

**Gentrification and Community Building:  
Social Processes in the Corvin Quarter of Budapest**

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Submitted to  
Central European University  
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary

2012

## Abstract

This study will show how the installation of a new residential quarter influences the everyday life of an already very varied community living in a central district of Budapest. The urban renewal program called Corvin Project aims to create a “new city center” by integrating the preexisting equipments of the district with the new infrastructure: the mall, the wellness center and the promenade. The common aim of the state, the municipality and the private investors is to stop the ghettoization in the middle of the city and to establish a new, flourishing node of the center. The strategy of the urban planners in the district was to combine the completely new promenade with streets where some of the old houses has been demolished and rebuilt, others renovated and a few of them kept in the original, ruined condition. How can we define gentrification in a post socialist context? Who are the social actors in that process? How sustainable is the present stage defined by the coexistence of substandard housing<sup>1</sup> inhabited by extremely poor dwellers and the new residences of the newcomers who differ from the old community in their age, class and financial situation?

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<sup>1</sup> In a Central European, urban context substandard housing means an apartment without bathroom, with shared toilets for the dwellers living on the same floor. In Hungary, many of these houses were standardized after the transition which meant that toilets were installed in the flats and a douche in the kitchen.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my supervisor and my second reader, Professors Judit Bodnár and Prem Kumar Rajaram for their constructive and inspiring attitude towards my thesis. I also highly appreciate all the help and patience of my academic writing instructor, Eszter Tímár. I thank the professors and staff of the Central European University, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, who created an open and friendly environment with a challenging academic program. Finally I owe many thanks to all my family and friends who constantly inspired my research with their questions and remarks.

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## Introduction

From autumn 2011 through spring 2012, I conducted field work on Vajdahunyad utca in the rapidly gentrifying 8th district of Budapest. When I moved to this neighborhood in 2008 from a residential section of the centrally located, upper middle class 5th district, I had not planned to study the area nor anthropology more generally. At this time I was working as a language teacher, but I soon realized that my living environment, the old, working class neighborhood next to the newly-built Corvin Quarter, was a unique anthropological field. Since those early days, I have continually seen my home place, my house and my neighborhood as a kind of urban laboratory where a disappearing Roma community coexists with two emerging cultures: the one of the consumer society, with the new shopping mall and wellness centers and the one of the counter culture trying to oppose and slow down the exaggerated commercial growth of the quarter by creating meeting points and possibilities for community activities – two special bars, and the newly established community garden.

The surrounding of the Corvin Promenade is a site where old communities are about to disappear and new ones take their place – the film entitled Corvin Variations (Trencsenyi 2011) shows the emptiness of the space and the lack of social interactions after the old communities had to leave the quarter. From the perspective of a researcher who has a chance to live in the middle of her field I can see that there is a continuity, not just on the surface with the mall, new buildings on the promenade and in the surrounding streets, but also on a deeper level: new projects are started (mostly by private investors and the non-profit organizations) with the aim to create living the communities. In my research I try to show how sustainable the present condition of the quarter is regarding the cohabitation of the old and new dwellers and the birth and die of the communities. For this reason I have to map the

field and show who the actors of the gentrification process are and how they shape their living environment in the heart of the 8th district, traditionally one of the most rumored parts of the Hungarian capital.

## Theoretical background

Gentrification refers to the phenomenon by which the population of a given poor or working class neighborhood gets exchanged due to “rehabilitation processes” which is the transformation of the area from social, economic and physical perspectives. This social restructuring process happens simultaneously on economic and geographic level: as urban space is a constantly transforming entity, shaped to the actual conception of production, consumption and transportation. Gentrification can be considered as an urban manifestation of a more general social transformation. The enlargement of the city population triggers the constant growth of city center, districts considered as suburb turn to center and it means a considerable rise in real estate prices. The most common way gentrification happens, is that lifelong residents of a given quarter are displaced from their homes by the so called gentrifiers, who do not share long-timers’ racial or class identity but who are often members of the young, wealthy middle class with completely different habits and needs. The phenomenon can vary by time, place and stage of gentrification depending mostly on the influx of capital, government policies and broad social, economic, demographic and cultural shifts (Brown-Saracino 2010:4-7).

Gentrification has long been associated with appeals to diversity and difference. Social balance or mix is one of the arguments in favor of gentrification: from the one side helping adults as well as their children in facing the social reality, from the other side, the one of the old dwellers offering higher quality services. What happens is that middle income people start a social mixing into lower income people (whose incomes are often based on social

benefits and salaries from informal activities). We can identify three main directions in the social mixing policy debates: First, the ‘defending the neighbourhoods’ argument claims that since middle-class people are stronger advocates for public resources, socially mixed neighborhoods will fare better than those without middle-class households. Secondly, the ‘money-go-round’ argument claims that socio-economically mixed neighbourhoods are able to support a stronger local economy than areas of concentrated poverty. Finally, the ‘networks and contacts’ argument draws on Putnam’s (1995) influential account of bridging and bonding social capital to promote social mixing as the way to generate social cohesion and economic opportunity. However, the rhetoric of ‘social mix’ hides a gentrification strategy and in that a hidden social cleansing agenda.

## Outline and Methods

The rehabilitation project is called Corvin Promenade and it aims to create a “new city center” which integrates the pre-existing equipments of the district, such as the Corvin Cinema with the new infrastructure: the mall, the wellness center or the promenade. It was and is still a big challenge for the urban planners to establish such a complex area which connects organically to the surrounding (poor) neighbourhoods and the new and modern residential and office quarter. In my research I focus on the life style strategies of both the original inhabitants and the newcomers to adapt their habits to the changing context, the new services, infrastructure, commercial equipment and leisure activities. The Corvin Project appears from the first view as spectacular, quick and effective urban renewal project going on in the 8th district of Budapest. Knowing that this part of the inner city used to be one of the most disreputable areas, often mentioned as the nest of crime, prostitution and deep poverty, the need for the rehabilitation can be easily justified.<sup>2</sup> In the first chapter of my work I intend

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<sup>2</sup> [http://fovarosi.blog.hu/2010/06/05/corvin\\_setany\\_jo\\_vagy\\_rossz\\_pelda](http://fovarosi.blog.hu/2010/06/05/corvin_setany_jo_vagy_rossz_pelda)

to analyze the present situation from a historical perspective from the birth of the quarter, through the state socialist period until the post transition struggles and the present dilemma of gentrification.

In the second chapter I will consider the social, cultural and ethnic composition of the dwellers for showing the extreme complexity of the older and the recent dwellers of the district. Through this descriptive part I intend to argue we cannot simply make a distinction between the old and new inhabitants in the area, but it is more useful to distinguish the reasons why a given individual choose to move or to stay in this neighbourhood. The inhabitants of the Corvin residency who are able to afford the price of the flats in the new built houses mostly from the wealthier layer of the middle class, coming from a significantly more advantaged social, economical and cultural background as the majority of the multicoloured, multilayered old community in the surrounding houses but they share a certain type of tolerance or neutral attitude: by choosing the 8th district for their new homes or enterprises. As the Corvin project is not a finished rehabilitation program, we still don't have a clear picture about the actual sustainability of that cohabitation. Considering the attitude of the old inhabitants towards the new commercial facilities, such as the passage like shopping mall or the Corvin promenade with the paper figures of the reality shows' stars, step by step the Rome young people started to enter the mall and move there with an increasing self consciences. The poorer middle class inhabitants of the old houses profited of the large offer of stores in the shopping center and the young intellectuals discovered the contemporary art gallery on the 1st floor of the mal.



