



**THE CHEMOLIMPEX BUILDING  
IN 1964**

BUDOVA CHEMOLIMPEX-U  
V ROKU 1964

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archive

# The Beauty of the New Modern Life and Technology The Survival of Socialist Architecture in the Budapest City Centre

Krása nového moderného života a technológie  
Prežívanie socialistickej architektúry  
v centre Budapešti

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Detailný územný plán vnútorného mesta Budapešti bol výsledkom dôkladnej analýzy dokončenej v roku 1966. Plán rozdelil piaty obvod do troch častí: severná časť bola určená administratívne, južná časť kultúre a vzdelávaniu, kým centrálna časť mala slúžiť turizmu a obchodu. Pozdvihnutie dlhodobého zanedbaného centra mesta bolo pre režim kľúčovou úlohou, centrum malo reprezentovať výsledky budovania socializmu a zároveň lákať turistov platiacich valutami. V dôsledku toho do osemdesiatych rokov 20. storočia nezostal v strede mesta žiadny prázdny pozemok, socialistické centrum – aj keď len čiastočne vybudované počas socializmu – bolo dokončené. Vybraní architektonickí sprievodcovia Budapešťou obsahujú 23 významných objektov z 20. storočia v centre mesta vymedzeného ulicami Alkotmány a Lajoša Košúta. Dvanásť objektov zo zoznamu, teda viac než 50 %, bolo postavených po roku 1945.

V súčasnosti, po tridsiatich rokoch post-socializmu, už viacero diel spomenutých v sprievodcovi z roku 1980 neexistuje alebo boli nahradené novými stavbami. Je možné, že nevyhnutné straty boli spôsobené pokrokom, alebo budovy sú odsúdené na zabudnutie v dôsledku prehodnotenia obdobia? Stratili tieto objekty svoje fyzické či nehmotné hodnoty?

V posledných dekádach bola ochrana povojnovej architektúry – bez ohľadu na jej lokalitu a politické pozadie – problémom pre pamiatkarov. Aj keď je zložité definovať exaktné kritériá, mali by byť uvedené aspoň dôvody na výber diel hodných ochrany. V súčasnosti navrhol expert na architektonické dedičstvo dve hlavné kategórie: diela výnimočnej výtvarnej kvality charakterizované unikátnym a kreatívnym prístupom k architektúre, alebo diela, ktoré sú referenčným objektom vďaka použitiu nových špeciálnych konštrukcií alebo reprezentujú „série“ opakovaných objektov. Architektonická kvalita nemá objektívne meradlo, takže pred výberom moderných objektov pre pamiatkovú ochranu je nutné dodať odôvodnenia ako príbeh, pamäť, symbolický význam. Avšak budovy nie sú čisto umeleckými dielami, ich funkcia a vlastníctvo môžu prepísať všetky vopred dohodnuté stanoviská.

Na základe zúženého zoznamu troch sprievodcov po architektúre Budapešti (1980, 1997, 2014) sme vybrali šesť stavieb a analyzovali sme ich príbeh prežitia, premeny a búrania. Zistili sme, že okrem prípadu autobusovej stanice, ktorá bola zaradená do pamiatkového zoznamu už v sedemdesiatych rokoch 20.

storočia, sú špecifická funkcia a vlastníctvo hlavným činiteľom súčasného stavu analyzovaných budov. V súvislosti s funkciou, administratívne budovy boli v najohrozenejšej pozícii, preto sme detailnejšie skúmali dejiny troch prvých administratívnych budov postavených v centre po roku 1960. Odhalili sme rozhodujúce kroky v procese výstavby a recepcií týchto objektov verejnosťou aj špecialistami po dostavbe a v priebehu ďalších rokov existencie.

Administratívna budova Chemolimpex-OTP bola dokončená v roku 1963, štyri roky po tom, ako bol prvýkrát spomenutý plán výstavby. Počas týchto štyroch rokov bola verejnosť pravidelne informovaná o prácach, v periodikách boli publikované modely a fotografie výstavby. Stavba bola výnimočná nielen po stavebnej stránke, ale aj vzhľadom na jej budúcich užívateľov – bol to jeden z najväčších podnikov zahraničného obchodu a štátna banka. Stavbu rovnako pozitívne prijali špeciasti, aj verejnosť. Jediné súdobé architektonické periodikum podávalo o novostavbe podrobné správy a publikovalo aj dve recenzie od renomovaných autorov. Jedna z recenzií oceňovala usporiadanie hmôt, menovite tvar vrchných podlaží vo forme písmena U, a nárožnú pasáž v prízemí. Druhá z recenzií zdôrazňovala prepracovanosť fasády, použitie šedej žuly na parapetoch, pásové okná a precízne detaily. Nosná konštrukcia bola špeciálne vyvinutá pre potreby stavby, rovnako ako architektonické detaily, ktoré boli navrhnuté špeciálne pre túto príležitosť. Podľa recenzentov odhalila „krásu a jedinečnosť nového moderného spôsobu života a technológie“.

