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Liget Budapest: Spectacle, Architecture, and Right-Wing Populism

Hungary's largest cultural development of the last hundred years is currently underway in its capital, Budapest. The aim of Liget Budapest is to create a new museum quarter in the city's oldest public park, the Városliget, which is also one of the oldest public parks in the world. [1] The plans feature the total renovation of the park, the reconstruction of historic buildings, and the construction of new ones for existing and new cultural institutions. The space will supposedly continue to serve the passive and active recreational needs of citizens from the surrounding, densely populated districts. At the same time, with its new status as a "family entertainment center," it will allegedly attract as many as 1.5 million additional visitors annually. [2] In August 2017 László Baán, the commissioner in charge of the project, confirmed that the government planned to spend roughly 250 billion Hungarian forints (773 million euros) on Liget Budapest. [3] A more recent estimate by the civil resistance group *Ligetvédők* put the foreseeable total cost of the development at roughly 1 billion euros. [4] There is no doubt that in a small country facing severe challenges in many areas, ranging from health care to education, there would be numerous other—many would say *better*—uses for such a large sum. Nevertheless, prestige construction projects remain one of the most important concerns of Hungary's current government.

In the country's 2010 general elections, the coalition of the conservative parties FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats) and KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party) was elected with a two-thirds supermajority, replacing the socialist-led government that had lost most of its supporters due to its failure to navigate the country through the financial crisis of 2008. The landslide victory and resulting constitutional majority enabled the new government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, to create a fundamentally new political, social, and economic order, which he branded as "illiberal democracy" in a 2014 speech. [5]

The "illiberal" system relies on nationalistic sentiment, and due to the government's nearly complete control over the media; a state-captured judiciary; and the increasing centralization of power in the fields of education, culture, science, and research, this sentiment is strong. Identity politics is instrumental for the creation of enemy images on which right-wing populist state rhetoric relies: anti-immigrant, anti-elite, anti-liberal, anti-EU, etc. [6]

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[1] For details, see Liget Budapest's official website: [link](#).

[2] For detailed estimates on the number of visitors see the impact study (in Hungarian) of KPMG, *A Liget Budapest Projekt mint kulturális és turisztikai beruházás hatása a nemzetgazdaságra* (Budapest, 2014), 86–88.

[3] For a short introduction on the project and its controversies, see Bálint Bajomi, "The Voice of the Trees," *Blueink Stories*, July 4, 2018, [link](#).

[4] The *Ligetvédők* fight for the democratic re-planning of the park. They summarize their critique of the project in seventeen points in an article, which is unfortunately only available in Hungarian: *Ligetvédők, "17 pontban arról, hogy mi a probléma a Liget-projektrel,"* Medium, December 13, 2018, [link](#).

[5] For the full text of the speech, see Csaba Tóth, "Full Text of Viktor Orbán's Speech at Bile Tunad (Tusnádfürdő) of 26 July 2014," the *Budapest Beacon*, July 29, 2014, [link](#). The system built by the current government is referred to as "The System of National Cooperation," "Illiberal Democracy," or most recently "Christian Democracy" by many in Hungary. In this essay I use the term "illiberal democracy" to specifically refer to the current Hungarian political system.

[6] Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has centralized power in his own hands to an extraordinary extent; for a description of his political career, see Buckley and Byrne, "The rise and rise of Viktor Orbán," *Financial Times*, January 25, 2018, [link](#). For more on Hungary's illiberal democracy, see Abby Innes, "Hungary's Illiberal Democracy," *Current History: A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs*, vol. 114, no. 770 (March 2015): 95.

Nation-states' development of capital cities has always played an important role in their efforts to create "dominant discourse about nationhood and otherness." [7] The construction of prestige cultural projects, especially museums, is strongly implicated in these processes, as well as in the promotion of states and cities in the global market. In this context, the Liget Budapest project is a particularly potent example of how increasingly spectacular architecture is put into the service of increasingly right-wing power.

The amplified role of representation in postwar consumerist societies remains best described by Guy Debord's 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*. An ever-growing number of images disseminated by media, film, and advertisements are used to manufacture desires and give simple explanations for the world. To quote Debord, "in the spectacle the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world." [8] The spectacle is more than simply the collection of these images; it is found in the social relationships mediated by them. It "governs almost all time spent outside production" as a means of pacifying the masses and serving capitalism's only goal—unending economic growth. [9]

Debord describes culture as the "star commodity" of the society of the spectacle. [10] This became visible in the postwar development of "Pop"—the engagement of culture with the taste of the masses, aiming to appeal to the widest possible part of consumer society. According to Hal Foster, Pop "found its principal subject in the heightened visuality of a display world, in the charged iconicity of personalities and products (of people as products and vice versa)." [11] Architecture kept up with these changes—the increased role of representation was and is compatible with the taste of the masses, and celebrity architects have accordingly defined much of the field through to the present day.

