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Changes in Children's Spaces: The History of Playgrounds and Fairytale Connections in Hungary during the Socialist Period[1]

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Abstract

My study outlines the history of the development of the typical settings of socialist architecture—the housing estates, panel blocks, and socialist modernist playgrounds—in parallel with the evolution of the status of the fairytale in socialism. The run-down spaces and abandoned milieus of the socialist period, born as spaces shaped by an ideal system and as visions of the new city and society, seem even sadder today. Through metaphorical architectural spaces, the utopia that once shone like a bright star is contrasted with what is sometimes nostalgia and sometimes a new beginning, a tabula rasa. My writing traces the history of the development and perception of socialist housing estates and the associated playgrounds/communal spaces, and explores how children's needs, fairytales, and fantasies increasingly shape these spaces as the regime changes.

Keywords: urbanism, socialism, architecture, childhood, utopia

Introduction

My study examines how housing estates transformed children's spaces, adopting a multidisciplinary approach that connects the history of socialist-era architecture with film and literary studies, social history, and sociology. The aim is to provide new perspectives to understand the recent past of the region and to critically analyze the identity constructed

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through socialist modernism. I explore the theme of change through architecture and, more specifically, through the evolving face of playgrounds. I live in Szeged, and my research on local history focuses on the city; thus, many of my examples are also related to Szeged.

The destruction and modernization of the city's former playgrounds and the transformation of its public spaces during the socialist period are disheartening because they were once the spaces of the new municipality and the visions of a new society, shaped by an ideal system. These former utopias are in tension with the sometimes nostalgic, sometimes clean slate attitudes of today's collective memory. The history of the development and perception of socialist housing estates and their playgrounds/communal spaces has been well documented. In many cases, the protagonists are "prefab children," the inhabitants of this new or necessary type of building, who, at the time, faced unforeseeable social and mental consequences. Pál Békés portrayed the grip of the housing estate of the 1980s from a child's perspective:

> "One evening, he was staring mournfully at the half-open door of the office. He could see the façade of a huge building. To be precise, all he could see from the office door was this house; the sky was out of the picture. On the fifth floor, sitting in the window, was a little boy of seven." (Békés, 1983, p. 26)

The tension between the child and the concrete building towering above, like a golem, is typical of the 1980s, when the prestige of panel buildings was in decline. As the year of the regime change approached, the inhabitants of the concrete housing estates no longer saw their homes as status symbols. Panel buildings were articulated as a social trap from which there was no "escape" for existential reasons. An exhibition at MODEM in the summer of 2019 highlighted the artistic aspects of this process, as Central European art history since the 1980s has increasingly featured the concrete apartment building as a dystopian/utopian motif—both as a social space and a metaphor for socialism's unsustainability (Süli-Zakar, 2019). In Marcell Esterházy's video loop h.l.m.v 2.0, the edge-to-length of a prefabricated house is realized as a geometric, abstract surface that fills the entire field of the image. Between the city and the natural spaces beyond the urban area, the housing block is a barricade that separates the city from nature, a gray zone defined as a nonplace, a non-lieu, or a between space. In the literature of the period, its "victim" is the child, cut off from the world of fairy tales and nature and forced into a magical, motherless environment. In the 1980s, growing attention was paid to the "theft" of the fairytale, the effects of the spaces surrounding the child on the formation of personality, and the creative maneuvers against demagicalization. In what follows, I will outline this evolution from the 1950s to the regime change in 1989, focusing on playgrounds as a metaphorical setting.

