

THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE
The Conference venue: Budapest and the Corvinus University

Tamás Gáspár, CSc

*Associate Professor
Futures Studies Department
Corvinus University of Budapest
Budapest, Hungary*

It is nowadays considered either facile or commonplace that every place has a spirit. Everyone would agree that we receive characteristic impressions everywhere: we can recall if we had a good time somewhere, and if it was wonderful, we may even shiver with memories. It is the people who make this spirit, with their ideas, expectations and actions over time, and hence a geographic and historic environment gives an ever-changing atmosphere to a place. And vice versa: each place's atmosphere shapes all the visitors who spend a period of time there.

What is not a matter of common sense is that a changing spirit always manifests in a particular place. The ideas, efforts and challenges of people grow one upon the next as barks of history, which are "in the air"; these, however, cannot be articulated directly. Either you taste it by living in the area for a while or you try to recognise it via its crystallised material forms: the buildings, the urban and natural environment, the activities of people etc. all tell about it. This short essay makes an effort to grasp what atmosphere Budapest - and the very building of Corvinus University - offers for our conference.

Budapest: the city of harmonised contrasts

Buda vs. Pest

Budapest is the unity of contrasts – she is like the larger country - or Europe - in miniature. The city has a central position both geographically (not geometrically!) as well as culturally in Europe and in Hungary, and this has been enriching its sense of multiculturalism – as well as its contrasts - for centuries. The very name of the city comes from the unity of two – or to be

more precise, three – different cities with different natural environments, different social backgrounds and histories. ‘Buda’ (like the third part, Old-Buda) is a personal name of Slavic origin, while ‘Pest’ in Bulgarian means both kiln, referring to lime-burning, and cave: the limestone mountains in *Buda* comprise kilometres of cave galleries. One can see that even the name of the city is rather dialectic: it is Buda that used to be called Pest.

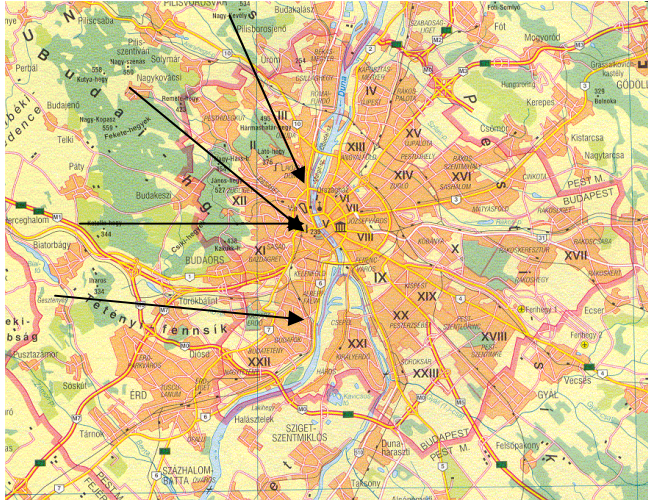
In the meantime it was called *Pest-Buda* for a while, and in 1873 the three historic parts were unified under the name of ‘*Budapest*’. These changes reflect the contest for the precedence between the two main parts and the evolved structure: since the unification, which is the birth of the metropolis at the same time, it is Buda that has been integrating different historic traditions, but also in its meaning like ‘Pest’.

Mountainous region vs. lowlands

Buda on the right side of the river is mountainous and wooded. The northern woods function as lungs of the city: the dominant direction of wind is north-western, which brings fresh air to millions of people. At the same time the embracing mountains protect the city from the aggressive, devastating northern wind – excepting, sometimes, the smog.

Three mountain chains differentiate the area and all reach the Danube:

- the group of Hármashatár Mountains from up north at *Rose Hill*;
- the group of János Hill, Hárs Hill and the Csíki Hills from east at *Gellért Hill*; and
- the blank Tétény Plateau from the south at Budafok.