Budova Hungarotex-u – taktiež podnik zahraničného obchodu – bola sprístupnená v roku 1966, sedem rokov od prvej správy o výstavbe. Výšková administratívna budova bola prvou svojho druhu postavenou počas socializmu v centre mesta. Táto „pionierska úloha“ bola pre architektov príslubom, ale zároveň aj zložitou výzvou. Výšku stavby obdivovali aj kritizovali. Aj napriek tomu, že architekti objekt rozdelili do dvoch blokov, pričom jeden mal nižšie priečelie, celková hmota objektu dominovala ulici. Podobná kritika sa objavila aj v niekoľkých urbanistických článkoch zameraných na Budapešť, publikovaných v periodikách o kultúre až do sedemdesiatych rokov 20. storočia. Okrem toho, že išlo o výškovú budovu, mal Hungarotex aj ďalšie prvky, ktoré reprezentovali technický vývoj. Bola to predovšetkým hliníková zavesená fasáda s pásovými oknami. Technicistné vyznenie

žiarivej fasády však malo technické problémy. Použité materiály, ako aj remeselná práca nemali dostatočnú kvalitu. Už čoskoro sa objavili problémy s kúrením a chladením objektu, o ktorých ihneď detailne informovali aj noviny.

Proces výstavby v socializme trval dlho, avšak v prípade paláca kultúry na Vörösmartyho námestí si stavba vyžiadala ešte dlhší čas. Pozemok susedil zo zadnej strany s Redutou, romantickou pamiatkou z roku 1864. V roku 1956 bola vyhlásená architektonická súťaž, ktorá počítala s novostavbou koncertnej sály spojenej s Redutou. Napriek tomu, že súťaž bola úspešná, v roku 1960 namiesto víťazného návrhu prezentovali nový plán so zbúraním pôvodnej budovy pri zachovaní rovnakej funkcie novej stavby. V roku 1962 médiá informovali o novom zámere postaviť osempodlažnú administratívnu budovu pre kultúrne inštitúcie s výstavnou sálou na prízemí. Výstavba sa nakoniec začala až v roku 1968 a ďalšie informácie sa objavili v médiách až v roku 1971. Menovali tu viaceré technické nedostatky, ktoré vznikli počas užívania budovy. O objekte nebola napísaná nezávislá recenzia po jeho dokončení, sami architekti však svoje dielo prezentovali vo viacerých publikáciách. Opakovane spomenuli použitý dovezený materiál, špeciálne dymové okná, ktoré mali nahradiť drahšiu klimatizáciu. Napriek tomu bola budova považovaná za ikonickú stavbu socialistických kultúrnych budov. Zmienili sa o nej vo viacerých relevantných prácach hodnotiacich súdobý architektonický vývoj ako o „štípke farby“ v centre, avšak pochvala diela bola vyslovovaná s opatrnou rezervovanosťou.

V zhrnutí príbehov troch administratívnych budov môžeme uviesť, že všetky budovy mali svoje technické problémy, ale