The third chapter observes a special phenomenon: the imprints of a counter culture which is about to appear in the quarter: young people who do not want to accept the hegemony of the consumer culture marked by the mall and the wellness facilities started such initiatives the Grund Hostel which is a cultural and community meeting point or the Gondozó ruin bar which is the local nest of the bike messengers and other engaged cyclists offering a variety of live music and adventurous programs. A recently emerged urban initiative, the community gardening found great support among the old-new dwellers of the area – offering a possibility to grow own fruits, vegetables and herbs while getting in contact with the dwellers of the neighborhood. The young, middle class people, half of them students living in the old houses for a low rental price, the other half are young people as well, relatively well off, having their new apartment on the Corvin-Promenade. In my research I try to show both types of urban spaces offering a contact surface for the inhabitants of the district: the commercial establishments with specialized consume oriented events and the spaces of counter culture, contesting the seemingly unlimited pace of the development process.

The methods that I used during my research were interviews and participant observation. I started my research with participant observation in the shopping mall, the Fitness center and the ruin bars: I attended special events of the Corvin promenade such as the 1st anniversary of the shopping mall, the Mothers Day, the Free Entry Day for retired people of the neighbourhood to the Wellness Center or the distribution of the community Garden parcels. I conducted the majority of my interviews in April and May 2012, my interviewees were the dwellers and the employees of the houses in Vajdahunyad utca and the future owners of the community garden project on the Corvin promenade. I conducted different types of interviews: informal talks with the dwellers on the street, semi structured interviews with the employees of the local shops and structured (shorter) interviews with the residents of the new

buildings. With my research I would like to show a typical pattern of the post socialist urban transformation in Central Europe with significant economical, social and cultural benefits on the one side, but with the backsliding of the poorest social classes.

## Chapter 1. Theoretical and historic contextualization

### 1.1. What is gentrification? Who are the actors of the process?

For more than three decades the notion of ‘gentrification’ has been the subject of discussions for sociologists, urban planners and policy makers. It designates a social transformation in the city where private capital gets invested in neglected neighborhoods with the aim to renovate the buildings and turn them into middle class conform residencies. (Smith 1996) The motivation of the gentrifiers is to get affordable but quality housing with a proximity to office quarters and cultural amenities. The first impacts from the aspect of the original inhabitants are the rise of housing costs and improvement in the infrastructure. These changes attract the so called gentries who choose the neighborhood as new residency and by this they affect the public opinion about the quarter. The neglected factor by this type of transformation is the destiny of the original dwellers that, in most of the cases are not able anymore to catch up with the living standards of the quarter which means that they are pushed to leave the area and choose a new residency in quarter with lower prestige. Demographic, economic and politic and cultural factors can influence gentrification trends. Investors who are willing to convince future dwellers relay often on the last aspect, namely that the development neglected neighborhoods with cultural and historical heritage can create a real value, a so called urban renaissance. The cultural argument is closely related to the idea of apparent social responsibility which hinders the emergence of inner city slums. (Glass, 1964).

Using the word “gentrification” indicates a certain aspect towards the judgment of the processes. The word implements that this change is a violent intervention which is based on pure market principles ignoring such factors as cultural heritage, equal rights to improved housing and the relevance of keeping functioning neighborhood structures. The notion makes

a shift in the concept of rehabilitation. Unlike the language of those who are more sympathetic to gentrification, the critics do not accentuate the fact that the area gets a higher developed infrastructure, better security, improved road structure and traffic facilities but insist on economic and marginalization of poor and minority people. (Atkinson 2003)

There are a number of counter movements or alternative gentrification tendencies which keep the aspect of “social preservation” who emphasize the social rather than the physical amenities, so they strive to preserve the character of the original community. Preservationist gentrifiers claim the prioritization of the existing residents, who lend their neighbourhood to the new comers, who in exchange invest their money to the economically disadvantaged part of the city. The social ecology of a given neighbourhood can be preserved if the culture and the social networks of the authentic community do not change dramatically (Zukin 2010:1-35). Social preservationists resist dominant, neoliberal forms of gentrification because they see that it threatens aesthetic, social and cultural heritage. Like all gentrifiers, preservationists contribute to the transformation of the neighbourhood but they take into consideration the physical, economical, social, and cultural presence of the original inhabitants. (Bridge 2012) The preservationist movement contributes to the shaping of the gentrification process by trying to make it more human, letting a larger place for keeping the originality of the area by trying to eliminate deep poverty and ethnic segregation. Sharon Zukin distinguishes three types of preservationist groups: the historic preservationists who consider the historical buildings as embodiments of urban memory as well as constituting elements of the district’s self identity. These people are mostly from the upper middle class who appreciate the value of the historical buildings without taking in account the human factors. The second group, the community preservationists put their accent on the aspect of the right of all people, even the poorest dwellers, not to be displaced from their homes. The

members of this group are middle class intellectuals whose aim is firstly to fight against radical discrimination<sup>3</sup>. The third group in Zukin's context are the classical gentrifiers who moved to the neglected districts decades earlier as the contemporary "urban renaissance" movements, still with a higher degree of tolerance and ability to share their neighborhoods (Zukin 2010:11).

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<sup>3</sup> A Hungarian example for this type of urban preservationist the figure of Mihaly Raday, a Hungarian filmmaker who led a television series about the good and bad examples of how to deal with urban heritage of Budapest. His main concern used to be the architectural value of the building and by this means he often ignored humanistic factors.

## 1.2. Tendencies in the theory of gentrification

The diversity of the definitions in the literature depends on the focus of the researcher, whether she wants to accentuate the causes, outcomes, or everyday character of gentrification, about which causes, outcomes or dimensions typifies the description? A further, important aspect is where gentrification takes place? In the general practice of theorizing gentrification, the researchers focus rather on outcomes, consequences and everyday manifestation than on causes, maybe because the consensus at this point is greater as in the theories about the causes. The two tendencies in the theory about the causes of gentrification differ at the point whether the government founded urban renewal or revitalization programs and slum clearance are already part of the gentrification process itself (Glass 1964: xxxi) or just a precursor of it (Perez 2004). Both theorists agree at the point that gentrification is not the only possible way which leads to displacement of poor and working class residents. (Smith 1996: 36) We can distinguish two parallel processes: the class based colonization of cheaper residential districts and secondly the reinvestment into the physical housing stock. The change manifests in the most of the cases as profit driven expansion under state control, serving the interests of middle class inhabitants who aspire to a more exciting city with central location housing in an attractive environment. (Smith 1986)

In the theory of gentrification there are two classical approaches: the first deals with the supply side, the second with the demand side. Neil Smith, representing the supply side approach established the rental gap theory. He argues that it is the capital and not the individual who decides to return to the city. Built environments provide only the requisite complexity for capital mobility with related social, political, economical and cultural shifts.

This means Smith identifies gentrification as an economic process based upon a difference between the actual price of the properties and their potential value. This process began after the Second World War when governments (of United States and United Kingdom) spent significant amounts of money on establishing residential quarters in the suburb. Smith argues that with time the original investment loses its value, so does the rent what the owner can ask for the apartment. In this way the gap comes into existence between the maximum acquirable rent and the possible revenues after a reinvestment. After the reinvestment we can say that the neighbourhood has been recycled.(Smith 1986) On many points Smith's theory was criticized by those theorists who represent the consumption side or with other words demand side. Chris Hamnett pointed out Smith's theory dissimilates individual agency in stead of taking in account the individual strategies of gentrifiers. This branch of theorists insists on the importance of consumption practices, cultural politics, and the role of race, gender and sexuality. One of the less coherent points in the supply oriented theory are the representation of the gentrifiers, who are in Smith's Marxist theory the pure servants of middle class residents without any further specification (Hamnett 1991:180).