To characterize architecture as spectacle, Foster takes Debord's definition of the spectacle—"capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image"—and turns it around: "Spectacle is an image accumulated to the point where it becomes capital." [12] And today architecture, as image, serves as a tool with which virtually any public or private entity can construct an attractive representation of itself in the global market. This representation often takes the form of a museum, where architecture becomes inseparable from the commodification of art. [13]

The Hungarian government's billion-euro museum quarter project has been conceived not only to provide the nation with new, open, democratic spaces of culture. [14] The economic policy of Viktor Orbán and his government differs in a fundamental way from the standard neoliberal approach. It can be characterized as economic-nationalism, where international capital is publicly treated as one of the enemies of the state, giving way to a new national economic elite, loyal to the government. Privately, the main source of income for this group is provided by the European Union through development funds. [15] Large-scale construction projects such as Liget Budapest are an effective tool in this unequal redistribution of European and public money, further empowering the ruling elite.

Questions of funding for urban development are becoming an increasingly important local political topic, as Budapest's independent districts remain the last bastion of opposition in the country. The city has a highly

[7] For an analysis of cultural projects in the national identity politics of the first Orbán regime between 1998 and 2002, see Emilia Palonen, "Millennial Politics of Architecture: Myths and Nationhood in Budapest," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, vol. 41, no. 4 (April 2013): 538.

[8] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 26.

[9] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 13.

[10] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 137.

[11] Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2013), 2.

[12] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 24. Hal Foster, Stan Allen, and Kenneth Frampton, "Stocktaking 2004," in *The New Architectural Pragmatism: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader*, ed. William S. Saunders (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 116.

[13] Contemporary cultural developments like the Liget Budapest project are increasingly reshaping cities to serve consumerism. The most spectacular example is probably Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, after which this phenomenon is often named. The "museum-boom" might be said to have started with the construction of the Centre Pompidou in Paris by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers in 1977, the first project of an era of "giddy, exciting and sometimes reckless growth, during which the museum-world experimented with all and everything." See Guido Guerzoni, "Designing Museums in the Twenty-First Century: A Matter of Responsibility," in *Museums on the Map: 1995–2012* (New York: Umberto Allemandi & Co., 2014), 18. According to Foster, in consumer societies display becomes an all-important quality of architecture—"both stager and staged, both setting for fine commodities and the fairest commodity of them all." This holds well for spaces of cultural consumption, such as museums. See Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, 66.

[14] Although, as Foster remarks, "for many commentators on architecture, the spectacular is a good-enough substitute for the democratic." See Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, 40.

[15] See Dorottya Sallai and Gerhard Schnyder, "The Transformation of Post-Socialist Capitalism—From Developmental State to Clan State?" *Greenwich Paper in Political Economy*, no. GPERC57, University of Greenwich (January 12, 2018). For a summary of the EU's role in subsidizing the increasingly authoritarian Hungarian government, see Dorottya Sallai and Gerhard Schnyder, "Is the EU Subsidizing Autocracies? Hungary and the Rise of the 'Illiberal'

democratic dual self-government system, where the local governments of the city's twenty-three districts are not subordinated to the municipal government. Issues of urban development fall under the jurisdiction of these districts. As a result, an integrated approach to large-scale projects that affect the whole city is hindered by antagonisms between district governments, which are often led by opposing political parties, and efforts to centralize some decision-making are often called for. What raises concerns, however, is that this centralization is not happening through the municipal government or an independent organization but rather through the national government and its new secretariat for Budapest and its Agglomeration.

In this context, the Városliget plays an invaluable role in “the undersized green system and faulty green network of Budapest” as well as in the “nation’s remembering.” [16] It doesn’t attract visitors from only the four adjacent districts but also from the rest of the country and well beyond its borders. Its redevelopment consequently receives large funds from the national government and necessitates an integrated planning approach. Through a series of legal maneuvers, the ownership of the park, originally shared between the municipal government and that of the city’s fourteenth district, was transferred in 2013 to a government-owned company for ninety-nine years. New and exceptional building regulations were also created for the area, allowing the national government to do virtually anything with the site with no need to involve local residents, politicians, or independent professionals in the design or decision-making process. [17] This did not result in coordinating the project with other large-scale developments in Budapest, as all major developments are led by separate government commissioners, independently from one another. Decisions over the use of development funds, however, were taken away from district and municipal governments, further diminishing their power.