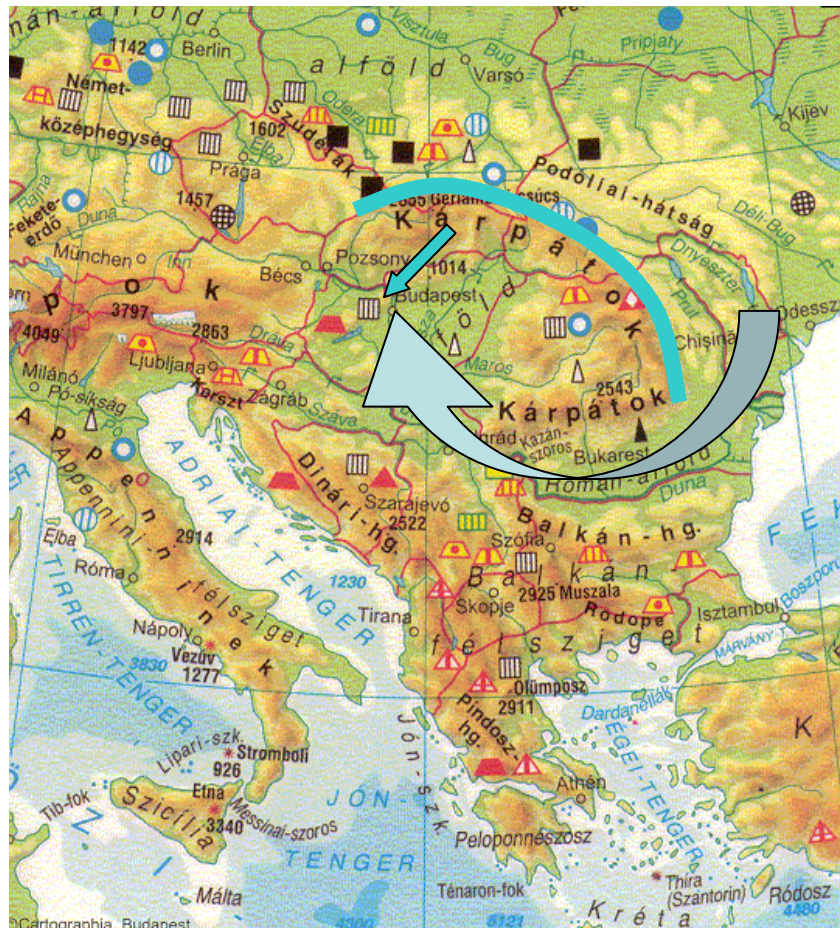


Mountain chains and Budapest City

Castle Hill is surrounded by Gellért Hill and Rose Hill, partly belongs to the latter, but is more precisely a terrace of the Danube. These hills, however, are not only special characteristics of Buda. *By origin* they are the leading edge of the *North-Carpathian Mountains*, transmitting the air of the highest areas of Central Europe.

Buda Castle, the cultural centre of historic Budapest, is thus naturally influenced by the “fresh air” of Europe. Christianity, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the social-democratic movements, though not to the roots and via a Central-European filter, always enriched the view of how to integrate the country, which is the essence of a Capital. No wonder that the cultural role of the historic castle remained alive after the collapse of the Monarchy: Buda Castle now offers a place for the National Széchenyi Library.

Budapest in a wider perspective



Pest is just the opposite. A flat, endless area with some natural borders to the north-east – the *Gödöllő Hills* – but open to the south. This land is an *organic part of the Great Plain*, the extension of its natural situation and culture. In a larger sense this plain is a local appearance of the southern strip of the *East European – Asian lowlands*. Between the Danube and the Tisza, up to Pest the short-grass steppe turns to a semi-desert, marshy land, which exists as an extreme of the Asian mode of life: these circumstances are not hopeless but call for very rational, sober, future-oriented work. The borderless area of Pest gave a unique opportunity to the city in the 19th century demographic and industrial boom to expand as well as to create a rational structure of civil, urbanised settlement.

East vs. West, North vs. South

Certain slices of the city follow the break and fall of the natural terraces. The Pest side is divided by semicircles starting and ending at the Danube. These boulevards make layers of the city with its core near the Danube – now the business and administrative centre – and have

created their natural extension by the bridges, hence connecting the two sides of the city and transmitting the values of the different layers. The *Great Boulevard*, a border between the core and the suburbs for long, has been built on a dead branch of the river.

