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Villas of Wealth: A Historical Perspective on New Residences in Post-Socialist Hungary

THE CONTEMPORARY INTEREST in large-scale residential villas has found new favor among the economic elite of Hungary. Having chosen to express their social position in the material and aesthetic terms of their existence, do the architectural conventions of the elite now reflect indigenous or foreign tastes and traditions? This paper investigates how the construction of such sumptuous residences draws on a variety of sources for inspiration mirroring both the new potentials and the new disparities generated in post-socialist, central eastern Europe today. [Architecture, urban history, elite, post-socialist, Hungary]

COMING UNDER THE COLLOQUIAL term of *villa*, the new luxury residences along Strawberry Street, Quince Street and many of the other thoroughfares in District XI of Budapest are a stark contrast to the houses and residential complexes beside them. From their private, off-road parking spaces to their manicured lawns and neat mansard roofs, from the expensive, foreign materials used in their construction to the impressive size of their lots and frontage, no passerby can mistake the wealth and prestige which they proclaim from behind a variety of discrete half-wall fences and immaculately clipped topiary. Situated in the quiet suburb of Gazdagrét off the western bank of the Danube river, these houses resemble neither the modest bungalow homes of the original neighborhood nor the eleven-story concrete apartment buildings of the Soviet-inspired housing estate built directly to the south.

In a way which finds recurrent parallel throughout nearby urban districts nestled amidst the Buda hills of the capital city, the construction of such sumptuous residences side-by-side with their neighbors mirrors both the new potentials and the new disparities being generated in post-socialist central eastern Europe today. How have the elite of Hungary expressed their position in the material and aesthetic terms of existence?

Do architectural conventions reflect indigenous or foreign tastes? Answering these, and other related questions will be the main subject matter for the discussion which follows. Rather than investigating in depth a single community in the conventional anthropological manner, this paper broadly reflects on the wide range of active historical meanings which these homes represent to Hungarians today. Such consideration is conducted in three stages. Firstly, some of the general issues of postwar residential construction in Hungary are noted with reference to the relevant literature on housing under state socialism. Secondly, the historical development of villa architecture in Hungary is reviewed by way of its incipient and classical forms. Thirdly and finally, the discussion enters the present day, examining current trends in villa construction by way of location, design and decoration.

The ethnographic data upon which the current paper rests is part of a much larger project of anthropological inquiry begun in Hungary in 1989 and primarily (but not exclusively) dealing with economic change in the region in relation to international business (Czegledy 1995, 1996). Focused fieldwork on new residential construction was conducted in Budapest and its environs during two separate periods of research in March and July of 1998. Participant-observation inquiry supported by both structured and informal interviews, along with textual research, was used throughout. Particular attention was paid to the new real estate and housing magazines (e.g. *Családi Ház* [Family House], *Szép Házak* [Beautiful House], *Ingatlan* [Real Estate], *Képes Ingatlan Expressz* [Pictured Real Estate]) which have recently begun to appear on Hungarian news stands. This inclusion was made after it became clear in the course of interviews that the content of these magazines has begun to increasingly influence the aesthetic mores of those Hungarians in a financial position to pick and choose housing designs according to their personal tastes.

Housing in Socialist Hungary

Much of the physical surroundings to contemporary house building in Hungary is directly influenced by the restrictions imposed on real estate development during the state socialist period. After World War II and the establishment of a Soviet-backed, socialist government in 1949, considerable effort was made by the authorities in Hungary to eliminate the housing inequalities inherited from the past of Habsburg rule and its successor Horthy regime. The establishment of tight housing controls regarding the use of residential space and the effective nationalization of the large houses of the bourgeoisie and upper classes set the framework for subdividing mid-level and luxury accommodation after the Soviet fashion.¹ With the installation

of administrative curbs on real estate ownership, "the state became the dominant force in urban housing, owning most of the housing stock indirectly through the new structure of the local authorities" (Kovács 1990:112). This situation remained in place until legislation was passed in July of 1993.² In addition to plans for the mass construction of apartment high-rise buildings, these early policies were intended to ease the urban housing shortage of the time. Simultaneously, they were meant to accommodate rural migrants from the countryside and, thereby, encourage the development of an industrial proletariat of the kind envisioned by the socialist forefathers.

Commonly located at the edges of towns and cities, the new Hungarian housing estates were intended to physically reflect the collectivist ideology of state socialism, whether it be in terms of their construction, design or in the provision of specific on-site services.³ While none of them matched the example set by Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow,⁴ many were designed with ideological precepts as well as practical considerations in mind. The largest of the housing estates grouped tens of apartment high-rises together, frequently organizing them around a children's nursery, primary school, grocery store and—more often than not—a *művelődési ház* (cultural centre) where state-sponsored social and political organizations could base their activities. In the 1960s, eleven construction enterprises were established to provide credit-subsidized housing on a huge scale of production (Locsmándi & Sillince 1990:452). These "apartment building factories" churned out a limited number of large-scale designs whose minutiae were strictly regulated according to administrative fiat. The extent of this regulation was such that even the *directional* orientation of the apartments were at one time codified according to their categorical size (Preisich 1997:77). The apartments themselves tended to be cramped, poorly heated and inadequately ventilated. They often shared washing, kitchen, as well as toilet facilities, and the most common complaint of their inhabitants was the lack of acoustic insulation and its effect on privacy. As we shall see, this issue of privacy remains a central dimension of villa architecture as expressed through the convention of surrounding gardens.