A Brief Introduction to the Architecture of Prefabricated Buildings in Hungary and the History of Prefabricated Spaces

The following overview provides a concise account of the emergence, developmental phases, and defining characteristics of panel-based housing construction in Hungary. One of the primary academic sources for this summary is the doctoral dissertation by architect Ádám Paládi-Kovács (Paládi-Kovács, 2020), which offers an in-depth examination of the historical and socio-structural aspects of socialist-era housing policy. Complementing this is the dissertation by Eszter Karlócainé Bakay (Karlócainé, 2012), which presents a detailed analysis of the spatial design of public open spaces within housing estates. The primary objective of state socialist housing policy in Hungary was to address the severe post-war housing shortage by promoting the construction of large volumes of standardized, rapidly assembled, and cost-effective dwellings. This demand was further intensified by industrialization and the resulting demographic shift toward urban centers. From the early 1960s, both national and international studies increasingly investigated the state of housing stock and the feasibility of prefabricated building technologies. A panel-based construction reached its peak in Hungary between 1961 and 1992, a period in which approximately 510,000 housing units were completed. Hungarian engineers studied Soviet, East German, Czechoslovak, and Danish prefabrication systems and subsequently developed a domestically adapted industrial housing production framework. The planning of these housing estates followed a uniform architectural logic, relying on modular design principles and standardized components to facilitate efficiency in construction. The residential complexes were often accompanied by institutions, commercial spaces, and essential service facilities, intended to support the everyday needs of residents locally, although their actual implementation frequently remained partial.

Public perceptions of housing estates were ambivalent. While some interpreted them as symbols of modernization and improved living standards, others experienced them as alienating and monotonous environments. Despite this, residents frequently sought to personalize their dwellings, using them as expressions of identity and as frameworks for creating a sense of home. Today, panel buildings continue to play a central role in Hungary's urban landscape. They not only embody the housing solutions of the socialist period but also serve as subjects of inquiry in the fields of architectural heritage, social identity construction, and urban theory.

In her research, Karlócainé Bakay (Karlócainé, 2012) highlights that open spaces within Budapest's housing estates between 1945 and 1990 evolved distinctly in terms of spatial logic, function, and visual language. During the Socialist Realist period (1951–1955),

modernist urban planning principles encouraged the creation of internal courtyards and continuous green space systems, aimed at reinforcing spatial connectivity between residential blocks. In the subsequent Late Modernist period (1956–1979), functionalist design took precedence, resulting in spatial configurations defined by simple geometries and repetitive, standardized elements. At the same time, increasing emphasis was placed on mitigating environmental stressors—such as noise, dust, and heat—through the strategic use of vegetation and planting patterns. Based on dispersed shrub groupings, green space design shifted in the 1980s toward denser, forest-like plantings, which provided both spatial articulation and ecological buffering functions. These structures remain active sites of discourse regarding urban renewal, social history, and cultural heritage preservation.

Changes in Playgrounds Between 1945 and 1990

1. Order and Discipline: The 1950s

The Socialist Realist architectural program in Hungary was announced in 1951 by the newly founded Association of Hungarian Architects. This style had been predominant in the Soviet Union for decades. Following Stalin's death, Khrushchev's speech in 1954 eased the pressure on art and architecture, and the socialist style was replaced by modernism. In the terracotta relief of the SOCREAL-style apartment building in Mars Square in Szeged, Antal Tápai presented the typical, idealized family model of the 1950s, for which the regime had designed these apartments. However, the child was not as crucial in the production-oriented state apparatus as the schematic iconographic program suggests. The Hungarian social-realist installations are rigid and symmetrical in composition due to their impressive appearance, and represent the grandeur of the workers' state. Within the enclosed blocks was a minimum of green space; at most, children could play on the building rubble or in the dustbin, which was a mandatory functional element. The playgrounds of the 1950s were not yet within the visual range of the windows; instead, they were located in the parks outside the blocks. The more confined areas of the blocks were used for institutions, laundries, and kitchens to achieve work efficiency. Our image of the playgrounds of the Rákosi era is from archival photos and former plans: the symmetrical 1953 Valéria Square (now Bartók Square) playground plan in Szeged, considerably remodeled, reflects the ideas of social–realist architecture. A characteristic of the supervised areas is the central space, visible from all points, including a swing and a rocket launcher. Instead of the plan's regular, landscaped surroundings, the playground was framed by cinder-strewn terrain, scattered vegetation, and the decaying backdrops of the buildings. Although not a playground, the youth square, designed by Tibor Snopper,