Avenues that connect the city with different parts of the country also divide the boulevards. Two of these run toward the main cities of the Great Plain, while one connects the capital with the industrial centres of the Northern Mountains. Something similar can be recognised on the Buda side. All in all the main highways and roads of different regions of the country run to Budapest: the Hungarian traffic system is highly centralised. Moreover, a central position of the city also appears in the trans-European transport network. The main avenues of Budapest in this sense reflect and urge for an international connection – now by a ring – *via* the main regions of Hungary *between Vienna and Istanbul* as well as *between Rijeka – Trieste and Kiev*.

Budapest as a unity of West and East now highlights a narrower content of the two. Vienna has always been a special pattern of West for Budapest – as Budapest has always belonged to her geographic and historic field. The *administrative centre* of Middle-European empires marks the essence of Vienna's role with Trieste as a connection to the seas. Budapest, mostly in the Monarchy, played a similar role towards the East and the Balkans. Nowadays with the fall of the bipolar world Vienna aspires to create a “Habsburg” subregion within the EU. If Budapest is willing to participate in a new “dualism”, then this subregion can extend its field.

Istanbul (Byzantium) and Kiev also represent a special type of East. East for Hungary means the Byzantine East with its different culture from Christian traditions. However, while Moscow became a centre on a basis that merged the Byzantine traditions with the Mongolian state administration, Kiev has long been under Polish and Lithuanian authority, hence represents Pan-Slavism with some Nordic characteristics.



Budapest between East and West, North and South

By extending these direct links of the TransEuropean network, Budapest will extend more characteristically between West and East, North and South, just as, for instance, Hungary is of Asian origin but has been integrated into Western European, Roman Catholic culture. Hungary was part of the Eastern, socialist block; however it was one of the most westernised countries of this block. With accession to the European Union, the country is now a part of the integration, which is originally of the West, but represent many characteristics from the East. The Nordic rational spirit as much represents Hungarian people as the Southern emotional attitude. Hungary is the Northern edge of the Mediterranean wine culture and very close to the Southern border of the beer spirit of the North. From a world economic point of view, this part of the globe, Central-Eastern Europe is a unique society at the lower edge of the North as “centre” and the upper border of South as “periphery”. The semi-peripheral status of the region has inspired many, in fields ranging from foreign economic strategy to film art.

Engineering spirit vs. market spirit

Corvinus University is situated on the Pest side of the city: this enjoyed its main construction period at the end of the 19th century, and became the field of civilisation-industrialisation-nationalisation bureaucratic tendencies. The main building of the University is on the Southern part of the present city centre, situated on the outer side of the so-called Small Boulevard. This area used to be the commercial centre of the city; the names of the

surrounding streets still remind one of this role: Customs house Boulevard, Warehouse Street, Salt House Street, Galley Street, Salt Street, Bear House Street, etc.