Sharon Zukin came up with an early reconciliation of the two opposing theories and since then researchers dealing with gentrification studies take both of the approaches into account. The accent of gentrification studies nowadays is on the need of empirical examples for legitimating general statements on the nature of gentrification. (Zukin 1987)

Investors forget about such issues as social equality, environmental perspectives and cultural preservation for fulfilling wishes of the newcomer middle class inhabitants. It is clear that those transformations offer less gain for poor, ethnic communities, who were the original

inhabitants of the gentrified quarters. If we consider further on the economic side of urban development we can see that a cantered and large scale service system took the place of the earlier manufacturing practice giving place to offices-based employment located in the city center. The change effects increasing property values in the city center with rising living expenses leading to the phenomenon that the original residents get forced out from the center to the suburbs. On the other hand private investments promise galvanization in tourism and improved education and job opportunities in the area. (Lees 2008)

Urban dynamics were quite divergent in British and American context. In Britain local actors, such as urban activists exercised more influence on the process which restricted the practice of private development and arrived to establish a social housing network against the segregation based on criteria like lower income or ethnic differences, in the US urban renewal efforts ended up in the opposite processes with the program to remove targeted ghetto areas from the proximity of business centers. This operation were called “slum clearance” and on the other hand American public housing programs was available only for the lowest social classes and situated outside of the city center. Later on during the 1980s development practices in the United States and in Britain converged with the main goal to serve the interest of private sectors and to mineralize the number of regulatory interventions. The result was an extremely uneven growth of social inequality manifested in uneven education possibilities, professional skills. The process led to even deeper social inequality, racial segregation and displeasing environmental effects like over crowdedness of streets and overloaded transportation means (Fainstein and Campbell 1997)



### 1.3. Gentrification and Social Classes

One of the reasons why gentrification studies are so keen to introduce class into their accounts derives from a problem deep in the heart of sociological theory. Redfern takes as basic proposition that everybody on the demand side belongs to the same economic class. His main idea is that researchers dealing with the concept of gentrification should not take this assumption for granted, but to discuss otherness within this group. (Redfern 2003:2351-2366)

The argument of the supply and demand side seems to be an exaggeratedly sterile way of discussing this complicated issue – this approach with the binary division needs to be transcended. (Lees 1994) Class cannot be defined as solely economic category, it includes cultural, social and human aspects – issues of life style and social closure get mixed up into class definitions. What needs to be revisited is the assumption that gentrifiers need to gentrify, and it could not be otherwise. Considering the fact that the group of the gentrifiers itself shows a diverse class constitution, it is not a homogenous new class as Redfern argues in one of his earlier work (1997) we can see that even gentrifiers represent divers cultural and social preferences – they cannot be seen as a homogenous interest group. The term “gentrifier” needs to be unpacked to deal with. For this reason we should switch from the question asked: “Why gentrification happens?” to “How it is preceded?” for getting closer to the identities of the actors of both sides. Can one still define the middle class only by economic terms? With the withdrawal of domestic labour the middle classes got less divided from other classes until the whole concept of middle class got blurred – definable only upon more complex criteria which turns the Marxian class group more into a Weberian type of status group. In my opinion and based on my research founding the group of the gentrifiers cannot be defined as a homogenous status group by looking at their lifestyle, cultural preferences or networking structure.

## 1.4. Gentrification in Budapest

Gentrification started in Budapest right after the transition period, in 1989. In other capitalist cities gentrification process already arrived to a certain point, so the investments were about to stop because of the economic recession. (Tomay 2008). Post-socialist cities share a number of similarities concerning gentrification practices: urban decline during state socialist times, similar models of housing privatization and finally the rising significance of the new middle class population appearing in this context as gentrifiers. Hegedus and Tosics (1991) use the term of “socialist gentrification” for the phenomenon of public urban rehabilitation which involved, even before the transition the relocation of inhabitants to flats in other public housing, consequent allocation of upgraded apartments and the arrival of new tenants with higher social status than the original population. (Atkinson 2003:90-93) Commercialization influences the landscape in post-socialist gentrified districts. The socio-spatial structure of Budapest has been influenced by the increasing economical and social differences after the transition – this disparity is imprinted into Budapest’s transforming landscape, marked by such brand new services like the multiplex cinemas or the shopping centers. (Bodnar 2001).

The common aim of the state, the municipality and the private investors is to stop ghettoization in the city center and to establish a new, flourishing node of the center by offering not just a well equipped living area but new work places, security and a new local identity. How to proceed in the transformation? This dilemma did not remain the struggle of the 8th district’s municipality because the local authorities forwarded the task to a group of private investors. That was the reason why social interests were kept in second rank as well as environmental aspects such as the use of renewable energy sources. The well known Hungarian urban planner, Anna Perczel established a very detailed plan for the rehabilitation

of the quarter, which took in consideration each building and decided upon the condition of the given building about the demolition or renovation of the old houses<sup>4</sup>. Following this plan the investors would have kept a larger part of the original buildings which means higher investment costs and less new apartments and offices. Because of the low profitability on the reconstruction plans offered by the group of professionals the municipality of the district hired a different investment group less conscious about architectural, social or environmental issues. The struggle about keeping a large percentage of the old inhabitants in the same district or changing them for the richer, usually (upper) middle class residents does not coincide completely with the fact of the abolishment of the old houses: even the residents of the old buildings changed considerably in the last couple of years.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://tet.rkk.hu/index.php/Tet/article/view/254/507>

### 1.5. The case of Józsefváros

Jozsefvaros is a district where the ghettoization is not only a prospect but full of tension regarding the physical and social environment. The district is composed by several neighborhoods which differ from each other regarding the housing standards, lifestyles and demographic composition of the inhabitants – they are like the stones of a big mosaic with different colors. In each of this sub-districts, such as the Palace Quarter, the Magdolna Quarter, Middle Jozsefvaros or the Corvin Quarter different renewal strategies got implemented in the last two decades with the aim to change the reputation of the district by splitting it into small mosaic stones with own identities, style and destination. Historically the district was divided into three main parts: Inner-, Middle-, Outer-Jozsefvaros. The district was named in 1777 after Jozsef II, heir to the Hapsburg throne at this time), originally it included today's Ferencvaros as well. (Varsanyi, 1998).

The district in general has a negative reputation, probably the worst in the city, it is associated with crime, prostitution and high percentage of Roma population with low socio-economical status. Zsuzsa Foldi, who conducted a survey about relocation preferences in middle class families and they mentioned the 8th district on the top of the least desirable residential areas. (Foldi 2000). An important factor is the distribution of the public housing units in the district: 50% of them are located in Middle-Jozsefvaros, right at the same territory where the largest gentrification project took place, in the Magdolna Quarter and the actual Corvin Quarter. In the past centuries the inhabitants of Jozsefvaros have been significantly more diversified regarding their social status and nationality as the people in other districts of Budapest.

Around the turn of the century, in the age of capitalist modernization, Jozsefvaros was the most densely populated part of the city.