State-assisted housing never succeeded in satisfying the voracious demand for urban accommodation which existed among all sections of the population. Public demand was partially offset by residential construction via private means, either through (i) state-recognized housing co-operatives or (ii) independent construction. The former entailed small associations of families building one-off, low-rise apartment buildings solely for their members.⁵ The latter type consisted of detached houses built by, as well as for, an extended family. Relations and close friends would frequently be called on to supply labor and expertise on a reciprocal basis known as *kaláka* (see Sik 1988), although skilled work generally necessitated the use of hired labor (Fehérváry 1997:140). Because of the state sector's near monopoly on both raw and semi-finished building

materials, this form of construction often required a measure of articulation with the black market (see Kenedi 1981). Such articulation fitted neatly into the propensity of state construction workers and other technical tradesmen to engage in “moonlighting” and, in the process, frequently using materials and tools stolen from their official places of work.

Only in the case of the socialist elite were detached, single family homes able to be constructed without significant resort to familial labor or the black market in building materials. Quite often, such construction was accomplished through the (mis)use of company resources at the direction of state enterprise directors who were, in effect, building personal homes at public expense—or trading favors with senior politicians and bureaucrats doing the same. The first time I came face to face with this little-discussed dimension to socialist life occurred in 1992. During a car journey with a workshop foreman of one of the socialist state’s industrial conglomerates we arrived at a major intersection in the Budapest suburbs. He turned his head slightly, pointed out of the car window at some semi-detached housing, and said with a mixed degree of pride: “Look [André], we built that: those nice condominiums over there were a gift of the [senior] executives of the company to themselves. Too bad the workers never got one!” It turned out that his workshop team had been but one of several workplace crews assigned by the company hierarchy to build these residential premises during the early 1980s. Such a case highlights one of the crucial differences between many of the elite homes of the time and those of the common citizenry: the personal cost of construction i.e. who paid the bills. Moreover, to this point can be added Györi & Matern’s (1997:102) recent observation regarding the connection between membership of the elite and the ability to use one’s status as a way of establishing *private* real-estate ownership under state socialism (versus the normative entitlement to much more limited, usufruct rights in terms of the rental of state-owned properties).

Notwithstanding the social status of their occupants, the houses of the socialist elite tended to be relatively modest, two story affairs. They were simple in overall design and without much decorative pretension, often utilizing heavily diluted elements of traditional architecture such as painted exterior plasterwork and simple pitched roofs. These conservative features permitted a measure of anonymity and ensured that the owners could not be accused of following “decadent” bourgeois tastes:

It is true that some carefully designed detached family houses were actually built in Buda during the sixties, but the builders were very careful to avoid, in their own interest, giving the impression, as slight as it may be, that the house in question could be a villa. [Gábor 1997:62]

Perhaps it is not a complete surprise then, that rarely did any of the houses of the elite borrow much in the way of decorative elements from

contemporary modernist architecture. Even the Social Realist style which originated in the USSR—while ideologically acceptable—tended to be reserved for prominent civic and commercial (rather than residential) buildings in Hungary. In spite of anti-segregationist policies promulgated during the state socialist period, the elite of Hungary continued to locate themselves in many of the same areas of the capital where their predecessors of the first half of the century had chosen to live. Their houses tended to be built in Districts II and XII of Budapest, both areas of the capital situated on the Buda side of the river—the bank which remains popularly associated with residential exclusivity (regardless of its housing variation). A large proportion of these elite homes were constructed either on the promitory suburb of Rózsadomb (Rosehill) or at its foot in adjacent Pasarét, a hilly neighborhood known for its tree-lined streets and substantial villa homes dating back to the last century. By the 1960s, Rosehill in particular became the favorite area for such new development, much of it unregulated (Preisich 1998:81) and under the protected sway of political patronage. The area's association with the socialist elite became so strong that by the end of the 1970s the mention of "a villa on Rosehill" was the colloquial equivalent of referring to someone's political connections to the ruling regime as well as their supposed wealth.

In spite of official efforts to the contrary, by the end of nearly four decades of state socialism Kovács could still write that: "... since the late 1970s, housing inequalities have continually increased, and there is a heightened public awareness of a clash with perceived fundamental tenets of the socialist system" (1990:110). For this and other reasons, early studies of the housing market in Hungary tended to steer well clear of focusing attention on the homes of the wealthy and powerful. Indeed, until recently, such research was considered intellectually inappropriate for ideological reasons—primarily because large-scale inequalities of personal wealth were not supposed to exist within the bounds of socialist equality. As a consequence, while a generation of Hungarian sociologists led by Iván Szelenyi and György Konrad's (Szelenyi 1978, 1982) pioneering research launched substantive critiques on the general provision of accommodation—none of them highlighted residences in the luxury category.⁶ The discussion which follows aims to redress this imbalance by focusing on the development of villa architecture in Budapest.

Urban Mansions and Summer Residences

The Hungarian term *villa* is derived from the Italian word for a country house, essentially a large rural residence for wealthy town dwellers which came into special prominence in the Renaissance period. Unlike the pastoral villas of Italy, however, the Hungarian variant and its central European counterparts are nearly exclusively found in urban settings and possess a bourgeois affiliation which is consonant with the development of “new” wealth in the industrial era. They are essentially “two storey, detached houses surrounded by gardens of varying dimensions” (Gábor 1997:5). The Hungarian variety possesses an indigenous character which is intrinsically tied to its origin in a combination of two separate but related architectural forms: urban mansions and summer residences built in Budapest primarily during the nineteenth century. The first urban mansions of Hungary were relatively small, but palatially appointed, residences. They were built in the still separate towns of Buda and Pest mainly during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁷ With important exceptions in and around the Castle Hill area of Buda, these mansions tended to be located on the Pest bank of the river. They acted as a winter complement to the rural seats of the aristocracy who spent the agricultural and hunting seasons on their ancestral lands in the countryside. While not as large as the country seats, these mansions were spacious enough to afford their titled occupants sufficient room for privacy in an age where a sense of personal space was still an exclusive privilege enjoyed by few urban dwellers. The mansions incorporated private quarters for the family and public entertainment salons of various kinds, as well as adjoining living quarters for the household servants. In terms of their architecture, they favored the neo-classical and baroque styles then popular among the conservative, upper classes (Lukacs 1989:38).

