

HUNGARY

Difficulties in Rehabilitating an Urban Mansion in Budapest

Numerous mansions were built in downtown Budapest during the period of its urban development in the 19th century. The wealthy families living in the provinces felt it was important to have their own houses in the capital, the centre of social life. At the time when the middle class developed and industry grew, the focus of social life transferred to the cities where significant development had begun. In this era, when a provincial manor house was not sufficient to show one's rank, more and more dignified urban mansions were erected. These buildings were constructed with various floor plans and for various reasons, but they had one fundamental purpose: to serve as an object for display. 12 Reáltanoda Street is a beautiful surviving example of this building type. Its builder and owner was the wealthy Blaskovics family. They had significant provincial estates and commissioned the construction of their Budapest mansion for this site.

The building is a two-storey house with a sculptured façade and two wings that stretch back deep into the lot from the street front. Due to the size of the lot in this area of attached townhouses, there was only enough space for three rooms on the street front leading from one to another. These were covered with silk wallpapering down to the height of the engraved inlaid wood baseboards. The family expanded the building once, which was when the room with a skylight and gilt wallpaper reflecting the Pre-Raphaelite style was constructed, a room used by the family as a picture gallery. A smaller, independent apartment is found on the ground floor, and the service areas were in the vaulted basement.

The well-proportioned, spacious stairway that opens from the carriage entrance is a truly imposing part of the building. It shows that the dignified receptions and social life demanded proper spaces necessary for pageantry. The owner was a major devotee of hunting and horse breeding. The single-storey wing with a half-timbered hayloft that stretched back into the courtyard served as a horse stable and carriage house. The owner of the building was also the owner of the famous racehorse *Kincsem* (My Treasure), which was considered unbeatable. During the racing season in Pest, the horse was stabled in this house. Besides horses, hunting was the Blaskovicses' other great hobby, and there was also an appropriate place for the dogs in the building. The favourite dogs were kept in an interior courtyard.

After 1945 the building was taken away from its original owners and divided into apartments. For this purpose the building, which had formerly functioned as a unified plan, was broken up – just as happened with other similar buildings. When a contractor purchased the building from its residents in the middle of the 1990s, it was hoped that a fortunate change had occurred for the revitalisation of the building. Naturally, the contractor's original desire was not to preserve the building's historic character, but rather he was driven by the opportunity to acquire a lot that was quite valuable. Surrounded as it was by five-to-six-storey buildings in the centre of Budapest, a building of considerable size could have been placed on this site as well, had it been possible. However, the authorities specified that this building be retained. In view of the taller buildings in the area, the owners later considered adding several storeys, but they did not receive consent for this plan, either, since this would have fundamentally altered the character and internal system



12 Reáltanoda Street, street facade



12 Reáltanoda Street, the stairway

12 Reáltanoda Street, the hayloft of the stables



of circulation for the entire building. It was fortunate that the building had been registered as a historic property, deserving protection as one of the well-preserved 19th century urban mansions, as without this it would have been demolished. This naturally meant that it was the owner's duty to preserve its original volume and system of interior spaces, and to restore the interior details in a professional manner. However, the simple restoration of the building did not prove to be a profitable endeavour. At the same time, due to the narrow dimensions of the lot, the creation of parking for automobiles could not be accomplished on site while ensuring the integrity of its original system of spaces. Under these conditions, the owner determined that the rehabilitation of the building was uneconomical. Since a real estate appraiser cannot calculate the value of historic spaces and character, it was not possible to show the profit on a utilitarian square footage basis that could be achieved by the owner with a building rehabilitation.

The building went through several changes in ownership. At first many tried to overstep the boundaries of historic preservation regulations, and then when it became apparent that this was an unworkable proposition, they sold off the property. It is difficult to find the kind of contractor where the concept for the preservation of the building's historic character has a place in their category of returns on investment. In Hungary today, properties that are protected as historic but have not yet been rehabilitated have a significantly lower real estate value than their neighbours that are of a similar size, but are not protected. However, after rehabilitation, when the building's historic character has become evident and is obvious and understandable to all – in particular if it is in perfect harmony with its new function – the building may have a value that is as much as 50% higher than similar properties.

On many occasions there was hope for a rehabilitation of the building. New, better-funded owners that represent the aforementioned economic view usually withdrew their offers. The passage of time has only contributed to the steady deterioration of the vacant building. In the years that have passed, valuable fireplaces have disappeared and their replacement further increases the expense of rehabilitation. The wood and masonry structures of the building that are exposed to the weather are rapidly falling into ruin. The only hope for the survival of similar buildings is if a contractor can be found who is expressly looking for a "seemingly uneconomical" site on which to implement a spectacular project. In other words, just as it was with its original function, today this building could serve as a distinguished statement, but now suited for the demands of our time. It could be a dignified Budapest reception house for a major domestic or international company or institute. In this case, following rehabilitation this building that is currently essentially in ruins could, become an emblematic structure. In other words, this kind of restored historic property would provide distinction for the product represented by its company or owner. The building could also thrive as an exclusive club, adding status to the programs and gatherings of a wealthy group.