The population reached its highest density in 1917 with 170.000 people. After a decline of 30% the population started to grow in the 1950s again. This tendency lasted only until the 1960s and a deterministic decline followed which lasts until today. The main reason of this decline is the poverty and the low standard housing. In the early period of the 20th century Jozsefvaros did not have a considerable Roma population. A large part of whom migrated here in the early state socialist times because of the low rental prices, others arrived only after the transition from those villages where unemployment was considerable. After the change of the system the status of the district as the least desirable neighborhood in Budapest became clear, so the municipality reacted with a District Development Strategy Plan in 1996. This document considered the district as an area in Budapest which accumulated various symptoms of physical and social backwardness. The key points of the strategy were the following: the proposal for the establishment of a management company (Rev8), rehabilitation of the district needs to be shifted from the Inner-Jozsefvaros (Palace District) to the Middle-Jozsefvaros, possibility of condominium level rehabilitation and a list of housing units prohibited to be privatized (Foldi 2006:252-256). This plan was followed by The District Development Concept with the aims to improve areas in Inner-Józsefváros, Tisztviselőtelep (Clerks' Quarter), the stagnating areas in Middle- Józsefváros and the crisis areas in Magdolna Quarter. Finally a long range (15 years) District development Strategy was prepared in 2004. The housing reform in Budapest happened after the transition period block by block, with this method the houses with private ownership got an easier access to the renovation as their inhabitants were able to contribute to the reconstruction fees. This procedure did not function in the 8th district as the percentage of the social rent apartments is

higher (25 %). The reason why the inequality among the districts of the capital is constantly growing is that each district has an own budget consequently the more it is located in the center of the city, the larger budget it has. This administrative background coupled with the stigmatization of the 8th district as the nest of crime and prostitution.

In the case of the so called “Corvin-Szigony Project” the local government had the possibility to decide about the future utilization of a housing stock, whether it was to be renovated or demolished and in case of renovation about the future of the social rent apartments. One of the arguments for the demolition of the houses was that the general quality of housing was extremely low and it is reflected in the rate of housing surfaces which was under 40 m<sup>2</sup>. Five main reasons are named by Zsuzsa Foldi for the reason why in stead of the regular municipality led intervention, in the case of Corvin-Project the local government forwarded the task of the rehabilitation to private entrepreneurial groups: (1) the high amount of municipality owned housing units, (2) the number of vacating blocks before the start of the project, (3) the homogenously bad physical condition of the buildings, (4) the relatively favorable location of the quarter, (5) the project area is boarded with important traffic ways: Big Boulevard (Nagykorut), Baross utca or Ulloi ut. (2006). Foldi puts her accent on the general upgrading process in the area without putting in question the right to the relocation of the original inhabitants and by which the destruction of an authentic part of the city . As her contribution was written in 2006, I can already base my critique on the actual development and outcomes of the (still unfinished) project, in the next two chapters I will show how the community of the newly established Corvin-Promenade and the authentic dwellers consider the actual situation and what are the ways of conservation of authenticity in the district by being part of an housing upgrading project. Referring to a previous student of CEU, Ian Cook, who studied gentrification in the 8th district and I would call the project “Aquarium for

Capitalism.” (2009) I think that this metaphor expresses plastically the nature of the investment: building a long atrium which crosses streets and which requires the abolition of large housing units cannot be considered as a grounded urban transition in one of the poorest areas. For constructing the “Te New Downtown of Europe” the real estate company, Futureal had to demolish 1100 flats. These flats were reportedly in bad condition, often without basic amenities such as toilets or bathroom. With my contribution I do not question the need for a rehabilitation process but I would like to focus on individual aspects of the gentrification.

## Chapter 2. Old Streets, New Identities

### 2.1 Time, Space and Actors

Time is written on the walls (not only on the streets but in the inner courtyards as well) with the visible bricks behind the crumbling plaster and bullet holes which remained from the Freedom's Fight of 1956. Houses in Vajdahunyad utca are two or three floor high with inner courtyards built at the beginning of the 20th century mostly for working class inhabitants, mostly families with several children coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds. (This street still hosts the community house for Hungary's official minorities.) A few apartments are still inhabited by the descendants of these families which moved to the area in the early history of the district. Today, a large part of those people who are considered as authentic dwellers moved here in the state socialist times, when the district used to be a worker quarter and the municipality enabled worker families to get access to cheap rental possibilities. The segregation within the buildings used to be an omnipresent phenomenon in the houses because of the enormous differences between the comfort level of the flats in a usual housing bloc with inner courtyard: the flats with windows on the street front are not just brighter and more spacious than the flats with windows on the courtyard but are equipped with bathrooms and toilets. The courtyard always used to be the agora of Budapest's historical buildings: a meeting point for the dwellers especially significant in smaller buildings where everybody knows each other like, number 10, Vajdahunyad utca, where I have lived since 2008. By that time the rehabilitation project was unfinished: it started in 2006<sup>5</sup> but it did not affect so profoundly the life of the community of my bloc or the neighboring buildings, as facilities

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<sup>5</sup> <http://tet.rkk.hu/index.php/TeT/article/view/254/507>



such as the Promenade, the Corvin mall or the Wellness Center were not ready at this time. Only two new houses were built in the street and the plan of the shopping mall which was going to block the street was published only the next year. The gentrification process affected much more the neighbourhood of Práter and Futó utca, and according to the official page of the project<sup>6</sup> only 100 apartments fell victim to the concept of bloc rehabilitation which did not involve a one by one inspection of the houses but the demolition of whole blocks of buildings enabling the construction of the atrium passage (shopping mall) and the promenade.

As opposed to the higher and larger bourgeois tenements with five or six floors and about 40 flats in the city center, here in Middle-Józsefváros the average block is only two floors high. These smaller buildings create a more intimate atmosphere consequently the density of social interactions is higher in this type of houses. The small number of dwellers meets with their special life style (as a large part of the inhabitants in working age is unemployed or partially employed they spend almost the whole day at home). I think that we can speak about a community in the case of these buildings as the ties between the dwellers are closer and they not just see each other on a regular basis but they inspect each other's routine activities and reflect on them. It means that each member of the community is taken in evidence, and the appearance of a new dweller or the disappearance of an old one is discussed publicly.

I started interviewing people in April when the nice weather set in and the dwellers started to use the courtyard as the agora of the building. I interviewed nine people from the dwellers of the building number 10, Vajdahunyad utca. This is a house with two floors and eight

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.corvinsetany.hu/ujbelvaros\\_fejleszteszazisai.php](http://www.corvinsetany.hu/ujbelvaros_fejleszteszazisai.php)

apartments: two apartments on the ground floor, four on the first floor and two on the second floor. People mostly know each other from the chats in the courtyard: children play here; women clean carpets and men smoke, drink and chat while sitting on the garden set bought by one of the Roma families. Because I have been living in this house before my relatedness to the field is more intimate: I have developed personal relationships with several families in the building and in the street and I offered free English classes to the children of my house during summer 2011.

I interviewed one person from each household, so I had six female and three male respondents. I conducted semi structured interviews about three main subjects: the first one is their satisfaction with the facilities, infrastructure and security in the surrounding area. The second block of questions centered on the community belonging issues, trying to find out what type of friendships they develop within the community of the house and in the neighbourhood. The last field was the subject of transformation in the quarter, how they can benefit of these changes and to what extent life became less affordable here. The interviews were on average 30 minutes long, with children shorter and less structured, with unemployed and retired adults longer and not that structured either, and with employed adults shorter.

One of my main difficulties was to explain in simple terms why I need to write about the situation of the inhabitants in the area. For children I explained it is an assignment for school, which they understood completely even though they consider me more like a teacher as I used to teach them English last summer. For uneducated adults the word “research” was not known, so I tried to explain the reason why I think that other people should know about their situation and the conditions in the quarter. While convincing them to give interview I

felt that I instinctively tried to shed light on my thesis as if it served policy making goals. I know that it is an outright exaggeration but it was the only possibility to explain to simple people why to write about the dynamics of a neighbourhood which is going through a gentrification process and I think that it is the hidden wish of all social scientists dealing with gentrification issues not just to map the field and its struggles but to forward it to the responsible institutions.

## 2.2. Life in a Two-Faced Neighbourhood

In this sub-chapter I will show how the inhabitants of Vajdahunyad utca see their chances in the old-new Józsefváros, what the conflicts are and how these conflicts are deepened due to the rehabilitation project. I will present the opinion of several respondents: the perspective of the wealthy Roma family, owner of a 150 m<sup>2</sup> apartment, the aspect of the poor Roma families with several children, without employment and living in socially rented flats, the older, non-Roma, retired people who have lived in the neighbourhood for several decades and finally the perspective of the young middle class employed people who moved to the area due to the recent expansion and bought their flats in old buildings.