the architect of the Szeged Design Office in 1954, is a real curiosity. With its single-room dormitories and monumental parade ground, the design of the 120-seat, socialist-style textile college building for girls stands out for the total absence of a personal zone and private sphere. The twelve points of the Pioneers' Pledge precisely define the Communist Party's expectations of school-age children at the time, the most important of which was good behavior, as suggested by the controlled and supervised spaces.

Figure 1

Sztálinváros, the park behind the houses on Május 1. Street, facing the rear of the houses on Vasmű (Sztálin) Street, with a seesaw and a swing set without swings, circa 1952

2. Two Floors of Happiness: The 1960s

In the 1960s, before the transition to factory-built technology, housing estates were constructed on a "city within a city" plan that provided all services locally. Kindergartens, schools, and doctors' surgeries were located between the houses, with small shops

and launderettes below. In the 1960s, living in a housing estate was prestigious, both due to the quality of life and the public services available (Prakfalvi, 2022, pp. 134–144). The housing estates were mainly built in transition zones, representing an outward shift of housing estates. The 15-year housing program required new technologies to meet its goal of building one million homes; thus, in the second half of the 1960s. Therefore, the state acquired the housing factories and initiated mass production of prefabricated housing using standard designs. The change in the perception of housing estates is also reflected in socialist housing films. Films from the 1960s (Herskó János: *Két emelet boldogság*, 1960)[2] portrayed the housing theme with an optimistic, comic tone; in contrast, by the seventies, for example, in Péter Bacsó's *Forró vizet a kopaszra!*[3], skepticism about housing estates is already evident, and the tone of the films becomes grotesque and tragicomic (Gelencsér, 2008, pp. 142–160). Public sculptures were a significant aspect of the housing estates of the 1960s, often functioning as gathering spaces and playgrounds for children. Such was the function of Walter Madarassy's reclining (bathing?) statue of a woman in the Odessa settlement in Szeged, built in the 1960s. The wave of playground construction started in the late 1960s; thus, while there were 669 playgrounds in Budapest in 1969, by the mid-1970s, this number had increased fivefold (Várkonyi, 1969, p. 29). Most of the playgrounds of the 1960s had been built by social workers without a particular concept; thus, the 1960s were the era of rocket climbers and chain swings welded based on the Soviet model.

Figure 2

Antal Tápai's relief depicting a family playing with their child above the gate on Hajnóczy Street in Szeged. 1955

Source: own photograph

[2] Two Floors of Happiness (My Translation)

[3] Hot water on the bald head! (My translation)

3. Serious about Games: The 1970s

By the 1970s, the economic situation had improved owing to the new development model; however, the construction priority was to build mass housing as cheaply as possible. It was the period when most of the panel housing was built, with even less attention paid to public spaces than in the previous decade. One reason for this is that before the ever-expanding housing estates were built, using panel technology, everything had been leveled, creating a barren landscape of concrete jungles devoid of trees or plants. The grass was replaced by asphalt, gravel, or gravel aggregate. The spaces between the panels were not as definite as those for the standard flats or building types, so the terracing between the buildings was often entirely ad hoc. Béla Borvendég, the chief architect responsible for developing the Szeged–Tarján district, wrote in 1975:

> The cheerful coexistence of the playground and the car park is somewhat surprising. I don't remember under what compulsion this solution could have been born. It seems that the sturdy steel tube climbing devices protect children from cars. What protects cars from children? Maybe it's Dad looking out the window. (Borvendég, 1975, p. 20)

Playgrounds were pushed out of residential houses, often following traffic routes and car parks that were placed between houses so that the family's only asset, usually the car, could be seen from the apartment window. The transformation of leftover materials from prefabricated buildings into playground equipment was common practice, for example, in Budapest, where the concrete playground on Vackor Street (since demolished) had been made from sewer pipes (Nagy, 2023, p. 117).

