

Wanderings in the streets of Budapest

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Sandor P Vaci, 2008

Budapest is like a dignified elderly lady who has seen better days. She was born when the ghost of Franz Joseph still strolled the Wienerwald and has somehow survived everything that history had thrown at Hungary in the twentieth century. First, losing the First World War then reduced to a small mit-Europa country feeling forever wronged. The interwar economic and social stagnation, Second World War fascism and defeat had been followed by forty years of communism. Eventually after Gorbachev's capitulation the hoped for change came, (against expectations a smooth handover) and the sour realisation that capitalism knows no sentiment.

She has taken it all and has a face rich with the geography of knowing. Through the changing fortunes, invasions and deprivations she has hung onto her mink coat. This was a present from her rich doting father for her twenty-first birthday well before she married her equally wealthy husband. The coat carries its own advance-warning floating as it does on a cloud of naphtha. It has the odd bold patch and the hardly disguised repair from a stray bullet during the Siege. The hat, tilted to one side, had feathers long ago though the silk band is still there. The blouse is recent, a present from a visiting American friend. The rouge, less bright than it used to be, overlaps the sunken lips that kissed so passionately once. But no matter she carries it off with the aplomb of those whose manners were instilled in the private schools of Vienna. She has style.

Now she has little income but there remain admirers who appreciate class. And what class as she enters the once grand coffee house with three gentlemen in tow who have also seen better days but are no match for her bearing. This is an entrance on a grand theatrical scale. Hats are raised, creaky backs bowed and hands are kissed. Whilst slowly sipping the double espresso during hours of chat she expertly views who walks by and who notices the coterie. When she gets up and ready for the late afternoon nap the onlooker receives a shock. She wears new trainers with thick foam soles reminiscent of four-wheel-drives, the harshly modern does not fit.

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I became reengaged with Hungary and particularly Budapest when the country with nine others was preparing to join the European Union in 2004. Here was something that émigrés had been hoping for all along: the formal entry into western family where these countries always felt they naturally belonged. The small mid-European states had a long history of living under eastern or western occupation whilst holding on to their national identities. In Hungary the overwhelming pull of western genius pitted against native culture and language.

This cultural duality had been reflected even in the doorways of Budapest, but, I am jumping ahead of myself.

My interest has been in making connections between the country where I was born and my home since 1956, England. 2003 and 2004 were devoted to two entirely different projects to this end. I undertook, a self-declared dilettante, the publication of a work of history written by the young Hungarian historian András D Bán on British-Hungarian Diplomacy 1938-1941. Bán died tragically young in 2001. After many rejections the book was eventually published in an English translation and had a grand launch at the Hungarian Embassy in March 2004. As a long time devotee of Churchill it was particularly gratifying that his daughter Mary attended and I could shake a Churchill hand. This whole venture had been a once in a lifetime experience in many different ways that I still cherish.

I was more on home ground with the other project as it concerned architecture. The Hungarian Government through the Hungarian Cultural Centre organised a cultural festival called Magyar Magic (perhaps an unintended pun in Latin on the double millennium). This was a broad ranging, geographically spread and well-funded series of cultural events held with the aim of raising Hungary's profile to coincide with the accession. Britain has always looked into the world and except at times of revolutions or famous football games Hungary has never been more than a speck on the European horizon. All the same a great effort had been made. The larger than life director of HCC K. B. headed up the festival. She had the knack for promotion, energy, chutzpah and the presence to pull it off. This was a Hungarian affair so she had to ride through the manoeuvrings and back stabbing whilst keeping in good terms with the politicians back in Budapest. Anyway she had my full support and I had her trust.

I volunteered to curate the architectural exhibition with a clear message: show examples of what contemporary Hungarian architecture could offer to a British audience. My time was a kind of back payment for the education invested in me up to matriculation without any return (that our factory was nationalised in 1950 without ever any recompense I decided to overlook). This touched a nerve, a sympathetic nerve, in K.B. who later put me forward for the *Pro Cultura Hungarica* award in appreciation.