In this case where I appear at the same time as researcher and dweller, my perspective matters as well, so I will describe how I became a member of the house community. My grand-parents moved to this house in 1955, a young worker family with one child which, arriving freshly to the capital from two opposite ends of the Hungarian country-side and rented a one and a half room apartment in Józsefváros. They were the first family in the house which transformed a part of the kitchen into a toilet and bathroom. My father grew up in this house and my grandparents lived here until 1986 as well. Later, when my grandparents moved out of the house they let the apartment to young couples for extremely low rents. By the time I moved in, in 2008 the last tenant had to flee the house because of some conflicts with the immediate neighbors who are usurers and human traffickers. I moved in with partial information about that story and I never got the courage to ask about any details of the drama.

One of my key respondents is Kati<sup>7</sup> is the wife of the Vajda (leader of the Roma community), 35 years old, she comes from Szabolcs Country, mother of a teenage boy and step mother of an older son of his husband. The main difficulty of the interview was to skillfully balance the subject of prostitution and human trafficking, not avoiding it completely but neither putting a large emphasis on it. I started the interview by asking when and why they moved to this apartment and why they decided to buy the flat.

We moved here in 2007 when my husband started his own business as construction entrepreneur. We choose this neighborhood as we know that middle class Roma families live in the immediate surrounding who would need our services but we did not know about the plan of Corvin Mall and the other construction works. Maybe if we knew that it was going to be like this we would have chosen another neighborhood, maybe closer to the Market, but this house is also located near the school, which influenced our decision.

Kati's example shows that not every family chose to live in the area because of the value increase due to the rehabilitation project: this family's motive was to get access to the middle income Roma population of the neighbourhood. When I further asked her about the results, if the actual situation met their expectations she said that the original plan with the construction business did not succeed, so her husband had to find a different way to finance the family - and in that case they already built the idea on the location of their home and on their embedded situation in the community of the area – that is how they started to give credit to the neighbors around 2008. Kati did not mention the main activity of the family today: the

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<sup>7</sup> The names of my interviewees are modified for the purpose of keeping their identity private.

trafficking of young girls to Germany, Switzerland and Netherlands. From previous discussions I know that she is not happy about this new occupation, but she argues that “in these difficult times there is not much possibility to be picky.” I was shocked when last summer Kati’s husband wanted to convince me to join the girls going to Germany for “getting a little pocket money.” At this time he tried to convince many young Roma girls in the neighbourhood, and by promising a nice income he gathered about ten girls between 16 and 25 who accepted to leave the country for sex work. Concluding, I would say that for this family the proximity to the not gentrified area with rather poorer inhabitants was an explicit motivation to move here. The fact that the value of their apartment increased due to the gentrification of the area only added an unexpected financial advantage.

The poor (Roma) families in the house and in the neighboring buildings are not owners of their flat, they live in social rent buildings and therefore they have a different understanding of the recent transformations. What they got from the gentrification is that the street’s “village ambiance” disappeared with the appearance of the new blocks and the shopping mall. When I asked whether they find that the living costs increased as a consequence of the transformation, they said that the proximity of the shopping mall did not affect negatively their budget and the (social) rental costs did not increase in to a different degree than in other parts of the district. By asking the children of these less advantaged families I got mostly positive feedback: they are happy about the mall where they can hang out after school and they enjoy especially the special program offered for example for the first anniversary of the mall, for Easter or Children’s Day. On these occasions they can play with special toys (mostly classic types – not video games) or they can take part in art, science and history quizzes with gifts as motivation factor (chocolate or candies).

I observed an interesting dynamics concerning the moving in and out of non-Roma dwellers of the house: Emese, an old-timer resident who used to live in the building for more than 40 years just moved out last year. When I managed to get into contact with her again (she works at the municipal office of the 8th district) and asked her about her reasons to change her residency she explained that she expected something more spectacular when she first heard about the Corvin-Szigony Project.

Life used to be different when I moved here in the 1970s, it was a peaceful worker quarter, neat families with one or two children lived here and they all went to work early in the morning and came back in the afternoon. It started to change in the late 80s and the quarter as well as the house number 10 changed its face and it became the nest of unemployed people, misery and a life style which I cannot accept with loud music and alcohol. When I heard about the rehabilitation project I really hoped that the investors would buy this house as well and it would be renovated or demolished and we might get a flat in a new building, but that just did not happen. I waited long years but the situation just got worse so in September 2011 I started to sell my apartment. Fortunately I found a young couple who bought it, so I could move out to a small family house in the outskirts.

Emese represents the remaining members of the old state socialist petit bourgeois class who always felt superior to the workers who inhabited the quarter but managed to cohabit with them. When a large part of the worker population lost their jobs after the transition and the proportion of Roma inhabitants increased, they started to feel uncomfortable. Hearing about

the Corvin-project sounded in their ears like salvation from this transitory period, so they hoped that the municipality together with the local authorities would disperse the poor and create a new city center. When they realized that it does not work so easily, they tried to sell their flats to those, mostly young people who have seen the potential in these old houses in bad condition but with advantageous location, near the mall, the promenade and the wellness center.

In the house number 10 there are three newcomer young couples who chose the flat in Vajdahunyad utca because of its proximity to the Corvin facilities. Out of the six people who live in these flats, two have work places in the office area next to the mall, which influenced their choice but they did not have enough money to buy a flat in the new buildings. Dániel, young office worker who moved in for five years explained that they considered the purchase of this flat as an investment but later on they realized that the cohabitation with the Roma families is not as easy as they would have thought: “we did not know about the prostitution and we did not expect that the lady on the first floor is practically insane, so she shouts with her three children the whole day, which spoils our weekends and vacations, we cannot feel relaxed at home. Anna, foreign language teacher living on the second floor with her boyfriend right above Dániel’s flat gets less the noise of the Roma family, partly because she listens to loud music as well, partly because she just moved here so the couple experienced less from the “loud scandals”. Her boyfriend says: “we think that the quality of the flat is worth the money we spent for buying the property, it is centrally located and the cultural life in the district is getting better with the new bars and restaurants.” The last interview with the new flat owners, Zoltán and his wife, was conducted spontaneously in the last moments of my field work – they just moved in two weeks after I finished interviewing in the house: they



bought Emese's apartment partly because their workplace is nearby partly because they like the atmosphere of this changing neighborhood.

I would conclude that the high pace of moving in and out of the building reflects the diversity of needs, interests and expectations of the different social groups. I realized that ethnicity and age matters much more than the exact date when a given family or individual moved to the neighborhood. On the one hand I believe that the community of my block can be seen as a relevant pattern for the old buildings in Vajdahunyad utca, even though I would not generalize the phenomenon that a family dealing with prostitution owns the most spacious and luxurious flat of the building. On the other hand the reaction of the other inhabitants, who are aware of the fact that there is a problematic family in the building can be seen as a pattern –the commune aspect of the three couples was that all of them affirmed that they would not stay in the house with a newborn baby and I consider this as a bias between Roma and non-Roma middle class inhabitants.