Although spaces for future public functions were designated among the housing blocks, these were for the most part never realized. The areas left vacant functioned as semi-private, transitional zones, where the boundaries between public street and the space belonging to the residential buildings remained ambiguous. By the 1970s, public space came to be defined not in physical but in social terms. It was precisely this poetics of space that attracted Central European neo-avant-garde artists, who began to stage their actions more frequently in parks, factory courtyards, schoolyards, and other public sites (Brașoveanu, 2023, p. 1–16). In Hungary, a representative example of such art challenging the very definition of publicness and freedom was Gyula Pauer's *Demonstration Board Forest* (1978), installed on the grounds of the former Nagyatád artists' colony, which had been reduced to dust.

At the same time, the neo-avant-garde turned its attention to childhood and childlike creativity as a metaphorical space of untainted purity, which led to a renewed interest

in art pedagogy. In 1971, Children's Art in Japan, a methodological book by Mária Székácsné Vida (who had spent many years living in Japan) was published, emphasizing the importance of art education and bringing attention to its role in Hungary (Székácsné, 1971).

Between 1975 and 1977, Dóra Maurer and Miklós Erdély conducted creativity exercises at the Ganz–MÁVAG Cultural House in Budapest to rekindle the "natural" creative instincts from childhood. In 1975, the Hungarian National Gallery tasked Árpád Szabados to create the GYIK Workshop (Children and Youth Art Workshop) to enhance children's creativity. In 1976, the first fairytale playground was built in Zalaegerszeg, partly thanks to the work of workshop members Árpád Szabados, Ildikó Várnagy, Márta Pallai, and Géza Samu. The Zalai Hírlap newspaper reported on the newly opened playground as follows:

> Stumpy country lanes, mysterious tunnels, log citadels, totem poles twist and turn on this fresh-framed playground, and the wind whips around with parts of strange, unnamable structures, on the swings you can cling to carved animal heads, and elsewhere a fairytale creature resembling a giant insect spins around on a concrete pedestal. And the creators have made it all cheerful with bright, flirty colors. (P. L. 1976, p. 4)

Figure 3
Page illustrated with photomontage from Ambrus Pirk's 1979 book *Játékról komolyan* [Seriously About Play]

The artistically designed climbing sculptures satisfied the children's need for movement (although the playground made of concrete waste did the same) and put their creativity, imagination, and magical thinking into motion. According to Árpád Szabados, who is also concerned with the psychology of creation, these climbing sculptures are considered "open works" in the emerging concept of postmodernism. The remaining 40% is made up of the children, making the work complete." (P. L. 1976, p. 4) The creators of the fairytale playground, members of the Zala Artists' Colony, researched topics such as collective creation and public utility, which remain relevant today, with the playground serving as an experimental laboratory for their investigations. "The participating sculptors created public sculptures that were an integral part of the urban environment, not only to be looked at but also to be touched and even climbed." (B. L. 1976, p. 4) The 1970s saw the emergence of themed playgrounds, such as the popular traffic parks. An example from Szeged in 1976 was the KRESZ playground, which even included a traffic scene drawing where children could learn the rules of the KRESZ (MNL-CSML, 538–2202/248 I.).

4. The Fairytale Arrives: The 1980s

Fairytale playgrounds spread throughout Hungary in the 1980s as part of a nostalgic movement that had begun in the 1970s, particularly focused on exploring children's creativity. In 1979, to mark the International Year of the Child, Ambrus Pirk published a book titled *Playing Seriously* (1979), which was written to provide housing estates with adequate playgrounds. This large-scale, nearly 300-page-long work was illustrated with photographs of the playground creators in Zalaegerszeg, among other sites. The background for writing the book was research conducted in the 1970s on children's health and initiatives aimed at improving health and promoting physical movement. The most important was the "For a Trained Youth!" movement launched in May 1977 (Vámos, 2021, p. 231).

