

**Benkő Melinda Ph.D.**

***The Role of Urban Renewal in Architectural Education***

There is no one and only educational method which would make a student into an architect with certainty! Traditionally, five-year academic training is mandatory to become an architect, but the curriculum differs significantly from country to country and from institution to institution. In this essay, I plan to accentuate the role of urban renewal in architectural education at the Faculty of Architecture at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. There are many reasons why it is relevant to discuss this issue here.

First, in the traditional Hungarian architectural education system, which is essentially based upon a duality of technical and art subjects, there is significantly less emphasis on urban planning and design than at other architectural schools. Secondly, if we take into account the history of the country, the current social and environmental problems, and the geopolitical and economic context, then I think we need to focus mainly on issues which directly affect us. However, we have to be familiar with contemporary urban phenomena like overpopulation, ceaseless concentration, or the shrinking cities and their fundamental research and design methodologies, even if they seem remote to us. (Metapolis, 2003)

Yet, our role as tutors does not end there; we are also responsible for making the next generation of architects aware of local problems. Building on the theoretical background, we have to prepare them to find practical answers to questions raised by privatisation, segregation, migration, gentrification, isolation, suburbanisation, motorisation, participation, tourism, as well as judicial and governmental organisation. Urban renewal is the subject that brings all these questions together.

Since 2006, when the initiation of the new educational system at the Faculty of Architecture took place, the city has been part of the architectural education program, from the first year on. This course is vital in every student's development, because the focal point is to discover the urban context of architecture. The city can become an inexhaustible source of design inspiration.

Let us look out the window!

Here, in the centre of Budapest, we can and must step out of the boundaries of the institution, because I strongly believe that academic knowledge is no substitute for personal

and holistic experience of the city and its architecture. We have to open the eyes of the students right at the beginning of their studies and encourage them to rely on their instincts and their personal experience by exploring the surroundings: the landscape, the city, the buildings and life within the constructed environment. (Bouchier, 2008) We must encourage them to stay diverse and adventurous, to dare to thrive and progress, and to want to see and know more!

During the course entitled “Basics of Architecture”, students explore a downtown area over a three week period and present it to the group by way of subjective analysis. This exploratory process helps them to recognise the city centre and find their ideal design location for an installation project in a temporary large-scale festival. The first year students’ explorations and plans displayed remarkable insight and sensitivity. To draw a conclusion, architectural training could build much more on the demonstrated literary, historical, philosophical, art and media background, which students bring from secondary school.

Among the mandatory components of the B.Sc. program, “Urban Design” appears in the 6<sup>th</sup> semester, following design courses such as the “Design of Residential Buildings”, “Public Buildings”, and “Office Buildings”. In this course, students face the complexity of urbanism for the first time, as well as the design of urban blocks and spaces which are in another scale than the buildings themselves as they create public realms. This is also the first time when they have to develop their own program. Since they do not have a well-defined design program, they need to formulate the possible directions of urban renewal based on their own research of the location and their understanding of the driving forces behind urban change. (Busquets and Correa, 2006)

We can state that the main difference between architecture and urban design is that urban design is boundless in many ways. (Devillers, 1996) How can we describe this? It means a spatial and temporal endlessness and a complex multi-disciplinarity which goes beyond architecture. Although urban design is site-specific, each component of the design – such as urban morphology, space functions, traffic and public realm – are parts of an overarching system. Local changes have a much more global effect; therefore, thinking cannot be narrowed down to the site itself.

Compared to architecture, urban design also has a different timescale. Historicity, the existing and historical context, plays a more significant role. Moreover, the timescale of design and construction is longer and more flexible, so short- and long-term prospects need to be taken into account in order to accommodate unexpected, unforeseeable situations.

Furthermore, urban planning and design are necessarily multi-disciplinary processes. Architects and urbanists play a serious role, but the contribution of engineers, landscape architects, sociologists, economists, jurists, psychologists, historians, geographers and other technical experts is essential. Although academic circumstances are not able to simulate this complexity, our aim is to prepare the students for a multi-disciplinary discourse and to make them ready to take a responsible role in this process.

In our compulsory “Urban Design” courses, we always choose as sites urbanized areas of Budapest that are potential locations of urban renewal. This is a conscious strategy motivated by the following considerations. In Europe, after the multi-decade era of reconstruction and New Cities projects, nowadays the majority of urban projects are urban renewals. Local issues like the transformation of Budapest since the political changes in 1989, as well as the present focus on sustainability, also require us to focus on this question. Our intention is not to create from scratch, but to renew; not to build just anywhere, but to take into consideration the existing context; not to focus solely on architecture, but also on the complex environment of the design; not train to compete, but to cooperate; and finally, to consider the possibilities of a sustainable approach on every scale and aspect of the design.

Each spring semester, 300 students work in 11 design groups on the “Urban Design” course’s given task. The design program and the selected area are always connected to an up-to-date urban issue. We believe it is highly important, in the academic context, that the design, based on an understanding of real urban processes, should have more freedom than the over-constrained reality of actual economic, regulatory and political decisions. The students’ proposals are not utopian, but locally situated, expressive and forward-looking design concepts based on contemporary urbanistic knowledge. They are rooted both in physical and theoretical architectural contexts, and they are literally boundless.

The work of the 11 design groups is interrelated by the topic or by the location of the sites. In this way, we can arrange comparative presentations between the groups, and we can also host introductory lectures by invited professionals.

