 1996, 136). By 2011 Trafó has slowly lost that initial uniqueness and the edge, and the monopolistic position it had till around 2005, when eventually MuPa opened. Currently it has a relatively small but reliable audience (294 seats), mainly made up of people with a university or college degree, supposed to be mainly of liberal and left wing orientation, with the core audience in their thirties, but not only, with an interest in international dance, circus, and theatre performances and music concerts. It hosts Hungarian dance performances too, and it has an extremely popular annual literary evening just before New Year's Eve, when some of the most well-known Hungarian contemporary writers gather and offer a joint performance.

The radical novelty it promised at the beginning, and the feeling that it had a mission to accomplish is nowadays more and more difficult to sustain. First of all contemporary dance and theatre has lost that initial edge and belief attached to it; that

it can be of public relevance, that it can have wider implications beyond these walls. This has happened in a wider context where arts and literature in general have lost their former anti-establishment edge, the political dimension, the authority attached to them during socialism. With the democratizing process artistic freedom and choice has increased, culture has become more and more commodified, packaged for individual consumption with the concomitant fragmentation and dissolution of a more unified public into lifestyle groups and niche markets.

The diminished importance of Trafó in the city's cultural life is also due to the fact there are increasingly more places all over the city, which offer culture in the form of cultural entertainment for the young generation too, for people in their teens and twenties. Many of these places are more inclusive and accessible in the sense of, for example, making entry free of charge, and secondly by housing performances that can be more quickly consumed and which are thought of as more cool. While talking to the Trafó people, I was told that many of the ruin pubs pose a serious challenge in so far as cultural entertainment there comes for free, something that Trafó cannot afford.

The place's credentials as a cosmopolitan urban space no doubt had to do with the influence of foreign state foundations which appeared all over the former socialist-block upon these states' embrace of the market economy. For example the role that the Dutch Matra Fund had on kick starting Trafó (a programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Relations), Pro Helvetia the Swiss arts council, and the British Council whose stated mission besides promoting artistic creation, and fostering cultural exchange, has been to open up important regions as markets for Dutch, Swiss and respectively British cultural practitioners but obviously not only for them. The Soros Foundation had played a similar role, funding all sorts of projects, events, running programmes that were supposed to build up an open society. If one visits these organizations' websites it becomes apparent that the attention and financial support of the respective states has moved further, prioritizing other emerging markets in North Africa, the Caucasus for example, with China receiving increased attention. This shift in focus can be observed in the orientation of EU-funded projects as well, where western arts organizations are increasingly looking for partnerships beyond Central-Eastern Europe, to regions and their markets that are of more interest now for the old EU, like China, the Middle East, North Africa etc.

This has implications on what Trafó is currently presenting too and what it will be able to produce in the future. One of the interesting and already visible results is that for the past one year Trafó has brought to Hungary dance–theatre productions from Lebanon, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Brazil, China and has a series of Indian sacred music too.

The other felt consequence of the eclipsed importance of this region for the Western powers is that while so far most of the project partnerships have taken place in a way that encouraged Central-Eastern European cultural organization to prioritize mostly western partners, now there is an increasing necessity, curiosity towards building up regional partnerships. At the end of December 2010 Trafó organized a symposium inviting around 25 similar performing arts institutions from the region with the explicit aim to create future partnerships with Central-Eastern European organizations.

Being dependent on public money Trafó tries hard to respond also and reflect on current domestic affairs. This fact is well shown by one of its 2011 January programmes on the occasion of Hungary's European presidency. "Presi-Dances" was a series of three choreographies presenting a Spanish, a Belgian and a Hungarian production in the frame of the Spanish-Belgian-Hungarian EU presidency.

Since 1998 Trafó has developed and preserved a reputation of a progressive, cosmopolitan cultural institution, reputation that has been fed by the right wing media too but with a more pejorative and dismissive undertone.

In the aftermath of the general elections in 2010 with the setting in of the current right wing government the institution's position has suddenly become more precarious. So far the appointment of the managing director by the state has not been directly questioned. He has been in this position for 12 years now and Trafó has attained its reputation largely thanks to his work. According to the cultural practitioners I talked to, Trafó enjoys a wider appreciation abroad than in Hungary, mainly thanks to the continuity represented by Gyuri Szabó. The fact that it exists for 12 years is something of a rarity in an otherwise constantly changing scene where cultural venues pop up, their front person changes and they disappear. This time there are rumors that the Municipality will have its own person run as a candidate in a competition that is feared to openly favor the latter. Hence the stakes of maintaining its progressive orientation are higher

than ever. The hesitation, the clear dilemma that made it to the press whether to present or not the 1992-formed anarchist band, Atari Teenage Riot from Berlin in November 2010 was obviously a sign that the management was starting to get too cautious about its productions lest these could somehow provoke the right wing government. In the end the band was allowed to perform but the discussion whether to allow this was a telltale sign that the place's freedom was compromised.