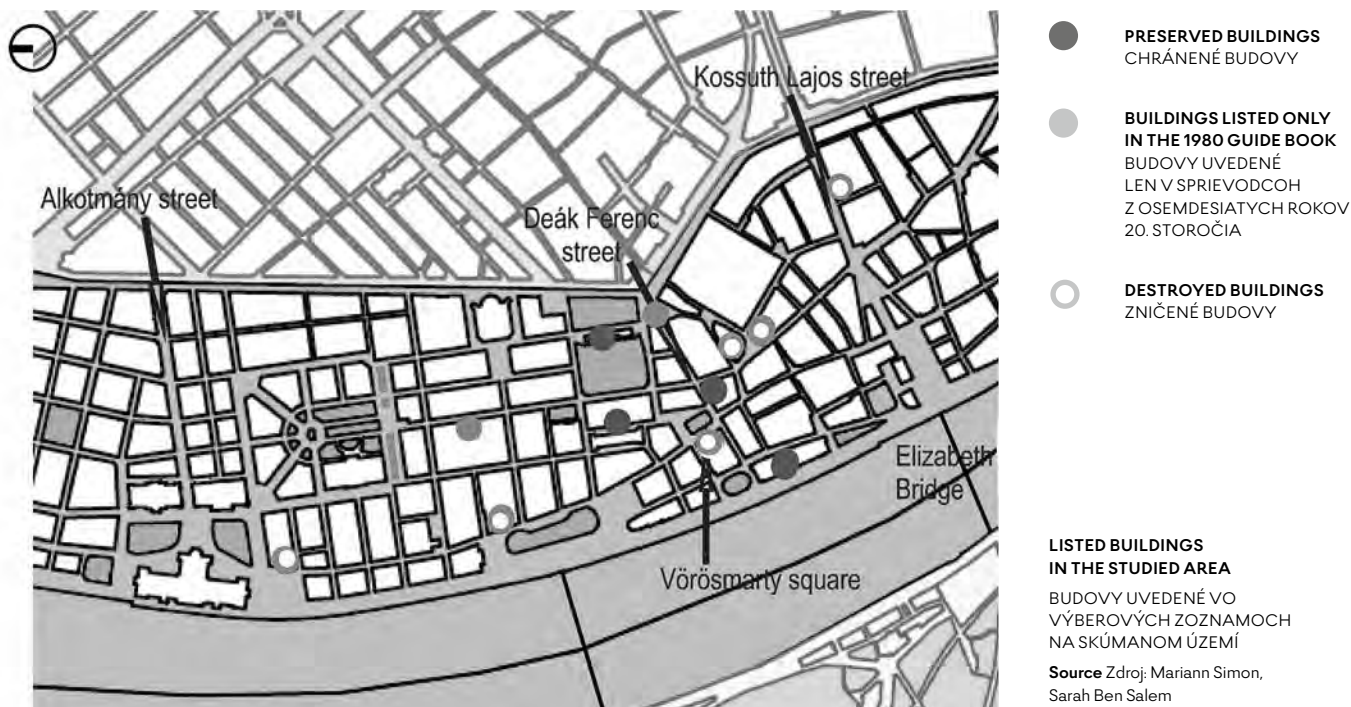
verejnosť o nich bola informovaná rozlične. Problémy s vykurovaním a chladením boli diskutované len pri druhých dvoch analyzovaných objektoch, nie pri Chemolimpex-OTP. Dlhú sa špekulovalo o účele a výstavbe v dennej tlači, predovšetkým v prípade kultúrneho centra), a treba dodať, že ani súčasné architektonické a kultúrne médiá neakceptovali tieto budovy bez výhrad. Búranie objektov môže byť vysvetlené zmenou majiteľa a tým, že nevyhovovali súčasným funkčným požiadavkám. Avšak z iného aspektu možno povedať, že nereprezentovali špeciálnu umeleckú kvalitu, povedzme že nevyhovovali ani nehmotné hodnoty týchto budov.

Budova Chemolimpex-OTP bola na rozdiel od ostatných dvoch menovaných prvou z radu administratívnych budov postavených v centre mesta a reprezentovala ich špecifický výtvarný charakter. Jej autor patril vo svojej dobe k najúspešnejším architektom – aj vďaka jeho popularite medzi odborníkmi a verejnosťou sa objekt stal modelom nového moderného života a technológie. Tento nimbus si objekt uchoval aj po radikálnej prestavbe budovy v roku 1994. Architektonický sprievodca z roku 1997 síce spomínal skutočnosť o prestavbe, no napriek tomu tento objekt zaradil do publikácie. Chemolimpex-OTP sa stal príkladom dobrej socialistickej architektúry. V roku 2010 developer predstavil návrh prestavať niekoľko domov na Bécsi utca, pričom vo výške stiech mala viesť vyhladkovú sklenenú chodba. Architekti a ochranári proti návrhu protestovali – vytvorili živú reťaz, aby ochránili staré domy vrátane budovy Chemolimpex-u, alebo azda len spomienku na stratené hmotné architektonické hodnoty.