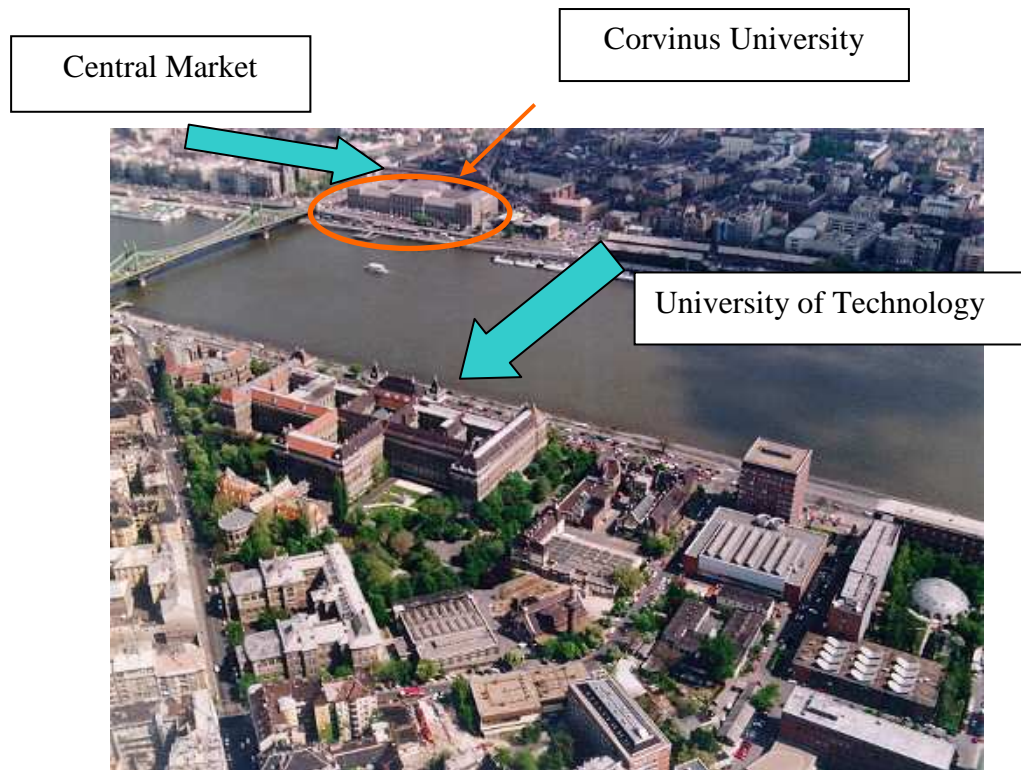


Photo: János Philip

Corvinus University in the confrontation of engineering and market spirits

The special atmosphere of Corvinus University is expressed by its location too, by extending between the confronting spirits of the University of Technology on the other side of the river and the Central Market behind the building. The engineering and classical market spirits are two different views of social management and futures.

Engineers in the classical sense are the ideals of foresight in the industrial world. A machine-model of the world makes it predictable and able to be planned. Economists are managers of creating the material structure of social harmony. Managerial forecasting has always been complex, including subjective initiatives, evaluation and feed-back. The engineering and managerial approaches cannot and should not be separated, even if given historical periods give superiority to one of them.

Different sides of science used to comprise the unity in Budapest. The post-war world, however, has subordinated science to the politics of status quo. In Hungary the separation and

confrontation of sciences went along with the separation and confrontation of universities. The old customs house gave place to the University of Economics and determined its view.

The University of Technology has given outstanding engineers and inventors to the world, such as *Donát Bánki*, the inventor of the carburettor, and *Imre Steindl*, the architect of Parliament. However, engineering sciences have never been an integral part of the city's power and social planning. Most of its experts as well as their inventions left Hungary.

The same is true of Corvinus University, formerly the University of Economics. Managerial planning should be an integral part of social philosophy; however the customs house past and the Central Market behind the building rather determine what economics is used for. In other words, it has mostly been the developmental model of Pest and of the market which have influenced economic science in Budapest. Engineering-management and market spirit have shaped a unique atmosphere at the bank of the Danube.

The University of Economics has always been a place which could place management studies into a wider perspective, and could embed economics into a cultural-political-historic environment. This is a tradition that in economic terms always traces wide social problems. No wonder that some of the outstanding scientists of this university played a determining role in social administration – as well as their careers having ended in private tragedy. All visitors are reminded by the busts of *Imre Nagy*, former head of the department of Agriculture, and of *Pál Teleki*, former head of the department of Economic Geography, both prime ministers who died violent deaths.

All in all, the existence and the development of Budapest and Corvinus University highlight two main features of the spirit of the place: **the articulation of diverse, sometimes opposing cultural attitudes that have always been harmonised.**

Messages of the University building

Materialisation of values

István Szécheny first gave birth to the idea of building a Customs Palace during Hungary's Reformation period. The 1830-40's were the beginning of the main city construction period and Szécheny moved ahead: among his national great plans he urged the construction of the

Chain Bridge as well as offering one year of his personal income to set up the Hungarian Academic Society; hence he became a founder of the Academy. His father also supported the national development: in 1802 he offered his library, his collection of medals, and his works of art to the nation, and thus became the founder of the Hungarian National Museum. The plan could finally be executed only in the 1870's; however the Customs Palace was constructed in a neo-Renaissance style by *Miklós Ybl*, one of the greatest architects of the nation.