### 2.3. The use of New Commercial Facilities

What I mean by commercial facilities in the Corvin quarter are the mall, the wellness center, the stores on the Corvin Promenade and the Corvin Cinema, which is not part of the recent development project. In general what matters in this aspect was not just the economic background, but the openness towards the facilities, designed mainly for the wealthy residents of the new blocks. That intention is easy to measure on the amount of advertisement an average old house gets versus a newly built apartment (I am a private language teacher in one of the hotels on Corvin Promenade, so I could get access to their post box.) The outcome is that the dwellers of Vajdahunyad utca old building get flyers on average once a week from the new commercial places, while the dwellers of the new buildings at least five flyers every day. This means that the Corvin mall, and Life1 Wellness Center did not discover the spending power in Vajdahunyad utca or they want to shape an exclusive public and even though they know about the needs of the diverse public of the neighboring streets, they do not want to include a group of people which is ready to share their living space with poorer residents.

By conducting semi-structured interviews with the dwellers of 10, Vajdahunyad utca I realized that even the poorest inhabitants frequent the mall on a regular basis, more than once a week, whereas the Wellness centre is not even known by the majority of the dwellers. The Promenade is a frequented place, especially children and families go there regularly for afternoon walks and games after school. There is one more, less commercial place in the area of the Promenade where families with younger children go and that is the playground of the hostel called Grund.

Györgyi, mother of three children living on family allowances is always looking for cheap or free programs for her children, especially for her smaller daughter who is three years old. “Last time we went to the Children’s Day program of the mall and the little girl loved it a lot, this time her favorites were the face painting and the chocolate cake. For Easter the mall brought even animals: lamb, rabbit, goat and donkey – they all loved to stroke the animals – as we live in the city and we go to the grandparents only in the summer they really need the contact with animals.” I chatted with the two children as well, who seemed to be less enthusiastic about the children’s programs offered by the mall, but they mentioned that during winter time the school organized special sport classes in the ice skating rink of the shopping mal.

Kati, the mother in the wealthy Roma family with one son and an older stepson told me that she goes to the mall almost every day, for shopping and also for meeting friends in the mall; she said that it is a comfortable place and her favorite shop is the drugstore and the second hand clothes shop. “Since the Corvin mall was built even my husband goes to the supermarket, which never did before.”

The three young couples are all employed and they do not have time during the week to frequent the spacious supermarket, but they spend sometimes a whole day of the weekend in the wellness center and in the mall. I am the only dweller of the house who owns a monthly pass to the wellness center. Anna, one of my interviewees said that the prices are too high and

his life style is not regular enough to invest in a monthly pass (It costs about 18 thousand forint which is more than the half of the family allowances for Györgyi.).

To my question what they would appreciate as additional program or service they gave different answers: Kati and all the three young respondents said that the offer in restaurants is not sufficient and the quality of the food is worse than what they are used to and Györgyi said that she would welcome more weekend program for children. Elementary school children spend usually the most of time in the mall as on their way back from the school the mall is in immediate proximity so they spend their free time there. The unemployed mothers, being in charge of the household and child care go there as well on a daily basis, not only for actual shopping purposes but because they use the mall as a meeting point. Although the mall even has a contemporary art gallery none of my respondents have ever been there or seemed to be interested in the project, including the three young couples.

As a conclusion of the answers concerning the commercial facilities of the district, I would say that there is a huge difference between the practice of the shopping mall and the wellness center: in the mall the programs are integrative, a real meeting point for wealthy and poor children of the 8th district, especially for the youngest age-group and families with small children. Even if we see a positive and welcoming atmosphere in the shopping mall right now, the evidence that it is a commercial institution excludes the further perspective of offering non-profit activities for unemployed families of the neighborhood. The naïve attitude of Györgyi shows that she is still not used to the capitalist, profit oriented system of malls and similar institutions, where the wellbeing is a privilege of those who can show a considerable purchasing power.

## Chapter 3. Alternative Community Building Strategies

### 3.1. The Leonardo Community Garden Chapter

In this chapter I will present the alternative initiatives which contribute to the counter-culture of the gentrification area in the Corvin Quarter. I believe that these examples show that a freshly built urban environment requires the scenes of meeting and community building. But what exactly means community in the virtual age of the 21st century? I do not intend to come out with a ready made definition; I rather follow the approach of Sara Ahmed who presents community as a question rather than a solution (2003: 252). We can see through the following examples that the main points are the integration or segregation; the commune goal of the group and the community cohesion.

The first example is the Leonardo community garden which represents a new movement – the urban gardening. I used the method of participant observation and I interviewed two gardeners: Barbara (Student from CEU) and Szandra (on maternity leave with two children).

As opposed to the shopping mall and the wellness center, the idea of the community garden is a non-profit initiative which is either subsidised by the private investors who own the Corvin residential quarter or is pushed by the municipality which would politicize the participation in the project. The implementers of the project are called KEK (Kortárs Építészeti Központ – Contemporary Architectural Center) and this is their second successfully realized gardening community building project. They started to spread the idea of community gardening in 2010 when the concept already had a history of several decades. The original idea was to organize people with different backgrounds to join the same community. Their aim is to popularize the concept of community gardening by creating real gardens in Budapest. KÉK created a

homepage as well which gives practical knowledge about gardening for establishing more useful green surfaces in the heart of the city. The main concept is based on the idea of sustainability, a healthy life style, community building, personal wellness, architecture, design, education, agriculture, self-provision, gastronomy and voluntary work.<sup>8</sup>

This concept can be easily related to the movement of degrowth which claims the downscaling of production in a declining world economy. Instead of the hopeless fetishisation of GDP, the movement of degrowth proposes the fortification of the civil society based on the value of human resources, voluntary work and non-commercial wellbeing strategies. (Latouch 2010, Harvey 2006) Instead of creating economic growth, this type of initiative tries to increase society's ability to cooperate. The main argument is to reflect on recent political transformations with a new strategy of growth, not economic, but one which often claims the aim as self-provision and sustainability. In Hungary these movement did not attract a large public on a theoretical level, but if we look at the concrete initiatives we can see that it influences the landscape of large scale alternative movements, such as the Critical Mass, claiming the right of Budapest cyclists to have similar rights on the streets as car drivers, as they represent a sustainable form of transportation. Community gardening is a similar sustainable movement, which does not always seek to replace something but it offers to fill a gap, namely that community building strategies do not happen automatically but there has to be some common mission which brings different people together. This mission in this case is the production of home grown herbs and vegetables by learning agricultural know-how and sharing gastronomic ingenuity. My two interviewees, Barbara and Szandra are both inspired by the potential of food growing right in the middle of the urban jungle. With

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<sup>8</sup> Translation of the description of the FB group: <https://www.facebook.com/KozossegiKertek>

Barbara who studies Human Rights at the Central European University we decided together to participate in the project. Her motivation was to find a place where she can practice her creativity combined with practical advantages. Szandra's motivation was to transfer her practical knowledge about food production to her children. Szandra said that she appreciates that the community gardening initiative offers a possibility to teach not only practical know-how for her children but trust and help among the members of the community.

In the United States this concept already has a long history going back to the 1970s. At that time working class neighbourhoods were not yet subject to gentrification, so the dwellers organized the first community gardens mainly with the aim of self-provision and integration of the newcomers. Sharon Zukin writes in her book *The Naked City* about the first wave of this movement with an immediate success without any municipal or governmental support. The real estate investors did not yet discover the hidden value in those areas, so people could freely access those territories and use them as community gardens. Later on, in the 1990s, when gentrification started investors took the grounds away so that the gardens had to close. In Budapest there has been quite different dynamics: the empty grounds between the houses were unused until gentrification brought young intellectuals into the quarter that had enough energy and courage to realize such a project without municipal intervention. The question arises whether this project will really involve those inhabitants who are not middle-aged, wealthy and well educated. My impression is that in a Hungarian context without institutional intervention these processes cannot start.