The landscape and garden architect Ambrus Pirk, born in Gödöllő, was the grandson of the painter Jenő Remsey. He uniquely developed his landscape architecture plans during the decades of socialism, employing a universal approach that affected the smallest details. In the volume intended for playground designers and teachers, the plans and examples, illustrated with countless figures and photos, highlighted the factors influencing suitable playing conditions, using Swedish and Norwegian playgrounds (featuring water, petting zoos, etc.) as examples. In a separate chapter, he addresses the downsides of a civilized lifestyle: overcrowded playgrounds in panel estates, limited green spaces, intimidating high-rise buildings, and the behavioral disorders that develop. Pál Békés' 1983 youth novel explores the same civilizational issues affecting children.

The focus of his book is the rehabilitation of the fairytale genre as a possible means of "saving" children. His descriptions portray the stark, schematic urban panel environments. What happens to children if their intimate relationship with nature fades? Pál Békés's novel *Lakótelepi mítoszok* (1984) is an ironically toned, episodically structured work that constructs a mythical universe from childhood and adolescent experiences shaped within the reality of late socialist housing estates. The narrative presents the housing estate not merely as a physical or social space, but as a site of collective mythology, where childlike imagination, the search for identity, and the absurdities of everyday life are deeply intertwined. Film director Judit Felvidéki released a film adaptation based on the novel in 1985.

What are the consequences of a "sedentary lifestyle, that allows being in the fresh air for only a short time" (Pirk, 1979, p. 26)? Those unable to play find themselves excluded from the fairytale world. Will they be capable of forming social relationships as adults? Ultimately, to what extent can the living conditions of children in a big city, in a panel estate, be humanized? The children's literature of the period aimed to restore fairytales to disenchanted housing estate environments. The 1980s brought a corresponding innovation: the fairytale playground.

Interest in children's games, fairytales, and naive art peaked in Hungary toward the end of the 1970s, marking the beginning of their formal incorporation into cultural policy. Concurrently, the Szórakatenusz Toy Museum and the Naive Art Museum in Kecskemét were established. Undoubtedly, these two institutions focusing on fairytales, games, and instinctive creativity, represented an archetypal common denominator understandable to everyone at that time. "Play is total, like human existence itself," wrote Mihály Schéner (1979). The artist, hailing from a peasant family in Medgyesegyháza, graduated from the College of Fine Arts in the 1940 s and later worked as a high school drawing teacher in Békéscsaba. His unique world of motifs developed in the 1960s, as he filtered through his imagination the forms and figures in peasant life, folk art, crafts, and folk games, combining them with the latest contemporary art techniques and creative methods, primarily from France. In 1982, he was commissioned to create public works for a playground, a commission that was a novelty and a brave undertaking at a time when playgrounds were built using templates. The playground included horses, hussars, Bari, a Puli dog, a pigeon, and a kissing pair of pigeons named Csilabe-csók, along with a peacock whose spread tail feathers became a squirrel wheel turning a swing (Peacock-swing-wheel), a carousel, and various animal figures. Each piece of the outdoor giant chessboard had a name; for example, the king was called Sweet Melon King.

The characters also appeared in a children's play titled Gyalogcsillag, which was staged at the Jókai Theater in Békéscsaba, written by István Csukás. From the late 1970s, some members of the Studio of Young Folk Artists also designed playground equipment, which was showcased in the nursery of the HUNGEXPO exhibition. However, the wooden vehicles of János Román, the wicker rocking chairs of Mária Nagy, Kristóf Nagy, and István Vidák, the ox-sack swing made of natural materials, the dragon tunnel, and other toy initiatives from HUNGEXPO were accessible only to the children of exhibition visitors. Kristóf Nagy's playground sculptures in Csongrád were forerunners of the organic school. The now-fading panel program of the 1980s, characterized by colorful blocks surrounding green areas, also contributed to the disenchanted spaces. During the construction phase of the Szeged–Makkosháza district in 1984, architect Imre Hernyák worked with painter Károly Koffán to develop the color schemes of the buildings. Art, myth, and fairytales seeped back into the walls after having been abandoned for decades.