The most recent topics since 2005:

- 2005 Pest-Danube, the Danube’s left riverbank in the capital
- 2006 The properties of the Hungarian National Railways
- 2007 The sustainability of housing estates
- 2008 Budafok, Haros and Teteny – areas along the Danube
- 2009 The sites along the Danube opposite Obudai Hajogyari Island

2010 The site enclosed by the Danube, the railway and the Hungaria Ring Road in the 13<sup>th</sup> district of Budapest

It is not a coincidence, that the Danube riverside is such a frequent design location. The Danube banks in Budapest became Unesco World Heritage sites in 1987, the first protected sites in Hungary. The renewal of these areas is one of the biggest contemporary urban challenges.

Besides the former industrial areas that were abandoned after the political, economic and social system change, there is expansion between the inner city and the administratively independent suburbs. This transitional zone has a mixed use of space and results in a varied urban fabric. Nowadays, many of these sites along the river are in constant transformation by massive land developments and investments, since the land value is very high. Although the regeneration and redevelopment of these areas has been emphasized in the official program of Budapest's Urban Development Plan for a long time, there are still concerns about the coordination of the process and about the proposed density, which is extremely high. Hence, these former industrial areas along the river have also featured as sites in the "Urban Design and Planning" course.

In contrast to the developers' pursuit of maximum profit, in the academic world, we live with the freedom to promote the traditional and contemporary values of urbanism. The aim of the plans is to achieve a complex, sustainable and context-sensitive design which is socially and functionally diverse and whose unique identity originates from the existing environment, both constructed and natural. These values lead to a liveable and lovable area with high architectural and environmental quality for the long run: a vision of a real city.

Other typical forms of industrial areas in Budapest are the unused, contiguous properties of the state-owned Hungarian Railways. As opposed to the inspiring natural environment and central locations of the inner city sites, in this case, students face the cultural, economic and environmental problems on the outskirts. Their experimental proposals suggest alternative usages for ex-railway landscape and buildings, new approaches for inter-modal interchanges and new ideas for healing ruptures in the urban fabric.

Budapest was created in 1873 by the unification of three historic towns: Buda, Pest and Óbuda. The Hungarian capital became the biggest city along the Danube. The majority of the housing stock in the city core, about 400 blocks, dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are three- to seven-storey buildings with an inner courtyard, a traditional *closed* urban typology. Following the periods of spectacular development after the Second

World War, the quantitative housing construction programs of the 60s and 70s took the form of huge housing blocks built on the outskirts, while neglect and destruction of nationalised residential buildings became typical of the historic urban fabric in the inner areas. After the political and economical transition, the housing and real estate market opened up, and an intensive period of building and development began, with strong involvement from Hungarian and foreign investors. Besides urban renewal, suburbanisation continued to absorb resources of urban development. The challenges for Budapest have increased both locally and globally.

Regarding the urban renewal of a residential area – which could be in the historic downtown, the heterogeneous suburbs, or an estate district – the aim is to explore the existing conditions, to renew and reinterpret the existing constructed environment according to today's needs and the requirements of complex sustainability.

During the M.Sc. programme at the Department of Urban Planning and Design, in design-orientated courses like “The Department”, “The Complex” and “The Diploma Design Project”, most of the students develop their own design ideas based on research of an existing context and environment. Following the common research process into a specific village (for example, Sósút or Solymár) or town (for example, Kőszeg, Szolnok or Sopron), students develop a master plan proposal before beginning their own individual architectural design. This way, urban design emerges as an integrated part of this process. (Urbanisztika Tanszék, 2009)

For the final project, students can choose the location of their building. It is becoming more and more common that, instead of finding a location for a proposed function, students initially choose a location in a city to which they are personally attached. (It could be either in their home town or in Budapest.) In the final project, they attempt to solve the complex urban and architectural issues with which they are familiar.

Towards the end of the architectural program, students specialize further. Until 2011, there was no possibility to specialize in Urban Planning and Design, but from the spring of 2011 onwards, this option will be available as M.Sc. in Architecture and Urban Design. Naturally, in this course of education, urban renewal plays an important role. Therefore, our aspiration is to involve professionals from different fields – such as sociologists, economists, property developers, engineers, landscape architects, etc. – alongside architects. The theoretical background is supported by national and international case studies. (Benkő and Fonyódi, 2009)

In conclusion, when peeling back the layers of urban renewal, historical background, concept design, feasibility study, comprehensive design and after-completion feedback are all equally important. Students attending “Urban Research”, “Urban Design”, “Town Planning” and “Complex Design Projects” are confronted with tasks on various scales, in addition to diverse environmental, economical and social issues.

The intention is to prepare the next generation of architects to be ready to lead and participate in the most common form of contemporary urban development: urban renewal.

#### References

- Benkő, M. and Fonyódi, M. (2009) *Glocal city – kortárs európai városépítészeti* (Terc Kiadó, Budapest)
- Bouchier, M. (2008) *10 clefs pour s'ouvrir à l'architecture* (Archibooks, Paris)
- Busquets, J. and Correa, F. (2006) *Cities X lines* (Harvard University, Nicolodi Editore, Cambridge)
- Devillers, C. (1996) *Le projet urbain* (Editions du Pavillon de l'Arsenal, Paris)
- Metapolis (2003) *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture* (Actar, Barcelona)
- Urbanisztika Tanszék (2009) *Egy tanszék 80 éve - A BME Urbanisztika Tanszékének története 1929-2009* (Terc Kiadó, Budapest)

This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.