The idea of a new museum quarter emerged in 2011, only one year after Viktor Orbán’s government came to power. Along with the renovation of the park and the enhancement of its existing recreational and leisure facilities, it featured plans for the construction of numerous new buildings to host several national cultural institutions. This included the renovation of the Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Transport and Technology, and the Olof Palme house—a pavilion built for the Millennial Exhibition of 1896. It also included the construction of new buildings for the Museum of Ethnography, Museum of Photography, Museum of Architecture, House of Hungarian Music, and the National Gallery, as well as a new section for the Zoo. The goal was to create a new museum district, improving Budapest’s position in the regional and global tourist market.

The planning process and design competitions were carried out at an extraordinarily rapid pace, which was only possible due to the lack of substantial efforts to ensure the participation of the public or independent professionals. Despite waves of resistance from urban planning, architecture, and landscape architecture organizations, as well as from local citizens and politicians, as of January 2018, the project had reached the phase of execution. The construction of many buildings is now underway, and spectacular images of what is to come have long been circulating widely in both domestic and international media.

[16] Kinga Szilágyi et al., “Limits of Ecological Load in Public Parks—On the Example of the Városliget,” *Applied Ecology and Environmental Research*, vol. 13, no. 2 (January 2015): 427–448. The phrase “nation’s remembering” is used in the first sentence of the CCLXII Law, passed in 2013 by the Hungarian government, regarding the renovation and development of the Városliget.

[17] The CCLXII Law created the Városliget Zrt to coordinate work in the park. The law ordered the creation of exceptional building regulations for the area by government decree.



Rendering of the National Gallery in the Városliget designed by SANAA. © SANAA.

One of the first things that was clear regarding the national government's plans for the museum quarter was that the designers of its buildings would be chosen through international architectural competitions, with some of the best-known practices of the world invited to participate. As a result, the four competitions for the project's five new buildings produced a large number of images showing the designs of "starchitects" in the park. [18] The images of these plans circulated in domestic and international media—iconic figures creating (pictures of) iconic buildings, and all for Budapest.

Guido Guerzoni, a researcher in economic history at Bocconi University in Milan, carefully analyzed the role of these "top architects" in museum developments between 1995 and 2012 in his 2014 book, *Museums on the Map*. Among his sample of 646 museums across the globe, there were twenty-three offices that had designed five or more. Altogether, these less than two dozen firms were responsible for the planning of 176 museums, totaling around 40 percent of all the investments from his sample. So, it wasn't simply a large number of museum projects that this small group managed but also those projects with the largest budgets. Furthermore, Guerzoni argues that the reputational relationship that develops between the museum and its architect is a mutually exclusive and reinforcing one because the two signatures bolster each other over time, forcing rivals to adopt the same strategy. [19] This has led to an ever-growing number of "masterpieces" with ever-growing prices, often paid for with public money.

In the case of the Városliget, two such star offices were chosen to create buildings, both from Japan: SANAA won the competition for the National Gallery and Sou Fujimoto for the House of Hungarian Music. The renderings of both buildings show featherlight, half-transparent structures blending with the natural environment of the park in the soft sunlight. However, more realistic visualizations show that the twenty- to twenty-five-meter-tall buildings will dominate the green areas, which in any case will be overcrowded due to the forecasted growth in visitor numbers. [20] Nonetheless, the overarching message delivered by the images is clear—the Hungarian illiberal state is wealthy and successful. With the completion of the buildings, the Városliget will spread the same message to its visitors in real life.

[18] The Museum of Architecture and Museum of Photography were originally intended to be designed together but were later dropped from the proposal.

[19] Guerzoni, "Designing Museums in the Twenty-First Century," 67.

[20] The necessity of the two buildings is questionable, too. The National Gallery is currently located in the Royal Palace of Budapest, a prestigious location, and the official argument for moving it is that the current building is not well suited for the handling and exposition of its collection. A new "Palace-museum" is planned (no concepts have been published to date) to allow for improved public access. Critics of the Liget Budapest project and the parallel moving of government functions into the Castle District suggest that the real motives are related to the government's plans to transform the district into a symbolically representative government quarter instead of the cultural area it was turned into by the postwar socialist government. Ádám Németh, a graphic designer working with architectural visualizations and animations, created the [website](#), to show that the renderings published by the planning offices are showing a deceptive, overly positive image of the buildings' effects on the green spaces of the park.