In the last thirty years, a vast literature has been compiled on the legacy of socialist architectural heritage and its evaluation after the fall of the regimes. The researchers of post-socialist urban transformation often select for their analysis clear cases like a whole town built or re-built under socialism, or focus on full-scale cultural and administration districts created on the site of earlier ones or placed near to the old, historic core as an alternative, representing a new era.<sup>1</sup> Such examples of new socialist cities or new city centres have been described and analysed in the case of Hungary as well.<sup>2</sup> However, Budapest, the Hungarian capitol, was spared radical interventions, at least in its city centre. Right after the war, the participants of an architectural competition intended, in the spirit of a new beginning, to remove all the buildings left standing after bombardment along the banks of the Danube and replace them with free-standing modern blocks. This plan was never realised, because of the lack of money.<sup>3</sup> The few new buildings erected in the inner city between 1945 and 1960 – functioning mainly as offices – were built on infill plots, meaning that they were usually not visually striking but were surely expensive.<sup>4</sup> A deliberate and programmatic development of the inner city started only after 1960 when the master plan of Budapest was finally accepted, in parallel with the political consolidation following the failed 1956 revolution.

### City Centre for Tourism and Commerce

The present city centre – District V – covers the medieval town of Pest and its northward extension dating from the early nineteenth century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, several prominent buildings were raised in both parts, which in addition to the street structure, had a profound effect on the inner-city's appearance. During the war, some buildings were destroyed and more damaged, but the whole district kept its character and its outstanding position occupying the eastern embankment of the Danube. The Budapest general plan of 1960 intended to address the restoration and modernization of the inner parts. Following a thorough analysis, the detailed master plan of District V was prepared and completed by 1966.<sup>5</sup> The plan divided the district into three parts: the northern part devoted to administration, the southern part to culture and education,



while the middle part was reserved for tourism and commerce. Upgrading the long-neglected city centre was a key task for the regime, since it represented a showcase of the ‘building of socialism’, in the era’s phrase, and at the same time attracted western tourists paying with hard currency.

In consequence, by 1980 no empty plots were left in the core of the downtown: the socialist city centre – though only partly built during the socialist period – was finally completed. A guidebook covering Budapest’s 20th-century architecture listed 23 items worthy of mention in the city centre, i.e. between Alkotmány utca and Kossuth Lajos utca.<sup>6</sup> Twelve of the listed buildings – more than 50 per cent – were built after 1945. In fact, these infill projects genuinely ranked among the most significant buildings of the period, and after completion were all published in the architectural press. However, the next work, the *20th Century Budapest Architectural Guide* (by different authors and compiled in 1997) listed only four of the previously mentioned buildings, though all still existed:<sup>7</sup> these selections being a bus station, a hotel, an apartment house and an office building.

At present, after 30 years of post-socialism, we find that while several buildings mentioned in the 1980 guide have disappeared or been radically rebuilt, others are still standing, but have failed to retain the interest of guidebooks or city tours. Since the turn of the millennium, guided tours have become increasingly popular in this locality, yet the authors have not found any tourist route within the historic city centre that includes mention of a former socialist building. Moreover, in the latest *20th Century Budapest Architectural Guide*, compiled by German authors and published in Hungarian version in 2014,<sup>8</sup> has in its collection of buildings only one item mentioned in both previous guides: the bus station.

Our aim in this contribution is to look for the reasons why many edifices once characterized by highly appreciated architectural values in the 1970s and 1980s have been either demolished or rebuilt. Can this be regarded as a necessary loss caused by progress, or is it the outcome of the revaluation process accompanying a historical era sentenced to oblivion? Did these buildings lose their tangible or intangible value?

### The Values of Socialist Architecture

“The very word ‘transition’ itself, commonly used to describe the changes, implies the idea of its end: while transformation might keep going on forever.”<sup>9</sup> This description, given for a case study example among former socialist Central and Eastern European countries, is also valid in case of the Hungarian capital, especially in its inner centre which is affected by intense urban pressure due to the concentration of touristic, commercial, administrative and political activities.



**THE BUS STATION IN 1949**

AUTOBUSOVÁ STANICA  
V ROKU 1949

Source Zdroj: Fortepan archive No 9272



**THE FORMER BUS STATION,  
A COFFEE SHOP, IN 2020**

PŮVODNÁ AUTOBUSOVÁ STANICA,  
KAVIAREŇ V ROKU 2020

Photo Foto: Mariann Simon,  
Sarah Ben Salem

Post-socialist urban transformation has been the subject of a huge body of literature over the almost thirty years since 1990.<sup>10</sup> Most such works concentrate on the social, spatial and cultural changes resulting from the rapid implementation of market economics. As Borén and Gentile defined: “the post-communist city may be viewed as the outcome of an unfought struggle between legacy and transition.”<sup>11</sup>