The first summer residences in Hungary were built in the early decades of the nineteenth century by the important commercial families of Pest who, unlike the aristocracy, did not possess country estates to which they might retire during the hot summer months. These wealthy, upper middle class families sought locations in close proximity to their commercial interests in the capital—yet removed from the crowded life of the inner city. Many of them began to build summer retreats in select places amidst the Buda hills, particularly the areas of Svábhegy, Zugliget and Szépjuhász né. Parceled out by the city authorities in the 1930s and early '40s, the largest of these Buda plots measured nearly 8.5 hectares in size (Gábor 1997:5). Comparatively, their buildings were of moderate proportions and tended to be constructed of wood rather than more durable materials. Many of them were styled in either the Swiss or Austrian manner of two-story chalets⁸, although several important examples used neo-classical elements within the framework of a single story design.⁹ Just

as the early summer residences were being built in the Buda hills during the 1930s, other upper middle class families began to construct similar retreats on the other side of the river just outside of Pest's growing urban sprawl. In point of fact, the Pest bank of the Danube was much the preferred location for summer residences in and around Budapest at the time. It was only at the turn of the century that this preference would change (by which time a Europe-wide phylloxera epidemic had devastated the Buda vineyards and created a surfeit of room for residential plots).

During much of the nineteenth century the only direct access across the Danube was a temporary pontoon bridge and, later, the permanent Lánchíd (Chain Bridge).¹⁰ Such limited access across the river ensured that the most favored residential locations of the day were all in Pest, either along the stretch of undeveloped land between Pest's Terézváros (Theresa Town) and the new Városliget (City Park) located outside of the city proper, or the lands immediately surrounding the City Park itself. These Pest plots were both smaller and less spread out than their Buda cousins; they were spatially restricted to an average of 4,300 square metres and often placed directly adjacent to one another. This close spacing maximized the revenues which the city authorities derived from the sale of undeveloped land while increasing their ability to effectively manage the development of the burgeoning Pest suburbs. Such growth was fueled by new residential demands incurred as a result of both increased migration from the countryside and changing middle-class prospects and expectations with respect to the acquisition of housing.

During the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries, all but the wealthiest of middle-class families had but two choices in terms of urban accommodation in the capital city. Many of them lived in the cramped apartment blocks which were to be found in the central core of Pest, what is now essentially District V of present-day Budapest. Others lived in small, detached houses away from the built-up areas of the city, in what are now Districts VI, VII, VIII and IX. In the latter cases, these suburban homes were mostly single-story structures without substantive architectural design or exterior decoration. New rooms would be added in a makeshift manner as the family grew in number and/or wealth. While possessing neither the splendor of the urban mansions of the aristocracy nor the idyllic isolation of traditional summer residences, these permanent homes established an important foothold in the public imagination, opening the door to speculation in the investment of private wealth. In doing so, they formed the final impetus for villa architecture in its classical form in Hungary.¹¹

The Classical Villas of Andrassy Avenue

The first true villas in Hungary were built during the 1870s and '80s in the general area of the summer residences between Theresa Town and the City Park (described above). They were located along, or in the direct vicinity of Budapest's new Avenue (Ut, now Andrassy Ut), an imposing thoroughfare laid out in 1872 and modeled on the Champs d'Elysée in Paris. The city's new Közmunkatanács (Council of Public Works)¹² initiated the development by parceling out thirty plots on the Avenue itself and fifty plots in the area around its outer limit at the City Park. The first four houses to be constructed were built by the Avenue Building Society with the explicit intention of providing a model for later housing. Such a progressive sense of urban planning was rare at the time and highlighted how Budapest was then considered a "world city" in the sense of Hannerz's (1996:129) meaning (whereby there exist a few internationally-renowned cities considered worthy of emulation). With the exception of four larger parcels, all of the initial plots on the Avenue were no more than 1400 square meters in area. Their consecutive spacing foreshadowed the city's plans to develop an entire residential area of villa housing, not only on the Avenue, but along its future transecting streets. These two characteristics (of plot size and density) encouraged an architectural compromise between the multi-story apartment blocks of the inner city (especially those constructed in Pest after the Great Flood of 1838), and the single-story tradition of summer residences and middle-class homes. The result of this compromise was that the villa houses of the Avenue neighborhood kept to a fairly standard, two-story format which remains in place today—irrespective of plot size.

Because of their modest area, the Avenue plots put increased emphasis on the architectural relationship between a building and its attached grounds. The former tended to dominate the latter—but never entirely erased it, as in the case of the inner-city apartment buildings. The gardens of the Avenue villas thereby exemplified the contemporary interest in nature as a lived experience, a line of thought which drew directly from the Sentimentalist thinking developed at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Gábor 1997:5–6). Even at their most ephemeral (such as with the Edelsheim-Gyulai Villa¹³), these villa gardens established a critical sense of household privacy, creating a "natural" barrier between the private world of the family and the public world of the neighbors and passing traffic. As an alternative to either nature "in the wild" or a separate area of ordered topiary in the formal (neo-Renaissance) manner, they confirmed the obligatory "green space" which contributes to defining villa architecture today—especially in reference to the socialist period when common recreational grounds denuded of substantive flora became the norm.