There are historic properties that have difficulty finding a program for their re-use, and the mansion at 12 Reáltanoda Street in Budapest is one of these cases. The question is whether or not the accelerating decay during this long period of disuse will make the expert rehabilitation of this mansion impossible.

Gergely Nagy
President of ICOMOS Hungary

Another High Rise Threatens Budapest's World Heritage Site

The centre of Budapest, along with Buda Castle and the Danube Panorama, has been a World Heritage site since 1987. When in 2002 the site was expanded by the inclusion of Andrassy Avenue, which was constructed in the second half of the 19th century, there was also a review of the entire World Heritage site. Today, Budapest preserves 2000 years of urban history, traces of which can be found throughout the city until today.

The period of industrialisation and the rise of the middle class brought the greatest development; therefore, the fabric of the present city characteristically reflects the world of the second half of the 19th century. The defining architectural style is Historicism, of which nowhere else such a unified and extraordinary architectural collection can be found. But the construction of high-rises, a constant threat in other cities as well, now poses a serious danger to this city. We were already able to read in *Heritage at Risk 2006/2007* about a previous threat, when in another part of town that also belongs to the World Heritage site there was a plan to disfigure the area with a then (but now no longer) fashionable building of concrete slab construction. Fortunately, that project was given up. Now a new danger threatens another area of the World Heritage site that is a defining part of the cityscape. There are plans to demolish that area for a modern glass palace.

Bécsi Street is an important axis of Budapest's downtown and one of the most significant roads in the historic urban structure. It is part of the buffer zone for the World Heritage site. This is where the five buildings are that are planned to be replaced by a new building completely out of scale with its surroundings, about twice as tall as the characteristic established cityscape. The idea is that this building that is to contain a hotel with many rooms will be like a glass blimp floating above the city. The full panorama would open in front of the rooms, although it is not this panorama, but the one from Gellért Hill on the opposite side of the Danube that is significant, because from there the entire World Heritage site can be seen. It is this vista that would be disrupted by this invasive intrusion alien to the historic character of the city and rivaling the church towers in its height.

The builders believe that because they contracted the office of the world-famous architect Norman Foster for the design that the work will be unique. This may be so, but not somewhere where there already are buildings of architectural value and where the urban structure and the historic cityscape that have evolved provide sufficient value to the area.

The planned development was designed without preparing an impact study for the area's character, urban structure, historic environment and World Heritage status. The builders chose the easiest solution when they planned for the demolition of all the buildings standing there. In their place they designed a huge monolithic building that will dominate the surroundings and that is completely foreign in scale, materials and rhythm. Amongst the buildings standing there now there are some that have considerable value or whose structures are important elements of historic urban development. Next to the British Embassy is the Fischer Department Store building, constructed in 1909 as one of Budapest's first large department stores. The builders consider it necessary to demolish the Modern building from 1964 that was one of the first to represent the Modern school of thought following the architecture of Social Realism and that was a defining building of its age. Its designer was Zoltán



Bécsi Street, the site to be demolished with Zoltán Gulyás's building



Bécsi Street, the former Fischer department store

Bécsi Street, 19th-century corner building to be demolished

The planned construction at the site of the corner building



Gulyás, whose workshop was where major Hungarian architects of the 1960s, 70s and 80s learned their trade. In Hungary, the Chamber of Hungarian Architects, DOCOMOMO, the Association of Hungarian Architects, the Hungarian Society for Urban Planning, the Architects of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, and the Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS have together stepped forward to defend the city against this development. That is to say, they have determined in their statements that the planned project damages, or even destroys the urban structure and all of its architectural, historical and cultural values. It does not preserve the area's outstanding character in an appropriate way and does not integrate itself properly into the valuable existing surroundings.

The planned building (its architectural program, use of forms and materials, etc.) is not compatible with the rhythm, scale, carrying capacity or traditions of the existing urban fabric. The foreign cityscape elements that it employs will fundamentally change the identity of downtown Pest. By erecting a new mass above the city the World Heritage panorama will be radically altered and disfigured.

The investors purchased the buildings on the block and are now allowing them to deteriorate. They requested a permit in principle for the demolition of three of these buildings, which the building authority issued without the approval of the National Office of Cultural Heritage. The professional civic organisations have submitted an appeal against this decision.

Gergely Nagy
President of ICOMOS Hungary



Views of the so-called blimp