The traditionalism of the Socialist Realist architecture dictated during the Stalin era diverged so strikingly from Western expectations as to be sufficiently shocking and strange to attract international interest already in the 1990s<sup>12</sup>; contrastingly, the values of the subsequent Socialist Modernism or Eastern Modernism came to the fore only much later.<sup>13</sup> When the heritage body ICOMOS organized a project on the protection of socialist architectural heritage in 2013, the experts concluded that a much broader “socialist heritage” approach would be needed, enabling the widening of the scope of appreciated heritage values. One representative of the scientific board also added that “in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe ‘Socialist’ architectural heritage still has low protection status (if any), an unclear form of ownership, is in degraded condition with minimal restoration experience for 20th-century heritage, is governed by a lack of state will and order for preservation of this heritage strata”.<sup>14</sup>

In the last decades, the protection of specific examples of post-war modern architecture – regardless of their location and political background – has become a problem for conservationists. While it is difficult to define exact criteria for the evaluation of post-war buildings there should be some defined reasons for selecting the buildings worth protection. Recently, an expert in architectural heritage proposed two such main categories: works of exceptional artistic qualities, characterized by a unique, creative approach to architecture, and works constituting reference objects, such as a new and special construction method or as a representative in a “series” of repetitive buildings.<sup>15</sup> Architectural quality does not have an objective measure, so before selecting a modern building for preservation some further arguments – a story, a memory, a symbolic meaning – should be added. However, buildings are not artworks, so their function and ownership can overwrite all the former considerations.

The first *20th Century Budapest Architectural Guide*, edited in 1980, listed 12 buildings in the core of the city dating from the years after 1945. At present, the visitors would find only a mere half of the 12 in their original or improved condition; the other six have been demolished. The four buildings listed in the 1997 guide are still existing, mainly due to the continuity of their function and ownership. The one exception is the bus station, which is no longer used for transport purposes.

As the first listed monument from the post-war period, the bus station was designed in 1949 by the highly regarded modern architect István Nyíri, and was completed as one of the few modern buildings before the Socialist Realist period. It was declared as a monument in 1977, at which time





**THE APARTMENT HOUSE IN 1968**  
BYTOVÝ DOM V ROKU 1968

**Source** Zdroj: Magyar Építőművészet. 17(2), p. 36



**THE APARTMENT HOUSE IN 2020**  
BYTOVÝ DOM V ROKU 2020

**Photo** Foto: Mariann Simon, Sarah Ben Salem

it still maintained its original function. When the function of the main bus terminal was removed from the city centre, the station building was renovated and devoted to art and tourism: at present, it offers artisanal shops and coffee places, both inside and outside the building.

The apartment house at the József nádor tér has a different but rather simple history. The nine-storey building was the work of the architect Lajos Földesi. Designed in 1966, it differed from the infill apartment houses of the period and was published with considerable praise in the contemporary architectural journals as well as even the daily press. Reviewers stressed the building's successful adaptation to its immediate environment. "The scale of the building is well thought out. Its constructive composition reflects the calm atmosphere of József nádor tér."<sup>16</sup> Although the building was radically different from the other structures surrounding the square, and even extended over its neighbour, the retracted glass wall of the centrally located stairwell and the longitudinal lines of the balcony parapets covered with cast stone gave it a noble impression. However, these aspects would not be enough to qualify the building for heritage status. It was privatized after 1989, meaning that the apartments were sold to the former tenants. Only recently, in 2017, was it given protection as part of the buildings surrounding the square.<sup>17</sup>

Designed by the architects József Finta and László Kovácsy, Budapest's first internationally funded hotel was constructed on the site of demolished buildings damaged in the Second World War. The project was both praised and criticized from the time of its first official announcement, and even more after it was completed in 1969. The hotel, originally known as the Duna Intercontinental, was discussed on several forums, especially that its situation is crucially important for the image of the city since it faces the Danube. The main accusations were directed against its height aspect in the cityscape and its blank rear facade turned toward the urban core. Despite the controversial judgments, the hotel was included also in the 1997 guide as "the first attempt at the regeneration of the Hotel Row which once stood on the Pest Embankment."<sup>18</sup> Between 1986 and 2006, the hotel was renovated several times, but always under the supervision of the original architects.