**The Customs Palace
(built 1870-1874)**

If one takes a look at this story from an economist point of view, Széchenyi was petting a vision to move the customs office into a stately Palace. Creating a luxuriously built environment, which is just the opposite of economic efficiency, is one way to highlight that international duties are taken as *public* issues. Customs duties and economic relations should be taken as a base to finance public goods and services, rather than simply budget revenues of public.



Corvinus University of Budapest

One may trace this notion in the structure of the building too. The three floors around the yard are oval in shape and form a closed corridor with a bridge in the middle – like the symbol of

eternity. One can walk round and round without bumping into any obstacles or stairs. It resembles cloisters in a monastery, which used to be consciously constructed this way so that monks could concentrate on their thoughts and meditation while walking. Retiring within oneself can be interpreted as a condition of being able to develop the future of the community.



Corvinus University of Budapest

The University „cloisters”

A passage, moreover, can be taken as an infrastructure that connects rooms, different departments and people working there, and hence enables their communication and future expectations. This construction idea follows Szécheny's principles and denies that the economic sphere primarily serves private interests.

No wonder that the main, traditional centre of futures studies in Hungary is also situated on the second floor of the University of Economic Sciences. The economic science tradition always incorporated the notion that economic processes are subordinated to future visions and community aims.

If one pays more attention to the Entrance Hall, the Customs Palace building seems to be an outstanding manifestation of the notion of integration: the massive ceremonial façade and the structuring follows the Wiener architecture style, while the details are of Italian solution – the North and South spirit in the sense of European art history.

The Entrance Hall

The Northern, functional view, with its cool mind and scientific attitude, as well as the Southern emotional approach, with its inquiry about general frameworks, have created two flows that have collided, mingled and generated a splendid variety of styles. As for two co-

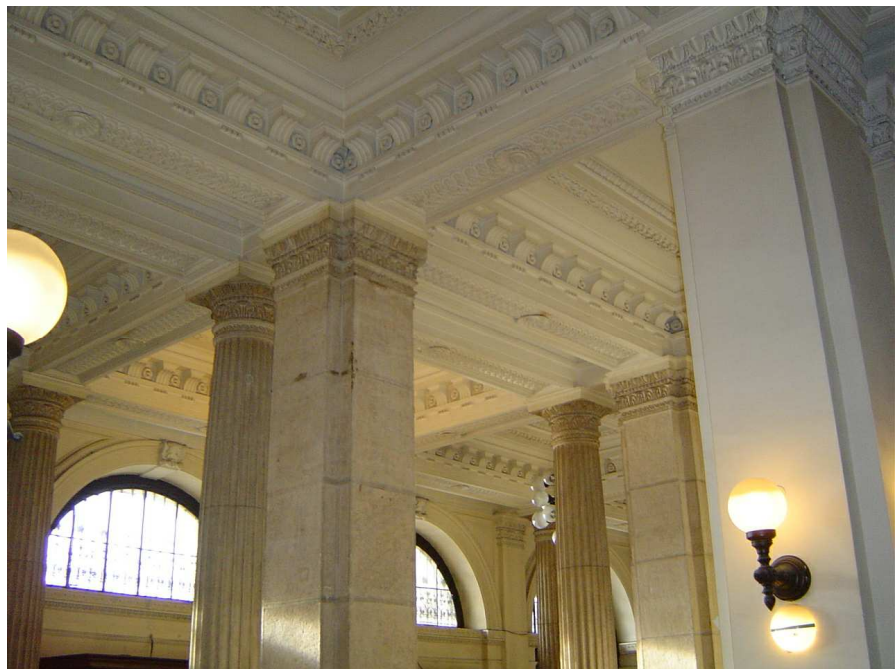


Photo: Tamás Gáspár

existing waves of mainstream, consider the 16th century Dutch portrait painter, *Van Eyck*, alongside *Masaccio*; consider Walter's chorals alongside *de Rore's* motets; or consider Italian bel canto alongside *Wagner's* musical dramas.