I set out my stall for choosing the projects: all the buildings had to have been built during the previous five years and all by architects trained in Hungary; public and residential buildings would be selected (eventually there was one exception). I was trained in Britain and was a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects so this was a view of Hungarian architecture seen from these islands. I had the advantage of not owing anything to anybody thus ensuring my complete independence. To K.B.'s great credit she backed me all the way. Early I settled on the title: *Hungarian architecture today: modernist and organic*. This was merely a reflection in the field of architecture of cultural duality. The modernist works would have a familiarity for British architects but *organic* was a Hungarian original, well original in its Hungarian version. And at any rate no such exhibition could take place without the *organic* buildings designed by Imre Makovecz the architect who came to world attention with his

pavilion design at the Seville World Fair. Makovecz and his followers produced buildings that were truly outside the mainstream using natural materials in their natural form; the wood was retained in its real tree shape, and using themes from traditional Hungarian architecture. Makovecz and his then disciple, Dezső Eklér, also produced marvellous architectural drawings. It also turned out, and this was a surprise needing adjustment, that Makovecz moved further into symbolism. In his latest buildings the trees were concrete trees thus only symbols of trees, towers were purposely cracked, fragments of classical orders led up stairs and domes were tilted. However, once I started my curating work in Hungary I quickly had to manoeuvre around the deep-seated political divisions and downright parochialism. I could understand the language but no longer the thinking.

I travelled around the country with my wife visiting every chosen building and interviewed their architects. In Tokaj an unforgettable night was spent in the weekend house designed by Ferenc Bán staring up from the pool at the shimmering blue underbelly of amorphous pods designed for contemplation whilst listening to the night chorus of the cicadas.

The visit to Makovecz's office almost derailed the whole idea of the exhibition. When he heard who the collaborator was at the Hungarian end he refused to take part but we could not go ahead without him. Makovecz is a genius but his views on race and politics are on the far right. My two visits to his office were stimulating and frustrating. In the end he relented so long as the organic buildings were clearly separated from the modernists. This I gladly agreed to and the brilliant young exhibition designers accomplished. It came as a relief when the collaborator resigned finding the work too 'involving'. There were further visits organising the construction, transportation and sorting out the usual myriad details. I stayed in a friend's flat in the middle of József város (Joseph Town named after Joseph II). Once my meetings with the architects were finished for the day, I had supper somewhere and went for walks. And that is when my next project started to take shape: Budapest-Porta.

First though we had the opening of the exhibition in February 2004 at the Royal Institute of British Architects. The display was original and splendid. The projects were shown on a cubist snake, each on its own panel opening like pages of a book. Keeping to my promise the *organics* were together at the far end. There was nothing on the walls. The visitor walked along the length of the room looking down on the photographs and text fully catching the illumination from the overhead lights (unlike the usual vertical panels). In the centre we had a full size replica of a column designed by Dezső Eklér for the Tokaj Winery. The erection of this huge piece was an exercise in itself. A late addition and something that almost stole the show was a light transmitting concrete wall invented by a young Hungarian architect. The President of the RIBA, George Ferguson, opened the exhibition wearing his trademark red trousers. I also gave a rather lengthy speech (learned from this for later efforts). There were about a hundred people milling around sipping wine. The exhibition was written up by Jonathan Glancy (a long time devotee of Makovecz) in a double spread Guardian feature. It also had brief notes in architectural magazines and people in the field mentioned that for a small exhibition the coverage was very good. But the most satisfying aspect was that daily

forty-fifty people turned up in their lunch hours to view it (the friendly receptionists told me this). And there were complaints that it only lasted three weeks. The exhibition travelled to Glasgow afterwards for a totally different public.

So the beginning of 2004 saw the culmination of two major commitments with the book launch and the exhibition. And like after examinations I felt a vacuum, it was time to look for something else. During those walks in József város, I took photographs with my digital camera of just four doorways in Horánszky utca a short, narrow airless street typical of nineteenth century urban landscape. But even in this street there were gems. I printed them out on a sheet and everyone who saw them in London was taken aback by the design and intricate detail. This encouraged me to look for more in an organised way. My first target was one hundred doorways but at that stage collecting them for no particular purpose.

This is how I organised myself on the technical level: I bought a really good digital camera (that is really good in 2004). This was a Canon PowerShot G5, which had some features that were particularly useful for such photography. The viewfinder had a swivelling LCD panel so I could hold the camera well above my head and point at the doorways over the anarchically parked cars on pavements. It also had a remote infrared trigger especially useful for night photography using a tripod. I took a small notepad with me recording in sequence the addresses and picture numbers. Once I downloaded from the camera I sorted each into three folders: the original camera shot, the edited Photoshop version and the Photoshop version compressed for use in PowerPoint. This may all sound like tedious detail but photographing the eventual 270 doorways (later reduced to 234) required over 700 pictures and such volume had to have rigorous discipline. The pictures were edited to show the doorways in full elevation with the sides parallel. Details were brought out and in a few cases graffiti or posters were removed where they interfered with clarity.