**HOTEL DUNA INTERCONTINENTAL  
IN 1969**

HOTEL DUNA INTERCONTINENTAL  
V ROKU 1969

Source Zdroj: Fortepan archive No 1463



**HOTEL MARRIOTT IN 2020**

HOTEL MARRIOTT V ROKU 2020

Photo Foto: Mariann Simon, Sarah Ben Salem

## The Story of Three Office Buildings

The architectural guide of 1980 listed eight office buildings among the twelve objects suggested as valuable works of socialist architecture. Until now only two of them has been preserved: the former Chemolimpex building, which was also included in the 1997 guide, and another one located in a narrow side street. In the last thirty years, several of the the socialist modern office buildings, standing on valuable plots within the city centre, have been demolished and replaced by new ones. This raises the question: what (if any) are the specifics of the Chemolimpex building compared to the other office blocks? To arrive at the answer, we concentrate on the story of the first three office buildings completed in the city centre, uncovering the steps toward the decision, the building process and the public and professional reception after the opening as well as in the long term.

## The Chemolimpex Building

In October 1959, a daily newspaper reported about the preparation of a site in the city centre. The article stressed the special and contemporary building technology intended for application and also gave the predicted starting date of construction works as May 1960. The report also named the future users: the OTP, the single state bank of the socialist period and the largest state foreign trade company, Chemolimpex.<sup>19</sup> From another article,<sup>20</sup> the readers were informed that the architects would be Jenő Szendrői and Zoltán Gulyás, employees of the design office Industrial Building Design Company, IPARTERV.<sup>21</sup> Construction took more time than predicted because the new foundations had to be adapted to the remnants of the cellar walls of the former building,<sup>22</sup> but the public was regularly informed about the progress of the new modern structure. In August 1961, a daily newspaper presented the photo of the already completed frame.<sup>23</sup> The periodical of the Chamber of Commerce also devoted an article to the new centre of the company, stating that “the new home of Chemolimpex is characterized by aesthetics, functionality and comfort”.<sup>24</sup>

Except for a short article which reported about some construction problems<sup>25</sup>, the reception of the building was positive in professional and public circles alike. The single Hungarian architectural periodical of the period reported about the new building in detail and published two reviews signed by appreciative authors. The first reviewer praised the arrangement of the masses, namely the U-formed shape of the upper floors and the passageway on the ground level of the corner lot. The other reviewer stressed the elaboration of the façade, the grey granite parapets, the strip windows and the careful details. Although the special supporting structure adapted to the demands of the infill plot, as well as the architectural details, had been designed and produced specially for the very occasion, the reviewers explicitly lauded the building for its revealing “the beauty and the uniqueness of the new modern way of life and technology”.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, the new, socialist architecture was popularized for the wider public, meaning that the daily newspapers and weekly magazines often published writings about architecture in the

## THE OTP BANK BUILDING IN 2020

OTP BANKA V ROKU 2020

Photo Foto: Mariann Simon,  
Sarah Ben Salem



1960s and the 1970s. The Chemolimpex building became a representative of modern architecture and modern technology alike. The urban planner and writer Pál Granasztói, a representative of pre-war modern architecture and an active member of the post-war scene, regularly referred to the success of the Chemolimpex building and set it as an example for infill design in the inner city. He also listed it among the most important results of the twenty years of socialist architecture.<sup>27</sup> Other relevant architectural and urban critics found the office building worth mentioning, too. It appeared in a book about Budapest modern architecture written for licensed tour guides and was presented at the architectural exhibition that summarized the results during the 20 years of state architectural design offices.<sup>28</sup>

However, not only the architectural profession was impressed by the Chemolimpex building. As a representative of the contemporary, modern interior design, it soon became popular for moviemakers and several Hungarian films were shot within its walls.<sup>29</sup> After all, it is not surprising that – following the rebuilt Southern railway station (*Déli Pályaudvar*)<sup>30</sup> – the Chemolimpex building was the second most frequently mentioned modern building in a questionnaire among university students in 1964.<sup>31</sup>

The political change of 1989 represented a shock to Chemolimpex, one of the strongest trade companies of the socialist period. It was privatized in 1992 and the new owner sold the building to the OTP Bank, already the owner of the ground and first floors.<sup>32</sup> Although the bank did not intend to change the function of the building, it commissioned a full face-lifting. The original concrete grid structure of the central banking hall was replaced with a glass pyramid, the granite panels of the façade were changed for an almond-coloured stone and the street passage was closed to the public. All this happened in 1994, under the supervision of the original architect, Zoltán Gulyás and his younger colleague.<sup>33</sup>