Figure 4
Mihály Schéner's *Dorottya carriage* in Budapest, at 2 Ágoston Street

Summary and Conclusions

This study investigates the transformation of children's spaces during the socialist period in Hungary, with a particular focus on playgrounds in housing estates and their connections to fairytales. Drawing on the example of Szeged (Hungary), it explores how socialist ideology shaped the urban environment and how conceptions of childhood and play evolved over the decades.

In the 1950s, socialist realist architecture served the needs of the model family envisioned by the state, yet children's perspectives remained marginal. Playgrounds were isolated from residential buildings, offering minimal green space and reflecting a strict logic of surveillance and discipline. During the 1960s, life on housing estates still held prestige, with these neighborhoods forming self-contained microcosms within the city. Although playgrounds continued to emerge primarily through community-led initiatives, there was growing interest in communal spaces designed for children.

The mass production of prefabricated housing in the 1970s, however, resulted in increasingly bleak and alienating environments, where playgrounds competed with parking lots for limited space. Public areas became undefined transitional zones, prompting reinterpretation by artists, particularly members of the Central European neo-avant-garde. Childhood began to function as a metaphor for creative purity, an idea being reinforced by experimental approaches in art education and participatory workshops.

From the mid-1970s, the emergence of fairytale playgrounds, featuring imaginative climbing structures designed by visual artists, marked a shift toward more holistic and child-centered spatial design. Some of these playgrounds operated not only as recreational zones but also as experimental spaces for community-based artistic practice. By the 1980s, fairytales had reentered the visual and spatial vocabulary of prefabricated estates, emphasizing imagination, proximity to nature, and the therapeutic importance of creative play. Institutional developments, such as the founding of the *Szórakaténusz Toy Museum* in Kecskemét, further supported the rehabilitation of play and storytelling. In the final stages of the prefabricated housing program, the aesthetic qualities of these urban environments came under scrutiny, and artists and architects collaborated to reintroduce color and create more humane built environments.

This study seeks to map the symbolic fate of childhood spaces within the framework of socialist modernization. It highlights the extent to which politics and ideology influenced the meanings of play, space, and fairytales, and how playgrounds ultimately became sites of resistance, memory, and renewal. The significance of this work lies

in its reinterpretation of socialist-era urban planning through the lens of childhood, revealing the ideological and social layers embedded in playground design. By integrating insights from architecture, art, and developmental psychology—fields often considered separately—it offers a multidimensional understanding of the cultural and aesthetic processes of the period. The study not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the past but also invites critical reflection on contemporary urban memory and the reimagination of children's spaces today.

Figure 5

Kristóf Nagy's climbing sculpture of the *Miraculous Deer*

Several potential directions for future research emerge from this study, though they could not be addressed within the present scope. These include examining how children's relationships to communal spaces have changed since the fall of socialism and assessing the extent to which today's playgrounds support creativity and community development. Further inquiry might explore how storytelling and play function within contemporary urban design, particularly related to the visual and cultural representation of childhood in public spaces. Interdisciplinary research could also investigate how artists, educators, and planners collaborate to humanize communal environments, whether through art education programs or creative camps. The role of socialist-era playgrounds as sites

of cultural and collective memory could offer new insights into the public's evolving relationship with urban heritage. Lastly, comparative studies of playground development across Central and Eastern Europe could illuminate shared ideological, artistic, and social patterns, while also identifying national specificities in spatial design for children.

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