I researched the community building dynamics with participant observation. I first joined the Facebook (FB) group of community gardening project and participated in the orientation

session where we learned about the conditions of joining the project. I was one of the 88 lucky people who could rent an allotment in the newly established urban garden, located behind the Corvin Promenade. The adventure started on a warm Saturday morning, two weeks after the orientation session: the first real gardening day, when after a short lecture about the strategies of vegetable planting we started with digging the parcel, hoeing the manure into the earth and to bed out plants. For most of us it was the first time to do gardening, and so most of them were quite enthusiastic about the challenges of this type of labor.

The participants of this first gardening program were about 50, most of them between 20 and 35, young people, mostly couples with or without children. These people have similar educational, social backgrounds; their involvement is based on curiosity and interest in agriculture rather than a real need of self provisioning. When the movement started in the New York of the 1970s it served as a cheap option for poor families to get access to basic vegetables. Regarding that the 8th district in Budapest is one of the poorest districts of the city and several families do not have enough money to provide healthy food to the children regularly, the idea of creating a hobby vegetable garden seems to be socially irresponsible. The leaders of the initiative reacted on that phenomenon by mentioning during the introductory session that in this district we should use better security systems as we know that our crop might be stolen. Instead of giving support for poorer families in the neighborhood who could use the garden for satisfying their real needs the leaders of the garden project installed cameras and covered the door with a wooden plate so that it is not possible to look into the garden from one of the neighboring streets. When I asked the leader of the initiative about that dilemma, she mentioned that one of the parcels is owned by the Equal Opportunity



Association.<sup>9</sup> This answer surprised me as the school project is for children with educational difficulties, not for Roma children but for those who live in the 9th district and attend the afternoon school. The aim of the program is to teach children not only factual knowledge but such practical know-how as cooking or gardening.

The leaders of the community garden choose a solution for the problem that the garden is located in an economically and ethnically mixed quarter, that they offer a limited number of parcels for NGOs dealing with minority issues in stead of helping the access of poor families to the parcels in the community garden. Considering how much more time the unemployed families have this could have been an adequate step to start an integration process which would require some municipal intervention.

As in the United States the concept of community gardening has already 40 years of history, the idea of integration had enough time to evolve. In Hungary, precisely in Budapest the first garden opened only in 2006, six years ago and today we have only three of these gardens, so the initiative could not spread and it is still at an early stage. One of the reasons, maybe the most significant one is that the local municipalities do not actively take part in the project and a sufficient international program cannot be started without subsidies. The other reason is that KEK is in the first place an architectural organization: they are professionals in garden

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<sup>9</sup> The association “Esely Kozossegi Egyesulet” is an Education Program for children with educational difficulties. They provide a personalized schedule for the afternoons: in the early afternoon they can prepare their home work with professional surveillance and from 5 to 8 pm they have project based workshops. One of them is the new gardening workshop. <http://www.ferencvarositanoda.hu/>

architecture but community building is less in their profile. That would be the mission of the City Hall – it should deal with non-profit initiatives serving social integration issues.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> During the last government that was one of the functions of Studio Metropolitana. <http://studmet.hu/hu/bemutakozunk> From their home page it seems that today the main accent is on City Management and Marketing without mentioning the issue of social responsibility.

### 3.2. 'Ruin bar' in a Ruined District: The Gondozo and Grund

In this subchapter of the thesis I will show first the general concept of 'ruin bars' or 'wreck bars' as a gentrification phenomenon in Budapest. In the second part of the subchapter two bars are presented: Gondozó and Grund, the local meeting points with community building potential. I would like to argue that both of them are typical – Budapest-style gentrification markers helping the process of population exchange by attracting middle class youngsters and pushing out older inhabitants who need a more peaceful environment.

What does “romkocsma<sup>11</sup>” mean? The word refers to a new type of bar that appeared in the beginning of 2000s in the 7th district of Budapest. The locations of the bars are in abandoned 19th century residential buildings, where the old structure of the flats has remained recognizable. Pieces of furniture came from a wide time spectrum: “art nouveau lamps from the 1900s, chairs from the colourful 1970s, dotted cups from the 1980s”. These districts are located in the centre, but not the particular downtown, where the power and money resides: the dwellers of the 7th district were traditional middle-class residential areas until the Second World War. Socialism destroyed the last remaining pieces of traditional urban citizen culture, so by the end of the era the neighbourhood was no more than a group of old houses in a really bad state, with socially disadvantaged inhabitants. (Balazs 2011) The location of these bars followed the pace of gentrification processes in Budapest: started in the 7st district and spread in the 8th district later on. (This phenomenon was less present in the 9th district, Ferencváros, maybe because of its relative distance from the city center). The buildings hosting the bars

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<sup>11</sup> Literally meaning: “rom” means ruin, referring to the condition of the buildings and “kocsma” means bar or pub.

are surrounded by new or freshly renovated houses waiting for their future – demolition or renovation. The “romkocsma” in those buildings is established temporarily.

Lugosi stresses in his article the guerrilla style of ‘ruin’ bar, the establishment by which he means the irregular nature of the venue at the crossroads of alternative and mainstream. (2010) There is a fashion of celebrating these double-faced places, which appear to be alternative at the first glance as illegal squats, but mainstream because most Budapest residents love them, and because they figure on the list of the most popular touristy places.

The special atmosphere is not only created by the ephemeral nature of the places and the transitory character between alternativeness and mainstream but there is an additional element: objects which recall the collective memory of the guests. These types of bars very often use recycled furniture and decorations that households and institutions such as the Budapest Transportation Company disposed of after they realized that these objects represented the previous regime. The best example of this is the ‘romkocsma’ par excellence, the Szimpla Kert.<sup>12</sup> They use the old wooden seats of trams, old cars cut in the middle, bathtubs as chairs and sawing machines as tables. These are not only funny and creative solutions for making a bar original, but they suggest those old memories about objects which are shared in the post-socialist context.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.szimpla.hu/>

Two young sociologists from the Hungarian speaking parts of Serbia opened the Gondozo<sup>13</sup> in spring 2011. As they knew exactly how the process of gentrification affects such a neighborhood as Vajdahunyad utca, they decided to buy a building in the street right opposite the homeless shelter and next to a building where most of the occupants are living in deep misery. As they are aware of the fact that young people are attracted by shabby looking bars offering high quality service, they were not afraid of locating the bar in Vajdahunyad utca. When I asked one of the owners about the constitution of the clients, they said that the regulars are from the neighborhood, some of them from the same street but also from the other side of Baross utca, which borders Vajdahunyad utca. Clients from the newly built Corvin houses are rare, for them the alternative character of the bar is less attractive, as they prefer the other ‘ruin’ bar, the Grund, located at the end of the Corvin Promenade.

The Gondozo offers many types of varied programs such as teaching traditional folk dance, contemporary art exhibitions, an adventure park in the basement, regular jazz concerts and meetings for cyclists. The most recent attraction is that the inner courtyard is semi-covered, so that clients are allowed to smoke<sup>14</sup> but the place is protected from the rain. With this architectural solution they managed to create a larger space not only for summer time but for the whole year. Spending time in an inner courtyard is the typical form of enjoining ‘ruin bar’ hospitality and at the same time it reminds of the agora of Budapest’s tenement houses: places where people meet who know each by sight or from short conversations. My personal

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<sup>13</sup> The name, Gondozo means social welfare institute and this was the function of the building before the young entrepreneurs bought the building in 2011. It was a mental care institution and the flyers of the bar are still referring to the history by showing a picture of a brain.

<sup>14</sup> As in Budapest since the 1st of April smoking is forbidden in closed spaces, the solution of covering half of the courtyard is the most effective way for attracting smoking clients

impression is that ‘ruin bars’ cannot or do not want to create actual communities – their main function is to attract people who wish to spend time by eating and drinking in a special ambiance. The process of establishing personal ties between people frequenting the same bar requires such community forging events as the teaching folk dance with live music. By organizing more specialized events the Gondozó contributes to the community building processes in the neighborhood by shaping a subculture profile which excludes both the local working class inhabitants and the new, wealthy residents of the Corvin quarter.