Similar to the urban mansions—but quite unlike the ordinary middle-class homes which were still being built throughout the Budapest suburbs—the villa houses along the Avenue were designed as cohesive wholes. The architectural connection between villa garden and building was structurally accomplished by way of an ornamental staircase set at the front of the house at a ground-floor level which lay above the half-basement (a semi-subterranean space where the servants lived and worked). The ground floor generally comprised an entrance hall along with “public” rooms of various kinds where visitors would be greeted and entertained. As in the case of the villa of Hermann Babocsay,¹⁴ these function rooms might include a study (library), parlor, dining and smoking room, as well as a section of the house reserved for its “winter garden” (arboretum). Above these rooms, on the first floor, resided the family and here were located the bedrooms for private use and the living rooms for informal, collective activities. The villa houses were intended as year-round homes for their occupants. Their construction reflected such permanence: built on a load-bearing wooden frame, the walls used a high-fire brick in an exposed manner or were plastered over and painted in one of several typical colors. The most popular of these colors was a spectrum of orange-yellow which one might refer to as Habsburg Yellow (because of its ubiquity throughout the Austro-Hungarian empire). The foundation cladding of the houses often consisted of several courses of semi-finished stone which offset the coloration above it. This stonework was employed for the purposes of both structural support and decoration, becoming an integral feature of many of the turn-of-the-century villas in Budapest, particularly those designed in one of the so-called Eclectic styles of the Arts & Crafts movement locally termed *szeecesszió* (Secession).

Within fifteen years, the Avenue was filled up with villas on either side of its wide boulevard. Some of them were built by the aristocracy as well as the upper-middle classes. In the 1890s and the following decade, most of these houses were renovated and extended just as new villas in more modern styles were built throughout the adjoining streets. Because the villa owners (leading bankers, traders, academics, etc.) tended to possess certain cultural pretensions in keeping with their upwardly-mobile position in society, many of them took considerable pains to hire some of the country’s foremost architects (Gustáv Petschacher, Aladár Arkay, József Vágó) to design and/or renovate their homes. The resultant villa *negyed* (villa quarter) was the first of its kind in the country. Both prosperous and trend setting in equal measure, it could boast a prestige which has lasted to this day. By the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Avenue villa quarter had become the (upscale) model for similar developments elsewhere, both in Budapest and throughout the country. One of the best known of these new villa areas, the so-called Judges’ and Public Prosecutors’ District (1911–1913) was located across the Danube on Kis-Svábhegy (Small Swabian Hill). The villas of this development were quite modest in comparison to those of the Avenue yet

managed to surpass their predecessors in terms of native inspiration. Influenced by the sense of historical nostalgia prevalent at the time of their construction, the villa houses utilized local folk motifs in their decoration and, thereby, set important local precedents in the architectural valuation of indigenous culture. Moreover, their siting signaled a veritable sea-change of residential demography by becoming “the starting point for a general tendency seen throughout the twentieth century. Since that time most villas have been built in Buda...” (Gábor 1997:24).

As the newer villas began to populate the slopes of the Buda hills in the opening decades of the twentieth century, the villas of the old Avenue area fell out of architectural fashion. Construction on such a grand scale could not continue indefinitely and the economic downturn which followed the end of the Great War put an abrupt stop to the building of larger-scale residences throughout the country, especially those in Pest. By reason of their running costs alone, many of the original Avenue area villas soon became untenable for occupation. Even before the war, several of the grandest villas had been demolished in the more conservative (neo-Victorian) spirit of the times. Some of them now went vacant for a time; others gained new residents—including among them national academic and charitable institutions (Gábor 1997:37–8). Today, the majority of the remaining Avenue villas are not inhabited by wealthy families but by foreign embassies, international-development organizations and a variety of state institutions. This current domination of the original villa quarter by prominent institutions rather than people (in the residential sense) is an apt reflection of the combination of funds and bureaucratic clout which is currently required to acquire (and maintain) one of these exclusive properties. While the country’s economic elite is not yet in a position to move (back) into this most prestigious of urban areas. They are, however, quite free and willing to build elsewhere. Where and what sort of villas they now build is the concern of the rest of this paper.

New Villas, Old Locales

Whether financially rooted in the service sector as Kovács (1997:121) suggests, or involved in the recent process of state privatization since 1987 as much of my own research has paid attention to:

The new rich stratum in Hungary does not seem to need the kind of legitimization conferred by diplomas. It seeks in the classic capitalist entrepreneurial fashion to exploit a niche wherever it finds one; but in Hungarian conditions this has tended to lead not to productive investment, but rather to conspicuous consumption and, above all, the consumption of housing. [Kovács 1997:121]

Although I do not entirely agree with Kovács' assertion of a lack of "productive investment," there is no question but that the "consumption of housing" is at the forefront of the contemporary Hungarian imagination. At the upper end of the now liberalized housing market, such activity is heavily skewed towards the villa model of residential architecture in its many modern variations. These new villas tend to be commissioned by professional couples (with children) where neither parent is of less than managerial rank and where at least one of them is the owner or general manager of a thriving local or regional business.

As in the past, Budapest remains the hub of villa development—although the construction and renovation of summer cottages along the increasingly gentrified shores of Lake Balaton (lying some distance to the west of the city) has provided an important alternative for those investing in high-priced real estate. With scant exception (such as the upwardly-mobile, Pest suburb of Zugló in District XIV), the new villas of the wealthy are still built among the Buda hills of the capital city—although such residences can be found in every major city in central eastern Europe. The new Budapest villas are constructed within the wider framework of a housing terrain wherein an increasing number of luxury residences can be found as one leaves the flat areas of the river-bank and ventures higher up the slopes of the Buda hills. This sort of hierarchical movement promotes a sense of spatial differentiation between those who can afford to live above the Danube's flood plain and those who cannot. Thus, in a way which reminds us of the variety of secular ritual and symbolism (including that of the state socialist type¹⁵) invoking the allegory between differing social status and relative elevation, one's altitude of habitation in Budapest generally confers a correlative prestige.