The criteria and name of my selection was also decided right at the start. The doorways were defined as the doors, the surrounding architectural treatment, the internal hallway and even stair balustrades. In some cases the internal details were where the real interest lay. So doorways would have been an inadequate description and I hit on the idea of Budapest-Porta, which sounds multi-lingual and has a good ring. Also the office of the doorman in Budapest used to be called the porta.

I selected the Portas solely relying on my *critical eye*. Purposely, I tried not to find out the name of the architect so as not to be influenced by reputation (the principle of my work for the exhibition apart from Makovecz). In some cases the name of the architect popped up afterwards but that was just a delightful surprise. My critical eye, as of all architects', had been honed during the many study trips in Greece, European countries, Scandinavia and the US. And of course with the *critical eye* every building and every detail is constantly judged based on over four decades of intense involvement in architecture. What is good in such a subjective style as eclectic architecture, though I also selected some nineteen-thirties doorways, is a matter of judgement in the context of a personal collection. Anyone seeing the

collection shall pass judgement on my judgement. All those who put themselves up for scrutiny have to accept the critical view. Let the eyes have their day.

On the completion of the first hundred I gave an illustrated talk, in February 2005, at the London Hungarian Cultural Centre. We had quite a good turn out of about forty. The architectural organisation of residential buildings in nineteenth century blocks in Budapest required explanation. Pest, well before its amalgamation into Budapest in 1873, was laid out on a regular street pattern with garden plots enclosed on two sides and the back by other garden plots. The plots gradually became sites for single and occasionally two storey buildings, which faced onto the street and the rest of the site behind given over to yards and small gardens. There was access to the yard, often for small businesses, either via a gateway through the building or on the side. Some such buildings can still be seen in the older parts of Budapest. Once the town's explosive growth got under way, during the second half of the nineteenth century, apartment blocks of four storeys height gradually replaced the low-rise buildings. These followed the typical central European model. In order to build as much as possible on a site with limited frontage the central courtyard was surrounded on all four sides by gangways at each level giving access to the flats. This meant that the flats facing the street had windows on two sides but those facing into the courtyard only one straight off the gangway. Ventilation of internal kitchens and bathrooms was via the '*lichthof*' or airshaft running the height of the building. Cellars were built under all buildings accessible from the street. The cellars in effect raised the ground floor level by half a landing. The advantage was added security and privacy to the ground floor occupants facing the street. The courtyard in the early buildings was level with the street so horse-drawn carriages could make deliveries. The device of raising ground floor, over-grandly called *piano nobile*, meant that the entrance was one and half stories high that is from the street level to the underside of the first floor. This arrangement together with substantial story heights of often four meters produced impressive entrances of one and half height. The architects of this period took full advantage and produced the extravagances of Budapest-Porta. There was also a commercial reason. Virtually all flats were rented and what better way for a landlord to attract tenants than a grand entry often surrounded by sculptures outside and in. The unrestrained amalgam of architectural styles within single buildings is what produced the rich heritage of Budapest eclectic. The centre of historic Budapest has survived despite the destructive siege in 1944-45, the fierce fighting during the '56 Revolution and years of neglect. According to Dezső Ekler there are some ten thousand buildings in historical Budapest.

The doorways were the only entries into the buildings, all the residents entered and left through this one point. Although social divisions in Hungary were as definite as elsewhere everyone would pass and greet each other at this common entry point. There was close proximity and not much was missed passing on the open gangways.

The level courtyard arrangements are indicated to this day by half round stone bollards on each side of doorways and now are used as handy parking spaces. Later buildings had raised courtyards only accessible on foot and of not much use today. The social function of

gangways has remained as safe places for small children to play, gossip and for the elderly to stroll around.

I looked for Portas street by street.

At last I was ready for my first walk in April 2004 in Andrásy út the principal boulevard running from the centre of town to Heroes' Square. This is where the best examples are found of the grand theatrical, ceremonial and symbolic entrances that characterise Budapest-Porta.