### The Hungarotex Building

In 1961 an office building program was launched in the capital. According to the press, 15 designated sites were listed, including one in the street Kossuth Lajos utca, a prestigious roadway leading to the Elizabeth Bridge (*Erzsébet híd*), then still under construction.<sup>34</sup> The identity of the future user was revealed to the readers only much later, when the construction was almost complete.<sup>35</sup> The corporation Hungarotex was a state foreign trade company, dealing with textile wares and design, so the program contained also an exhibition hall in addition to the usual office functions. Completed





**THE HUNGAROTEX BUILDING  
IN 1966**

BUDOVA HUNGAROTEXTU  
V ROKU 1966

Source Zdorj: Mariann Simon's private  
archive



**THE BELLEVUE PLAZA IN 2020**

NÁMESTIE BELLEVUE V ROKU 2020

Photo Foto: Mariann Simon, Sarah Ben Salem

in 1966, this example of a high-rise office building erected in the city centre was the first in its type during the socialist period. While its “pioneering role” was promising, it additionally represented a difficult challenge for the architects János Pomsár and Tamás Puskás. Above all, the height of the building was celebrated and criticized in equal measure. “Such a high building has not yet been built in the city centre” – reported one journalist enthusiastically.<sup>36</sup> However, not all reviewers were so happy after the building had been completed. Even though the architects created two blocks with a lower front and a higher rear part, the mass of the building dominated the street panorama. One writer and publicist devoted a long article to several recently completed high-rise buildings in 1968, even attaching a drawing of the Hungarotext building to demonstrate that its mass and the nearby steeple mutually clash visually in the view from the street level.<sup>37</sup> A similar criticism appeared in some urbanists’ papers devoted to Budapest and published in cultural periodicals, though by this point published only in the 1970s.<sup>38</sup>

Besides the high-rise character (14-stories!) of the Hungarotex building, it had another element representing technical development, namely the aluminium curtain wall with strip windows. The choice of metal, the “Hungarian silver”, offered new possibilities to the construction industry and architectural design at that moment.<sup>39</sup> However, despite the high-tech appearance, the shining façade gave rise to practical problems. Neither the used materials nor the workmanship matched the expectations. As summarized in a review: “Looking at the work as a whole – from the perspective of the national economic activity – the result cannot be called positive.”<sup>40</sup> Soon, the heating and cooling problems of the offices became apparent, and the newspaper reported about them in detail.<sup>41</sup> In consequence, even the Budapest Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party initiated an investigation in the case of the building, though this fact was not explicitly made public.<sup>42</sup>



**THE CULTURAL CENTRE IN 1971**  
 KULTÚRNE CENTRUM V ROKU 1972  
 Source Zdroj: Fortepan archive No 116099



**THE NEW COMPLEX IN 2020**  
 NOVÝ KOMPLEX V ROKU 2020  
 Photo Foto: Mariann Simon, Sarah Ben Salem

The Hungarotex trading company was itself privatized after the change of the political system, although it took a long time and was completed only in 1996.<sup>43</sup> The new owner was a real estate investor who first offered the building for rent, but soon decided to rebuild it.<sup>44</sup> The new design retained only the structural frame, but kept the building at its original height and added modern technical equipment. Construction works were completed in 1999, accompanied by media interest due to the high-priority location. However, despite the new fashionable appearance, the Bellevue Plaza was not celebrated by reviewers. They criticized its height and façade, which was “wrapped in an American high-rise veneer” – as a reviewer remarked.<sup>45</sup>

### The Cultural Palace

Construction works always took a long time in socialism, but in the case of the cultural palace on Vörösmarty tér, the process was even longer. Since acquiring its current shape toward the beginning of the 19th century, this square is now one of the main attractions in the Budapest touristic urban map. A huge residential building with shops on the lower levels, once dominating the whole front of the square, was bombed and burned out during the war. However, the plot had a further unusual feature: at the rear, it adjoined the Vigadó concert hall, a romantic eclectically-styled monument from 1864. This connection made it difficult for the authorities to decide the function of the new building. In 1956, an architectural competition was announced, which assumed the new structure’s use as a concert hall, connected to the Vigadó.<sup>46</sup> Although the competition was successful, instead of the authors of the winning entry a new design company presented its plan for the same function in 1960.<sup>47</sup> In the meantime, the ruins of the destroyed building had been removed, so the empty land was temporarily in use as a parking lot.