Land for urban expansion of the villa sort is secured by building on unused or derelict lands and, occasionally, by way of subdividing larger lots. Just as often it has progressed through the rapid colonization of the officially "protected" green belt of park land which traditionally girds Budapest on its western side. Exclusive hill areas such as Istenhegy, Orbánhegy, Mártonhegy, and Gellérthegy experienced such unfettered residential development in the later decades of the socialist era. More recently, it has been the turn of the Kút völgy area of District XII to fall prey to this aggressive form of urban expansion.¹⁶ As a consequence of pressures on residential land, even outlying areas of the city like the Gazdagrét neighborhood (mentioned at the beginning of this paper) are being filled up in the rush to acquire land sufficient to accommodate family homes of significant size. The average new villa plot on Gazdagrét's Quince street is approximately 2,000 square meters in size and costs approximately ten million HUF (Hungarian forints)—although some in the neighboring vicinity run to well over twice that respectively. With the average Hungarian employee receiving an annual salary of 562,044 HUF.¹⁷ In 1996, such plot prices are equal to nearly eighteen years of wages—without taking into account social & health insurance (of

forty-four percent deducted by the state at source in Hungary) and personal income taxes depending upon income (see Frydman, Rapaczynski, Earle et al 1993:102). After adding to these financial considerations the actual building costs of a villa house (which might range from fifty to two-hundred million HUFs), it is easy to understand how substantial is the existing discrepancy between the Hungarian residential ideal and its acquisition in terms of the general public.

Just as the price of prime real estate continues to escalate, the daily reach of the metropolis has been extended by the only recent acceptance of a commuting lifestyle for wealthier families in the country. This new trend points to the fact that many of the newest villa sites of Budapest are semantic contradictions in that they are not located in the city proper but lie just beyond its south and northwestern peripheries. In former peasant villages like Szentendre and Leányfalu which snake their way north on the Buda bank of the Danube, the social and working lives of the newly arrived residents are completely focused on the capital city to their south while their residential existence lies outside the city boundaries proper. These residents have little social connection to their immediate residential surroundings. In many cases, their extravagant villas sit next to a mixed variety of summer cottages and humble peasant homes—no doubt buildings which will soon be displaced by the erosive need to acquire the large lots necessitated by the suburban villas. The large lots of the villa compounds—like the impressive houses which they contain—arise from specific circumstances. These circumstances can be linked to three major issues: material display, privacy and personal health concerns. The most explicit among them is that of the display of material wealth in the form of luxury housing, a phenomenon which incorporates an unreined backlash to the socialist ethic of austerity on the one hand, and fits directly into the new cult of materialism which has inundated central eastern Europe, on the other. From this perspective, the routine argument that the *nouveaux riches* seek to advertise their social status through their homes is not without substantive foundation. The further quest for urban privacy is one of the most important motivating factors in the decision to build villas in the first place and, in the second, to locate them in low-population density areas. It is only in these areas where larger lots are available. The larger the plot, the greater the sense of seclusion—irrespective of the neighbors' activities. In this sense, the contemporary interest in creating a separate space of familial activity mirrors that of the first Hungarian villa owners of the nineteenth century. Like them, the owners of the new villas recognize that the slopes of the Buda hills provide an added topographical feature which increases the spatial separation between nearby structures and lends itself to even greater privacy. Such separation not only affords the inhabitants the aesthetic value of an unimpeded view of the city below but it also increases the net worth of their residences in a way which is consonant with Hungarian views biased towards residential property as the primary form of familial investment.¹⁸

Emphasized by my own research data, a final motivation for locating villas among the Buda hills is the new-found sense of ecological concern (as related to health issues) felt among the affluent in Hungary.¹⁹ While statistical evidence to suggest that the location of the new villas in suburban areas of the city removed from the increasing pollution of the inner core remains elusive, it is clear this sort of connection is not without relevance. Every villa owner whom I spoke to replied with an answer featuring the health of the family as a primary consideration. As one young millionaire who made his money through the process of "spontaneous privatization"²⁰ in Hungary put it to me:

If I can afford [to avoid] it, why should I have my family live where it is more polluted? Here among the Buda hills there are more trees, the air is clean, and I don't [have to] worry so much about the family's health.

New Villas, New Styles

While prospective villa owners pay careful attention to where their new homes are to be located, much more of their time is focused on the physical structure and layout of the villa itself. This is a matter of construction and design, on the one hand, and the context of material supply and consumption, on the other. From whichever perspective, historical precedents as well as recent innovations play their part to produce a kaleidoscope of architectural elements. In terms of their overall construction, the new villas of the wealthy hark back to the more holistic approach of the prewar era. This is for two reasons. Firstly, their owners possess the means to finance construction at a single stretch, a condition which is a distinct rarity in comparison to the general picture of house-builders in Hungary, sixty percent of whom have only ten percent of the required funds at the start of construction according to a recent study (Fehérváry 1997:140 cf. *Magyar Nemzet*, 15 November 1996). Secondly, the villa owners possess the sort of social networks which are necessary to ensure that the inevitable bureaucratic barriers can be quickly hurdled without serious detriment to the building works. Such combined personal resources allow for a cohesive design of the premises as well as its full execution. Unlike in Russia, where the draftsmen of construction companies play a central part (Humphrey 1997:98), the design process in Hungary is often led by one of the new generation of aspiring architects who received their practical training in a state architectural practice but have since turned to the private market as a means of viable income.

Because most of the new villa owners are businessmen and women who have learned to delegate authority in the climb to the top of the

commercial world, their involvement with the process of construction is frequently limited to consultation over the chief design elements of the house. Many of the minor design touches—including the villa grounds²¹—are left to an architect, with the owner(s) then signing off on the final plans. This is a striking difference to the case of other home owners in Hungary, the majority of whom continue to put a great deal of their own labor into the construction of the familial home. The major point of convergence between the two disparate groups is, if anything, their mutual distrust of the workmen involved. This distrust is both a matter of personal control over the project as a whole and an acknowledgment of the convention of workplace theft which mushroomed under state socialism. Building-site theft is a dimension of the construction industry which feeds into wider social relations in Hungary on the part of villa owners. It is frequently countered through the owner(s) asking a poorer relation to act as a building supervisor of sorts, thus expanding the notion of traditional *kaláka* relations by including a non-manual (service) function. Rarely is cash money given to the relative in direct reciprocity—although offers of a paid vacation abroad are not unknown. Generally, it is simply understood that as the largest house to be found within the extended family, the villa will become, *de facto*, the focal point for larger assemblies of relations. This responsibility is not a light one in the sense that its logic of generosity may include a heavy addendum: care for infirm senior relations who may be housed in a separate “apartment” built into the general plan of the villa. Such apartments are popular in Hungary among both the wealthy and less wealthy alike, principally because they can be utilized to accommodate both paying and non-paying tenants.²²