Eventually I made ten trips to Budapest and taking into account that each time I walked around several times I must have walked thirty to forty kilometres. The residents of the buildings where I asked to be let in for a look around the entrances were universally friendly and trusting. A few were intrigued by the interest in something they walked past daily but never appreciated. The attacks of graffiti were upsetting. And there was the excitement of discovering something wonderful just around the corner. This is what stimulated me and I have not been disappointed. To cap it all once I finished with Pest (two volumes of about a hundred each) there came Buda that almost exceeded all that was found before. Still I had to finish it even knowing that I probably missed some of the best. There was ruthless thinning out of doors, which seemed right at the time but not in retrospect.

Now it was time for the exhibition and the challenge of realising it.

In 2005 I approached the then director of the prestigious Ernst Gallery in Budapest. K. K. ruled over her kingdom like a tzarina firing orders for coffee, endless packets of cigarettes. The curators, exhibition installers and staff had to attend at a moments notice. I met K. K. at one of the Magyar Magic exhibitions and she immediately accepted the concept of Budapest-Porta without even looking at the material. I wondered whether this was my supposed but limited reputation or that they needed the next show to fill the gallery. A budget was prepared, I offered my share and subject to sponsorship the date was set for July 2007. During repeated trips to Budapest I collected more doorways and attended meetings with K. K. and her staff usually followed by a trip to the nearby bar to down kosher plum palinka. Also on one of those visits in Teréz város I came across a contractor who salvaged stamped bricks, doors, metal balustrades and anything else that could be sold off in Germany to ambitious house decorators. He had a pair of entrance doors from a recently demolished nineteenth century house. The bottom halves had deteriorated but the upper parts still had the wood mouldings and metal grills. I fell for the idea of displaying real doors at the exhibition and paid the contractor in euros. We transported the heavy doors down to Zala and then realised that a great deal of money would have to be spent restoring them. Eventually I abandoned the whole idea with the usual Hungarian hug of *'more was lost a Mohács'*.

The target for the exhibition was August 2007. At the end of 2006 the state supported gallery scene was rationalised and the Ernst was amalgamated into the Fine Arts Gallery. The director decided that Budapest-Porta did not fit into the programme of contemporary art assigned to the Ernst. This was understandable except that nobody, almost nobody, had the gull to tell me. In fact to this day I have not had any official notification! The almost nobody

turned out to be S. A. who let me know first by e-mail then phone what had really happened. I was on my guard from then on. Who could be trusted? The upside was that S. A. became an ally and wise counsel to eventual success.

The next try for Budapest-Porta was an exciting new venue in Király utca, the VAM gallery. This was a mid-nineteenth century building once owned by the wine supplier to the royal court. The enterprise, privately funded, of turning this building around was on a heroic scale. The wine cellars were large enough to play tennis in, the courtyard had been roofed over with a glass structure spanning the full width. The exhibition spaces were endless. We had some discussions and then it dawned on me talking to a serious young PR lady that VAM was an out an out commercial enterprise not suited to a genteel exhibition of doorways. We parted company to their disappointment.

A further visit followed to a bar to discuss other possibilities. S. A. mentioned the *Gödör Klub* in Erzsébet square. I dashed over and immediately it felt just right and besides this was one of the schemes I exhibited in London. The abandoned National Theatre sub-structure had an inspired make-over creating a cultural centre for the young. The wide stepped approach led down to the gallery topped with a glass bottom pool so light rippled through the water. The site was very central and at night hundreds of young people visited to meet friends, listen to free music or see exhibitions.

Eventually I made contact with F. A., the director of Gödör Klub, who welcomed Budapest-Porta. Another year of planning and uncertainty followed but eventually the exhibition opened on 1st July 2008 for a four week run. At night those who came to Gödör spilled into the gallery and without doubt at this venue the collection of Budapest-Porta had been seen by many more than would have at either of the other two. At a guess almost three thousand people saw it over the twenty-eight days. Not bad for a hardly publicised exhibition.

On the day the exhibition opened we launched in London a web site of the whole collection.

Whether the exhibition will have made those who visited more caring about the often sorry and even abused state of Budapest eclectic is a brave guess. It has been a hugely satisfying and frustrating enterprise requiring real dedication and will to succeed (and not a little financial support). Even after going over each Porta dozens of times I am still captivated. The exuberant, uninhibited (sometimes teetering on the vulgar), imaginative, hugely skilful and never ever dull doorways of Budapest are a unique, urban architectural heritage from a previous age when pomp and style were appreciated. Hope this collection helps in a small way in the appreciation of what the past has left.

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London and Budapest