For a liberal elite who convinced itself that this place, and many similar others, could acquire a significance beyond itself, that it could become a genuine urban public space, this was largely possible thanks to the importance and legitimacy that culture enjoyed in the former socialist block before 1989, and secondly thanks to the dominance of the same liberal economic and cultural elites for years to come. A liberal culture seemed to easily accommodate itself to some of the most radical neo-liberal economic beliefs.

The late 90s as a matter of fact was the expression of the zenith of the liberal establishment, that is of the 'free democrats' and 'socialists' who could still believe and pretend for another short while that they were the culturally, socially and economically progressives of a largely successful liberal and democratic world. Had they looked a bit beyond the liberal places and developments supported by them they might have noticed too beyond the then right-wing opposition with which they were constantly waging their daily wars, the immense swaths of those who were left out of this brave new world; the poor and the disenfranchised many of them belonging to the Roma.

'Building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor, and capital. But it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what – and who- should be visible and what should not, about concepts of order and disorder, and about uses of aesthetic power' (Zukin, 1995 195). Culture has always been a powerful means of controlling cities, as a source of images and memories reflecting 'who belongs' in specific places. One cannot overlook the changed valence of culture today when a more explicit part of urban politics and policies consciously deploys the symbolic importance of arts, and culture in the urban political economies of cities. Economies and fortunes of cities are based increasingly on symbolic production, with culture more and more the business of cities. Rosalyn

Deutsche in her book “Evictions” writes that instead of celebrating redevelopment as a ‘revitalizing’ and ‘beautifying’ process, it is more apposite to view it as the historical form of ‘late-capitalism urbanism’, which also facilitates new relations of domination and oppression, transforming cities for private profit and state-control. The mechanism for redevelopment destroys the very conditions of survival – housing and services – for residents no longer required for the city’s economy. ‘The emergence of a large population of homeless residents is redevelopment’s most visible symptom.’ (Deutsche, 1996, p. xiv) Neil Smith’s argument that gentrification is becoming a generalized urban strategy of development deployed in the global south and in the global north alike against a larger backdrop of uneven economic and geographical development as a structural rather than an incidental feature of cities also compellingly argues that growth is far from a uniform process, and it is driven by a hierarchical differentiation of social groups and territories, re-producing inequalities and marginalization at the same time that it produces privilege and domination.

In the 2010 general elections the extreme right wing party Jobbik managed to gather enough votes to secure 11 seats in the parliament. With an agenda that is unabashedly anti-Roma advancing extremely punitive and repressive measures the party’s support has been steadily growing within a larger constellation in which a more and more repressive state is taking shape.

The deeper concern about what the current political establishment will decide about Trafó was fed by the rumors some months ago about the closure or merger of some cultural institutions. That time it was heard that there would be a merger between-ironically - PeCSa/Petőfi Hall, the famous pop-rock concert spot with an open stage capacity of 6000 people, and Trafó, with voices that PeCSa would be eventually demolished.

Even if the special budgetary freeze decided by the government in the summer 2010 did not affect that time Trafó, this does not preclude the possibility of losing significant financial support in the future or even being transformed into something totally different. Similarly to repertory theatres Trafó has to house 140 productions during the 2010-2011 artistic year and try and secure full house productions. Since Trafó is not a repertory theatre to have the same play run for weeks on end, with the

same production maximum on two consecutive nights, the pressure to meet the expectations is really high. While at the time when Trafó managed to be upgraded to the status of a theatre, a more secure institutional level which guarantees annual support, was seen as a clear success, this status can in the current situation jeopardize its existence.

One of the modifications to the Theatre Law, which was introduced to the parliament as an individual motion and adopted on December 20 2010 without any prior consultation with the profession beforehand, leaves many institutions in total uncertainty. To complicate things even more, the city of Budapest and its public transport company BKV has amassed huge debts for the past two decades. In the recent and extensive drive to re-centralization, the state offered to bail out the city's transport company in exchange of three cultural institutions owned by the city. One of them is Trafó.

There is a climate of complete uncertainty as many of the (cultural) institutions are said to be swapped, redistributed, sold between the state and the capital in the future, another sign that state power and its purview are being redrawn with the power of local governments circumscribed and the autonomy of individual institutions under attack. The changed relationship and interaction of different levels of government under the pretext of their potential or failure to solve problems is more about the reproduction and contestation of domination through the transformation of the state. Societal and state actors seek to transform political institutions, alter spatio-institutional configurations through various spatial strategies and the power relations inscribed into them. This way new spatial configurations are formed that shape societal conflicts, produce new terrains for the negotiation of compromises, influence the way interests are formed and affect societal actors chances of successfully articulating and generalizing their interests through state politics.

It is not necessarily this single but by now protracted and quite overwhelming instance of a rush of modifications and changes that creates the current climate, but a long process of making the regulatory context extremely opaque, prone to quick modifications and designed to allow for many loopholes, to encourage favoritism, situation that forces many institutions and individuals to try and search for the most secure way of operating, of being financed. And this way is most of the time seen in gaining state support, often in becoming a public entity. From the FMK's bid to get rid of state control through subversive artistic productions through Trafó's

accomplishment in winning state/city support Trafó arrives yet again at a crossroads when the generous embrace of the state may kill it.

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