While there is no specific “villa style” of architecture in Hungary today, many contemporary villas do follow certain patterns of general design as well as sharing a number of decorative features. In terms of their general design, variations on a box structure are prevalent because of the ease of construction. More angular, asymmetrical and/or curvilinear designs are, however, popular among the less conservative clientele—a group whose tastes are clearly influenced by the examples of “international” residences featured in the new housing and interior decoration magazines. The most popular styles of villas appear to be either loose interpretations of earlier neo-classical and baroque villas or diluted modernist versions which owe as much to the recent neo-Italianite style of Euro-American institutional architecture as to the preceding Bauhaus. In the latter cases, this co-existence of modern decorative elements (and materials) with traditional forms reminds one of the reach of international artistic design and, particularly, the way in which globalization has produced a “deterritorialization of cultures” (King 1990:399).

The major indigenous contribution to current villa residences in Hungary is that of the Hungarian school of “organic architecture” led by Imre Makovecz. Its influence is felt in terms of both materials and their employment. On the one hand, there is the abundant use of wood as an

integral construction material in a way which is quite unlike the Russian counterparts noted by Humphrey (1997:94). On the other hand, there appears the fluid half-moon shapes of upper-story windows and the thick, draped roofing which frequently envelopes the topmost story of a structure. The latter feature (which is also found in a lighter Russian version) seems to originate from the traditional look of thatched huts built by the peasantry in Hungary. This sort of mansard roofing repudiates both the pitched-roof design characteristic of simple, middle-class homes and the flat roof designs of modernist and Social Realist architecture. Especially in the case of exaggerated examples, its elongated nature plays a hidden role in providing an extra story of habitation by neatly sidestepping local building-code restrictions on where a roof must begin (but not end).²³

As far as exterior decoration is concerned, the new villa residences utilize traditional and modern features in a dizzy mix of architectural vocabulary. Yet, whatever the mixture of their features, even the most modern of them tends to echo the established archetypes of local villa architecture. The compounds are generally fronted on the main (street) side by an ornamental gate through which one enters the villa grounds proper. Many versions of this gate incorporate architectural details such as a miniature roof and eaves imitating the substantiality of the traditional gate-house of aristocratic palaces. Running at ground level around the residence can usually be seen either a foundation course in stone cladding (as in the case of the turn-of-the-century villas)—or a wide band of paint (different from the building's main coloration) which visually imitates the very same feature. Both gate and banding act as architectural solidifiers, anchoring the building within a recognized tradition of easily interpreted, cultural vocabulary. The main door of a villa residence is often framed by one, two or four sleek columns which mimic the neo-classical porticos of the grand civic buildings of Pest and add a deliberate sense of permanence to the new structures. These columns are rarely couched in a pure, classical manner (i.e. Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, etc.). Instead, pared-down, modernist interpretations seem to be preferred (and replicated in other external features such as balconies, lintels, etc.). As a consequence, the columns most often appear as simple pillars sheathed in painted plasterwork.

Another intrinsic element of the new villas is the addition of an automobile garage. Such garages are the practical successors to the coach-houses of former times, similarly harboring prestigious vehicles which are the envy of the general populace. As elsewhere throughout the former Socialist Bloc, the Russian-made Volgas have now been replaced with other foreign makes of automobile, particularly those of German design (BMW, Mercedes, and Audi). The arrival of these new cars has been paralleled by an explosive combination of social developments throughout central and eastern Europe. These developments include: the rise of conspicuous consumption, an increasing disparity between rich and poor,

the growth of organized crime and a poorly-funded police constabulary. In at least some combination, they have led to a significant increase in crimes related to property, particularly burglary and automobile theft. As a consequence of the threat of crime, the overwhelming majority of the villa garages are covered and/or of the "off-road" type (where the parking space is safely integrated within the interior of the villa compound).²⁴ Some of the newest villas even have burglar alarms installed, a radical notion for a country where the oppressive nature of a totalitarian system possessed the silver lining of high levels of personal and property safety.

Whatever the main architectural features of the new villas, the residences themselves tend to uphold the traditional color schemes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings: a range of smooth pastels along with the ubiquitous Habsburg Yellow. The continued use of this "culturally resonant" (see Czegledy 1995:46–50) color in a country which has uncritically aped Euro-American fashions of late is not, however, a question of retrograde personal taste reproduced time and again. More than any other feature of contemporary Hungarian architecture, it is emblematic of the current vogue for Austro-Hungarian nostalgia—itsself an offshoot of post-socialist, patriotic sentiments which have found a new lease on life in public display of all manner. In spite of their impressive outward appearance, most of the new villa houses share with their less well-off neighbors substantive structural defects related to either (i) shoddy workmanship and/or (ii) the local market in building materials—although Humphrey's (1997:86) research in Russia might add willful sabotage on the part of workmen as an additional dimension. The first of these factors is the combined outcome of a long-standing tradition of contractors skimping on building materials (as a way of increasing their profit per project) in addition to the postwar deterioration of craftsmanship values in the construction trades. As might be expected, this deterioration is directly related to former state production policies and their emphasis on the volume of industrial output (rather than its quality).