The other bar, the Grund<sup>15</sup> has a different public – as it is located next to the Corvin Promenade, the style is more elegant and people who frequent the place are wealthier. The bar has a garden where tired office employees sip their cocktails after a long day in the neighboring offices. I would say that it is not a prototypical case of the “romkocsma” concept, rather a specialized patchwork establishment including a hostel, a cozy bar with a terrace and playground not only for the guests of the hostel, and lately a community garden as well. This eclectic list of functions shows that none of the functions mentioned would be sufficient for launching a successful enterprise, so the owners have to combine different ideas.<sup>16</sup> The inventiveness and richness of the events goes beyond the classic spectrum offered for young intellectuals of the city: the bar even offers Sunday services with protestant liturgy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The name *Grund* sounds familiar to all those who went to Hungarian elementary school. It is one of the central venues in a novel which is compulsory reading for young pupils.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.agrund.hu/index.php>

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to attend the services personally but those friends of mine who know about that service reported about a young public between 20 and 40, mostly the new inhabitants of the quarter but not only from the new buildings.

Most of the clients of the Grund are from the same age group as in Gondoó but visibly with higher income. The Grund has its community building initiative as well, which was created a couple of months earlier than the Leonardo Garden. It is located between the Promenade and the other community garden: this one does not have fences and each parcel has a different shape. The garden has surveillance not by cameras but the same guard takes care of it that is in charge of the surveillance of the hostel and the bar as well.<sup>18</sup> The shared characteristic of the two community gardens is that both are supported by Futureal, the development company standing behind the Corvin Project.

In this chapter we could see that entrepreneurs of the 8th district used the already successful model of the 7th district of Budapest: they rent or buy old abandoned and dilapidated buildings which are seemingly in a bad condition but still not dangerous and they shape the spaces regarding the diverse interests and needs of the local gentries. They definitively have a community building function: first by creating a place with a clearly fashionable ambiance and second filling this place with the matching events and community spaces such as the football lane, the ping-pong table or the billiard table. Getting to know the neighbours by drinking in the same bar is not easy but playing, gardening or cooking together creates a real possibility for community building.

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<sup>18</sup> On the official blog of the Grund Garten one can find news about the life of the community garden. There are two interesting notes: one is the confession of the Grund Garten which clarifies that the mission is double – community building and city greening (18.03.2012). The other relevant note (10.05.2012) refers to the appearance of the Leonardo garden with a title „The guys with red shirts arrived” quoted from the children’s novel „The Boys from Pal utca.” The Hungarian blog reader knows that the fight between the guys with red and white shirts is desperate. In the present case there is no fight, only a sort of competition. <http://grundkert.blog.hu/>

Why can we say that these places are opposed to the shopping mall? In both of the ruin bars the commercial aspect is not the ultimate reason of the enterprise – the owners of the bars are private people living in the neighborhood having a personal interest in making the quarter a more livable place, unlike in the case of the mall or the wellness center where the ultimate goal of the institutions is to generate profit.



## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that gentrification is a significant process shaping cityscapes and urban communities where the circulation of capital plays an equally important role as location specific social processes. Based on the theoretical background by Sharon Zukin I used a small scale empirical research for a better understanding of larger gentrification patterns in Budapest. I was curious how an ongoing urban transformation project can influence the social life of local people, both newcomers and earlier inhabitants. My research site is located in the immediate surroundings of the Corvin shopping mall and the actors are inhabitants of a building in the neighborhood, urban gardeners from the Leonardo community garden initiative and frequent clients of the bars located in the area.

My research question was how sustainable this form of cohabitation of different social actors can be without the explicit expulsion of the original inhabitants. I expected that this form of sustainability of cohabitation depends on the intention of the municipality, on the one hand, and the financial transformations going on in the neighborhood, on the other hand. I found out about an additional factor: expectations about the impacts of urban renewal program.

After conducting fifteen interviews I divided the actors involved in the Corvin gentrification project in four different groups based on the date of their arrival and depending on whether they own or rent their apartments. I found that people living in the quarter for decades in proper apartments expected the gentrification process to be a quicker and more radical, therefore they show a tendency of leaving the quarter as they still consider that the

neighborhood is dangerous and poverty has remained a constitutive factor of the ambiance in the quarter. The next interest group, tenants of municipally owned flats did not report a significant rise in the rent but they mentioned that with the demolition of several blocs in the neighboring streets they lost several connections and the loss of this social capital played an important role in their life. The group of newcomers is diverse as well, it consists of those who moved into the older buildings and purchased their apartments for a relatively lower price but still with the proximity of the city center and with mainstream and alternative facilities in the quarter. These actors of the dynamics realized the disappointment of the petty bourgeois inhabitants and reacted before the larger scale actors could arrive. The members of the last group are the gentrifiers living in the newly built residencies that invested more significant sums in the purchase of their apartment and therefore expect a visible transformation of the district.

The major actors, the investors and the municipality played a secondary role in my work as I focused mainly on individual aspects and how they can influence the actual outcome of the gentrification process. I believe that my study is a minor contribution to the subject of the Corvin Project, which deserves a larger scale study involving the perspectives of the different investor groups and investigating the possible strategies of the political interest groups at the local municipality.

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## Appendix 1

### List of respondents

NAME	AGE	STATUS	DATE OF INTERVIEW
<b>Kati</b>	36	Unemployed; lives with her husband, stepson and son in a large apartment with five rooms	03.04.2012
<b>Györgyi</b>	34	Unemployed; lives with her three children in a one room apartment	06.04.2012
<b>Emese</b>	63	Retired; moved out from the house after living there for decades	10.04.2012
<b>Emma</b>	82	Retired; lives alone in a one room apartment	10.04.2012
<b>Ferenc</b>	55	Employed as factory worker, lives with her wife in a one room apartment	12.04.2012
<b>Daniel</b>	32	Employed in an office; new owner of Emese's apartment	20.04.2012
<b>Zoltán</b>	36	Employed as HR manager; lives with his wife in a two room flat	21. 04.2012
<b>Anna</b>	29	Employed as teacher in a private language school; lives with her boyfriend in a one room flat	22. 04.2012
<b>Szeréna</b>	12	Daughter of Györgyi	06.04.2012
<b>Barbara</b>	25	CEU Student, owner of a parcel in the Leonardo community garden	10. 05.2012
<b>Szandra</b>	35	Mother of two small children, owns the parcel right next to mine	28. 05. 2012
<b>Attila</b>	38	Business manager of Gondozó, former sociology student	25. 05. 2012
<b>Eszter</b>	26	Former sociology student, regular guest in <i>Grund bar</i>	20. 05. 2012

## Appendix 2



**Figure 1. The Corvin Quarter**



## Appendix 3



**Figure 2.** The inner courtyard – Photograph by Csöge Balla



**Figure 3.** 10, Vajdahunyad utca - Photograph by Csöngé Balla



**Figure 4.** Children's Day in the Corvin Mall – Photograph from [corvinplaza.hu](http://corvinplaza.hu)





**Figure 5.** The Promenade – Photograph by Csöngé Balla



**Figure 6.** The Grund Playground – Photograph by Csöngé Balla



**Figure 7.** The Grund Community Garden - Photograph by András Unger



**Figure 8.** Leonardo Community Garden – Photograph from <http://kozossegitertek.hu/>



**Figure 9.** Gondozo – Photograph by Balázs Beregics



**Figure 10.** Gondozo courtyard Photograph by Csöngé Balla