Raising one's head, one may take a closer look at the frontispiece of the Palace. The Danube façade is ornamented with sculptures representing rail, steam shipping, painting and sculpture



Corvinus University of Budapest

– the Western and Eastern spirit in the sense of how the essence of the world should be expressed.



Photo: Tamás Gáspár

The Danube façade of the University

Western development puts the emphasis on classical scientific explanation, and on the material aspect of the mind, even if counter currents have always been present, even sometimes dominant. What we call Eastern apprehends phenomena in their totality, with holism rather than analytical research. Art certainly is not “Eastern” as such but in this case, in relation to economic sciences, the arts stress symbolic, right-brain thinking. The traditions of the University allow us to consider and to research the economic field as an art too.

Linking diverse areas

As indicated above, the University building was built as a customs house in 1874. In those days the inner yard of the building was an area open to the sky – and served as a freight yard. This was the terminus of rail lines from the South, and hence the building operated as an infrastructure of communication. If one looks carefully around, the railway arches can be still recognised in the Assembly Hall.



Corvinus University of Budapest

**The assembly hall in
2004**



BTM Kiscelli Museum, photo: György Klösz

**The open assembly hall in
the 1890's**

Railway transportation, and hence the goods station in the present Assembly Hall, used to be connected with the Danube quay by a cellar system and subways. Rail and water as two kinds of infrastructure are closely linked to each other. Like the arches in the Assembly Hall, the bricked-up gates at the quay can also be discerned.



Photo: Tamás Frajka

**The water-linked
Customs Palace**



Photo: Tamás Gáspár



Hungarian National Museum

While the two sides of Budapest extend their attraction, and meanwhile comprise the East and West of Europe, the natural material basis of both their separation and connection is the *Danube* (Duna), the second longest river in Europe. This huge river has been providing fish and water, and hence has created the opportunity of settlement. As infrastructure, it also connects the western part of Europe with the Balkans, offering a transitional role between the two, both in the sense of trade and of culture. The Danube has been always big enough to enable the two sides to have their own kind of development, small enough to transfer the influences and to unify the opposite banks, and long enough to enable Central-Eastern Europe to develop its own characteristics.

Endre Ady, one of the greatest poets of Hungary, wrote in the early 20th century that Hungary is a “ferry-country”: She is always carried off by the European great powers of the West and the East. First she is put into a port of Christian Western Europe, then of the Turkish Empire, next of the Habsburg Empire, then of the German Empire, followed by the Soviet Empire, today of the European Union and NATO. The Danube in this sense symbolises the river that separates as well as creates a dialog within the country and the city, as well as the river on which our ferry-boat is drifting or makes political decisions: on which side to moor.

The University building has told another story than the City. It has enriched the spirit of the conference by emphasising and manifesting **outcome-output orientation** and **communication**.

Conclusion

This short overview, far from being complete, has uncovered the spirit that Budapest and Corvinus University can offer for the World Conference and Budapest Futures Course 2005 of the World Futures Studies Federation.

The geopolitical situation, the history and the inhabitants of the city represent quite varying values throughout space and time. However, harmonising the permanent diversity is one of the main challenges for the city as well as one of its deepest traditions. The main building of Corvinus University, the former Customs Palace, has had a unique role in Budapest: crystallising values and diverse attitudes in material terms as well as creating the infrastructure for the communication between remote places and values.

Linking the articulation and harmonisation of diverse attitudes to outcome-output orientation and communication result in two main features that characterise the conference venue. **Dialog among diversities** is not alien to this place, while the demand for manifestation of values leads to **action orientation**. We can extend these notions to the diversity of people and the co-existence of generations as well. The result is just what the conference calls for: **Futures generation to future generations**.

I hope that the spirit of the place is going to support the coming discussions and with this knowledge let me wish all of us a fruitful and enjoyable conference and Budapest Futures Course.