The second factor in low quality construction in Hungary (and elsewhere in the region) is a simple result of the inadequate supply of building materials. The plaster and paint on the exterior of a residence often covers over second quality materials, in particular a generic type of pale red, clay brick which is substantially larger than prewar examples but also of lower quality. The cavities nature of this brick is meant to give it insulating properties. This advantage is, however, outweighed by a combination of variable composition and relatively low-temperature firing, both qualities which leave it prone to cracking during manufacture, transit and erection. Such cracking ensures problems with respect to structural durability and makes the brick ill suited for decorative purposes (in the manner in which the material was sometimes used in prewar residences).²⁵ The lack of quality building materials in Hungary (and the region as a whole) is in major part a direct legacy of the socialist period when the authorities organized the construction industry around monopoly

enterprises offering an extremely limited product range. The successor companies to these enterprises have not substantially changed the quality of their self-produced wares—so even the most opulent of villas in Budapest, Prague, etc. tend to share some of the problems of their less well-off neighbors. Only in the last half decade have higher quality building materials become available (again)—but their exorbitant cost as (often imported) items has largely restricted their local use to decoration rather than substantive structural incorporation.

New Villas, New Capitalism

Just as the new villas of the wealthy exhibit the riches of the economic elite, so too do the social uses to which these residences may be put reflect the post-socialist world of commercial priorities. Such an emphasis veers away from objectifying the villa as a simple construct of material culture in the vein of consumer-oriented studies and, instead, turns to viewing it as a social device of enabling power co-terminus with organizing structures significant to post-socialist society. In these terms, it is necessary to briefly consider the internal layout of the new villas as well as taking into account their attached space at the ground floor level.

The general floor-plan of contemporary villas in Budapest focuses on the classical two-story model established in the nineteenth century, although garret and basement sections of a house may extend the space of the residence by a substantial margin. The ground floor is given over to common function rooms (kitchen, dining room, lounge/living room) while the story above is usually divided into specific bedrooms for the family. Only toilets and bathrooms (which are traditionally kept apart from one another) may be duplicated throughout the various levels of the structure. Such an arrangement follows the traditional separation of the private/familial part of the residence from its public level(s) of communal activity and hospitality.²⁶ While it is rare for this internal layout of the villa house to be readily apparent to the casual visitor looking in from the street outside, such is not the case after entry. One's entrance is usually made through a small, but well-appointed, foyer which is situated close to the lounge containing sofas and chairs set around one or more, low-slung coffee tables. Quite frequently, an impressive antique (carved wood) end cabinet or *secretaire* serves as the centerpiece of an interior wall which is situated opposite to an over-sized picture window looking out onto the terrace patio and the villa grounds.

In terms of a showcase role, the lounge is an interior space of considerable technological and decorative focus. It is here where a top-of-the-line home entertainment system²⁷ takes pride of place just as in many

of the well-to-do houses of western Europe. The entertainment system is a technological device which not only transforms the modern home into self-contained leisure site (*pace* Tomlinson 1990:60–61), but also exists as a separate status symbol of consumerist achievement. Through it, the household projects its self image of spending power on a par with the successful expatriate families whom they may visit during vacations abroad or, perhaps, even the wealthy households profiled and portrayed on international television programs. Like its cousin appliances in the kitchen, the entertainment system is a technologically sophisticated object of spending which parallels the air of calm, professional efficiency considered emblematic of the new Western style of entrepreneurial capitalism. To it is attached an inverted snobbery wherein foreign-produced appliances (and even interior design fixtures) confirm a much-valued air of materialist cosmopolitanism. In this way, the economic elite of Hungary may be said to have (re)joined the world of consumer cosmopolitans—a fraternity of image-oriented, elitist culture where rare and expensive items (of a monetary value far above the level of McDonald's hamburgers and Levi's jeans) are chiefly known only by those few who can afford them. As one villa owner noted to me: "Nothing second-rate. I want only the best that money can buy. Everything will be *prima* (top quality), as good as the furnishings in any house you [might] see in Vienna..."

Not surprisingly, it is also in the lounge where one finds ethnically-symbolic, folk artifacts and/or more sophisticated *objets d'art*. The latter include paintings by Hungarian artists and—just as frequently—one or more pieces of highly prized, local porcelain (usually from either the Herend or Zsolnay factories). Each of these clearly recognizable "cultural" objects resolutely proclaims the family's indigenous credentials while presenting a terse reminder of *haute* social authenticity to visitors. In the context of current Hungarian fashions at least, their presence contributes to what appears to be a conceptual division between manufactured, technical objects and the result of artistic, aesthetic expression. This division emphasizes a dichotomy between preferences for technological products in the guise of international commodities, on the one hand, and preferences tied to a distinctly local character, on the other. Both of these prejudices lends itself to a given image of the family open to artful manipulation. Thus, the household can be interpreted—or interpret itself—as either energetically "modern" or respectfully "traditional," depending upon the given context.

In spite of the way in which the lounge acts as a stage for interior decoration conveying specific cultural messages, it is in terms of its more general architectural dimensions that it plays its most significant role in the design of the new villas. In this case, the issue of dimension is really a question of size, for the lounge tends to be the largest room in the house in terms of both floor space and cubic volume. Its lateral dimensions are often intensified through vertical incorporation into a *faux* atrium plan

(which may then be given a theatrical flourish by way of a protruding, interior balcony connecting the upper-story bedrooms). The size of the space is a direct function of its critical role in accommodating various social gatherings of relatives, friends, business associates and related acquaintances. As one young Hungarian millionaire put it to me: "I made sure that the lounge would not only be a comfortable place for [my child] and her friends, but also that it would be big enough to fit a large group of people inside, even if it rained." His statement is double-sided in that on the one hand it refers to the size of a lounge being sufficient to accommodate large group of people and, on the other, the prospect of its doing so when the external twin (an adjacent terrace patio) is unavailable for use due to inclement weather. This requires some explanation. While the diverse architectural lineage of the contemporary lounge might be traced to the parlors and smoking rooms of earlier villas, the terrace patios of today are, in effect, architectural substitutes for the grander promenades once incorporated into the rear of aristocratic palaces. In spite of this historic difference, both lounge and terrace patio are spaces designed to fulfill the same ulterior function (which may be considered separate from any sort of internal, family usage): They are intended to act as the site of group activities, particularly evening drinks, parties or receptions held on the occasion of Name's Days and other life-event anniversaries. During the summer months, weekend luncheons also figure prominently in the scheme of social organization. Among some Budapest families at least, there seems to be a recent vogue for the use of imported barbecue grills in the North American tradition of preparing meats, especially beef.