Rendering of the House of Hungarian Music designed by Sou Fujimoto. © Városliget Ltd.

Superlatives are also important in the production of the spectacle. Claims for the project being “the biggest,” “the best,” or “the most sustainable” are often supported by different awards. Although the received awards hold little weight within the field of architecture, the news of a certain building receiving a prize is often nevertheless picked up by the Hungarian media and circulated with remarkable speed, reaching the widest possible domestic and international audience.

The Városliget project—dubbed by the government as the biggest cultural development in the country since the end of the nineteenth century and one of the largest on the continent today—was shortlisted for the “Best Futura Mega Project” award at the 2017 MIPIM (Le marché international des professionnels de l’immobilier), a major property and real estate development event held in Cannes. It did not win the award, but as the three other shortlisted projects were from Japan, Brazil, and Russia, Liget Budapest became recorded in the media as the best integrated urban development project of the European Union. This success wasn’t only broadcast domestically. It played an instrumental role in the developer’s efforts to attract further investors to the city at different international forums, best exemplified by the 2017 and 2018 booths of the Hungarian real estate developer’s association at Expo Real, Europe’s largest such event, organized annually in Munich. A large, under-construction biodome that would house a new attraction at the zoo received the award for the best leisure facility in Europe at the International Property Awards. [21], [22]

[21] Dávid Péter, “International Property Awards: New Building of Budapest Zoo Wins Best Leisure Architecture of Europe Award,” *Daily News Hungary*, December 8, 2018, [link](#).



[22] The dome is allegedly the largest such dome in Europe, [link](#). The attraction is Pannon-Park, a garden section representing the flora and fauna of the Carpathian Basin during prehistoric times, when it was a subtropical region.

Photo from the construction site of the Biodome in the Zoo of Budapest. The area of the building will be seventeen thousand square meters. Photograph by Nagy Attilia Károly. © INDEX.HU Zrt.

The competition for the Ethnographic Museum brought an unexpected result. The list of contestants featured the biggest architecture offices of the world, but in the end, NAPUR architect, a Hungarian office, was chosen. [23] The planned building relies on its green image—the whole building will be sunk into the ground, and its entire roof will be a green space. In 2018, it received the award for the world’s best public building at the same International Property Awards that honored the Zoo. [24]

It takes only a little research to find that the International Property Awards is an organization that gives out an almost endless number of awards to development projects around the world. Any project may register for a relatively small sum, and in most categories, there are virtually no contestants. [25] The winners, however, are free to spread the news of their great success. Here again, architecture—or rather its image—provides an occasion for developers to promote themselves in the global market.

The future House of Hungarian Innovation (the concept for which was created when it became clear that the reconstructed Museum of Transport and Technology building would not be able to house the institution’s extended collection) and the reconstruction of the Olof Palme House show the important role of nationalist, often revisionist, history in such promotion. Both buildings are copies of pavilions from the Millennial Exhibition of 1896, Hungary’s most spectacular attempt to demonstrate its wealth and the worthiness of its self-rule inside the Austro-Hungarian empire. [26] The era is referred to as the “Golden Age” of Budapest, which will now receive a permanent exhibition in the Olof Palme House. The Millennial Exhibition brought about the Városliget’s first transformation into a large-scale exhibition, which overturned its early nineteenth-century founding purpose to serve the needs of the growing middle class “with a sublime display of nature.” [27] The Liget Budapest project similarly subordinates the park’s role as a green space for local citizens in pursuit of a successful image of the country.

Sociologists Tamás Csillag and Iván Szelényi argue that the search for suitable images of conservative regimes in Hungary’s history is one of the main ideological concerns of today’s state. Hungarian post-communist traditionalists, or neoconservatives, work to associate the current government with those of the successful prewar era, in counter-distinction to the postwar socialist regime. [28] Architecture, statues, memorials, and names of public spaces all serve as tools in these endeavors. [29] Christine Boyer asserts that



[23] The decision is less surprising when one is aware of the close relationship the office maintains with the government—it was responsible for planning the main location of the 2017 FINA swimming world championship in Budapest, and it will be planning a new athletic stadium in the south of the city.

[24] The official release from International Property Awards announcing the Ethnographic Museum as “World’s Best Architecture” can be found here: [link](#).

[25] For more details regarding the existing categories, the registration process, and the opportunities for media coverage see the organization’s website: [link](#).