In 1962, the Hungarian media reported about a new proposed function for the site: an eight-storey high office building for cultural institutions, containing exhibition halls on the lower floors.<sup>48</sup> In the following years, several versions appeared concerning the new building, each produced by different state design companies. The function remained the same, but the construction did not begin for a long time, although it was regularly announced for the public. The explanation for the delay lay in the state’s lack of money, as the new building was designed to be connected with the Vigadó, which had to be restored first. Finally, the construction work started in 1968, but the next news about the building appeared only in 1971, listing the numerous technical defects uncovered once the building came into use.<sup>49</sup>

No independent review was published about the completed building, though the architects, Elemér Tallós and Tibor Hübner, presented it in several professional publications. According to these

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sources, the designers aimed to: “create a building that adapts to current needs, it is efficient and economical, but at the same time it represents a European high standard.”<sup>50</sup> To fulfil this demand, the architects repeatedly mentioned the imported materials, especially the sun-blocking window glass, intended to replace the more expensive air-conditioning system. However, the office building in the city centre was primarily considered as an iconic building for the socialist cultural politics. It was mentioned in the relevant architectural studies evaluating the recent development as a “new dash of colour” in the city, but the celebration was completed with cautious reservation.<sup>51</sup>

In 1992 the cultural centre together with the Vigadó was handed over to a cultural foundation, which soon realized its inability to cover the building maintenance costs. Finally, in 2002 they partly sold the property to the ING Investment Management, which demolished the cultural centre and built on the site a multi-functional complex of retail, offices and residential units instead. The new complex was fully opened in 2008.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

The protection of state-socialist built heritage faces several problems in Hungary. The national political representation visibly prefers previous epochs and the organizational background is weak, although a growing interest is developing among younger researchers.<sup>53</sup>

In a different approach, in recent years several buildings, once highly appreciated, lost their tangible value, as the story of the three office buildings represents. They were promoted at their time of completion because they expressed “the beauty of the new modern life and technology”. However, technical problems occurred in all three buildings, though the public was informed about them differently. Against the few technical weaknesses mentioned concerning the Chemolimpex building, the problems with heating and cooling were widely discussed in case of the other two buildings. The hesitation about the future users and the construction works – all published in the daily newspapers – also took a long time, especially in the case of the cultural centre. To sum it up, these office buildings had a different, and worse, public image than Chemolimpex. And it also should be added that neither contemporary architectural nor cultural press accepted them without reservations. Their demolition can be explained through the change in their ownership and the buildings falling short of current functional expectations. But – seen from another aspect – they did not represent a special artistic quality, let us say an intangible value either.

In contrast, the Chemolimpex building was the first in the series of inner-city office buildings displaying a special artistic character. The architect was among the best of the period and the building – due to its extensive publicity in both professional and general media – became a model of the new modern life and technology. Moreover, the aesthetic sense survived even after the building’s radical reconstruction in 1994. The architectural guide of 1997 mentioned the fact of rebuilding, but even so, included the item. The former Chemolimpex building became the symbol of good socialist architecture, a model of what it could have been like. In 2010 a developer intended to demolish and rebuild several houses along Bécsi utca, with a glass lookout tube installed on the top of them. Architects and city protectionist protested and formed a living chain to save the old houses,<sup>54</sup> including the former Chemolimpex building – or just the memory of the lost tangible architectural value.

**1** See for example DE ROSA, Annamaria Silvana and DRYJANSKA, Laura, 2017. Visiting Warsaw for the first time: imagined and experienced urban places. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism, and Hospitality Research*. **11**(3), pp. 321 – 340. PRELIPCEAN, Andreea A., 2018. Sustainable Regeneration of Urban Built Heritage in Post-Socialist Cultural Context. *Acta Technica Napocensis: Civil Engineering & Architecture*. **61**(3), pp. 173 – 185.

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**3** VADAS, Ferenc, 1985. Budapesti tervpályázatok 1945-ben. Az újjáépítési ötletpályázat. [Architectural competitions for Budapest in 1945. The reconstruction design competition.] *Magyar Építőművészet*. **76**(3), pp. 52 – 55.

**4** Here should be mentioned the IPARTERV (1950, Pál Vincze) and the ÁMTI-UVATERV (1952, István Nyiri) headquarters. Both represented high architectural quality and were made of expensive materials.

**5** PREISICH, Gábor et al., 1966. A budapesti Belváros rendezési terve. [Detailed plan of Budapest inner city.] *Városépítés*. **2**(3), pp. 3 – 20.

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- 18** Lőrinczi, Zs. and Vargha, M. (eds.), 1997, p. 26.
- 19** Helyszínen öntött falakból építik a Belvárosban az első irodaházat. [The first office building in the city will be built with on-site cast walls.] *Esti Hírlap*. 15. October 1959, p. 1.
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