[26] See Emilia Palonen, “Millennial Politics of Architecture: Myths and Nationhood in Budapest,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, vol. 41, no. 4 (April 2013): 537.

[27] Kinga Szilágyi and Mária Kanczler né Veréb, “The City Park’s 200 Years—Changes in Spatial Structure and Park Use in the Life of an Urban Park,” *4D*, no. 33 (2014): 23.

[28] See Tamás Csillag and Iván Szelényi, “Drifting from Liberal Democracy: Traditionalist/Neo-Conservative Ideology of Managed Illiberal Democratic Capitalism in Post-Communist Europe,” *Intersections*, vol. 1, no. 1 (November 2015): 43.

[29] The renaming of public spaces and institutions is an important tool in identity politics using urban heritage. For an account of the role of street names in Budapest’s contemporary identity politics see: Emilia Palonen, “The Politics of Street Names: Local, National, Transnational Budapest,” in Marnix Beyen and Brecht Deseure, *Local Memories in a Nationalizing and Globalizing World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 51–71.

Rendering of the House of Hungarian Innovation.
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when relying on constructs and fabrications from the nineteenth century in contemporary urban development, “both the historical organization of these visual genres in their original spatial and temporal contexts as well as their insertion and meaning within aestheticized cityscapes of today” need to be understood.

[30] They cannot be transferred without taking social and political changes into account. Nevertheless, in the case of Budapest, there hasn’t traditionally been any overarching politics of remembering; separate gestures shape the city.

The government decree that initiated the Liget Budapest project used the park’s historically important role as the main argument for its further, spectacular development. Historicist reconstructions are funded by the national government in many other places around the city: the National Hauszmann Plan includes the reconstruction of nineteenth-century buildings such as the Royal Riding Hall in the Castle District and as part of the Imre Steindl Program, Kossuth Square is restored to its prewar state. [31] These reconstructions are dubbed authentic; however, it is, of course, only their appearances that are repeated, as they are constructed using modern building methods and materials. The buildings’ functions rarely matter; it is the image of the “Golden Age” that is important. As scholar and critic Péter Görög has remarked, “A reconstruction which has no real function is nothing other than the illustration of neo-nationalism’s unbearable emptiness.” [32]

The spectacle is becoming ever more intense due to the growing number of images experienced on a daily basis, as people’s relationship to the built environment is increasingly dominated by prestigious designers’ deceptive visualizations, fake awards, and recreated artifacts of prosperous historical periods. Architecture seems to be dissolving into the spectacle, and it is the responsibility of the profession itself to prevent its disappearance altogether. Right-wing populism reinforces these tendencies. As a politics preoccupied with short-term economic and political goals for some, it uses ever simpler images to appeal to its base. In Budapest a large number of architects, urbanists, art historians, and environmental groups have allied with others who are trying to resist the transformation of a public park into a prestige project. Despite their best efforts, questions regarding the city’s development have not been sufficient to mobilize enough citizens to resist the realization of the unnecessary and wasteful project. [33] The architectural community must play a leading role in resisting the transformation of our cities into sceneries supporting populist politics. It must actively engage with the public, so the images of an architecture-only-to-communicate become transparent to the degree that they, and not critical architecture itself, disappear.

[30] Christine M. Boyer, *The City of Collective: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 2.

[31] See Adrienn Sain, “The Buda Castle is Being Rebuilt,” *Daily News Hungary*, February 10, 2016, [link](#). The website of the company responsible for the Imre Steindl Program shows all developments included: [link](#).

[32] Péter Görög, “A neo-nacionalista díszlet,” *Élet és Irodalom*, vol. 60, no. 23 (November 2015). *Élet és Irodalom* is the most prestigious weekly magazine of Hungary and is available online: [link](#). In English, the article’s title is “The Neo-Nationalist Scenery.” Péter Görög is a media researcher and professor at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest who often publishes on daily issues of politics.

[33] The website of the civil activist group the Ligetvédők lists ten professional organizations that oppose the development of the Városliget in its current form. Among them are the Hungarian Society for Urban Planning, the Garden and Landscape Architect Section of the Hungarian Chamber of Architects, the Scientific Board of Art Historians at the Hungarian Academy of Science, the Hungarian Association of Landscape Architects and numerous environmental organizations. See (in Hungarian): [link](#). Politicians of opposition parties tried initiating referendums about the development; however, these were blocked by court decisions. In 2016, at the height of civil resistance, protests happened in the park, and many public intellectuals drew attention to the issue.