It is at such *ostensibly* benign social gatherings where the villa owners play host to other businessmen/women, politicians and civil servants—all the time developing further the sort of multi-purpose networks which have been integral to putting them in a position to build the villa in the first place. These personal networks of the elite have developed out of a combination of entrenched and engineered social relationships drawn from a range of personal and institutional circumstances and backgrounds. Under state socialism, they were the vital factor in leaping over the hurdles of bureaucratic procedure and economic inefficiency. In today's chaotic capitalism of half-established (and half only effective) compliance and governance structures, they provide the surest path to solving the daily problems of the post-socialist world. While drinking wine and snacking on goose-liver paté, the villa hosts not only reinforce a complex web of cross-cutting relationships but also take the time to introduce their children to the guests who, one day, will form the most senior element of the personal networks for the next generation. Such mixing of private and public domains in a cross-generational fashion is very much a hallmark of the way in which the new economic elite of Hungary and the other post-socialist nations of central and eastern Europe operate today. In substantial part, this sort of dense "network capitalism" is a direct legacy of state socialist society and its emphasis on power related to status and social

influence rather than that connected to monetary and other forms of material wealth. One of the major post-socialist differences is, however, that engendered by changing social attitudes towards the acquisition of such material wealth, its display and the renewed acceptance of conspicuous consumption. These “new” perspectives have provided an open door for the new economic elite to continue the villa tradition of architecture with renewed intent. Such intent is both a matter of desire and one of necessity, for whereas state socialism provided a variety of accessible institutions and structured forums for the congregation of the elite, the new capitalism has no such basis. Gone are the Party, Young Communist League, powerful unions, etc.; gone are the celebratory events of the Socialist calendar. While the capitalist replacements of a nascent Chamber of Commerce and other venues attempt to find their feet in society, it is the new villas which have come to prominence in a switch of setting from the public institution of the Cultural House to the lounges and terrace patios of private residences in the Buda hills.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the modern villa in Hungary is not simply a comfortable home for the aspiring (or already successful) family in the sense of conventional usage. Its mix of classical and innovative architectural vocabularies, its use of foreign materials and appliances, even the featured ethnic decoration, all combine to form a potent symbolic statement equally understood by its authors, inhabitants and those who might visit them. Its calculated, social spaces further provide the necessary environment for the maintenance of personal networks critical to managing the vicissitudes of post-socialist life. As the major material symbol reflecting its owner’s status, the villa reassures the guest with messages of permanence rooted in the historical specificity of distinct locations and conventional architectural forms. At the same time, its modern features and sophisticated appliances claim an international pedigree and cosmopolitanism which repudiate much of the local context in the sense of King’s observations on architecture and modernity. He reminds us that this is a world where the differences to be found within given societies may be greater than the differences between them, and where “architects and designers move more easily between them, and New York, London and Bombay than between Bombay and the villages of Maharashtra” (1990:449).

Yet in Hungary this message is never so clear as to be completely uniform, for as structures of display the new villas simultaneously proclaim an important dimension of ethnic pride through their indigenous motifs and the showcasing of artistic products possessed of a very real

local identity. While such latter display (especially) might be but a disingenuous metaphor for the rooted “honesty” of a villa’s owners, it simultaneously reinforces the value of indigenous, cultural production in an escalating spiral of aesthetic exclusivity. It is this very idea of exclusivity which seems to separate Hungary’s economic elite from the reach of other sections of the population. In reality, such exclusivity is not the product of some hard and fast set of prestige objects but the result of a far more nebulous curtain of social possibilities turned into probabilities. It is not the material possessions of the new economic elite which continually consolidate their position in society but, rather, the overlapping webs of relationships put to constant utilitarian use on a level far above that of the common man and woman. In such terms, the new villas of the wealthy are both the products of wealth and its creators. They have become an ideal architectural launching pad for the reproduction of the new sort of assured, network-based capitalism which is now the dominant form of socio-commercial endeavor throughout Hungary and its post-socialist neighbors.

Notes

¹ For which see Connor (1979:278).

² See Györi & Matern (1997:101–104).

³ For elaboration on housing estate sites in Hungary refer to Preisich (1997:67–120).

⁴ Built in 1928–9. See Buchli (1998).

⁵ Many of these developments were located on the edges of the city in the Buda hills, where land plots were made available at favorable prices by the local councils. Connor (1979:254) notes that this variety of housing in the context of socialist regimes played a greater role outside of the Soviet Union than within it.

⁶ Only recently have Szelenyi and Konrad’s insights come under stronger scrutiny, this from the direction of Kovács (1990), who has reasserted the general premise of an equality of access to state housing—at least under *early* state socialism.

⁷ The three historic towns of Buda, Pest and Obuda were unified in 1873.

⁸ The Kochmeister Villa (1852), built by Frigyes Feszli at what is now Budakeszi út 71, is a leading example of the Swiss chalet style of summer residence.

⁹ The Villa Rózsa (1847), likely built by József Hild at what is now Budakeszi út 36/B, is a leading example of the neoclassical style of summer residence.

¹⁰ Completed in 1848.

¹¹ Gábor considers the middle-class house the direct “predecessor” (1997:12) of villa architecture in Hungary.

¹² The Council was established in 1870.

¹³ Situated at Andrásy út 132, this villa was designed by Adolf Gnauth of Stuttgart and took its name from the second owner.

¹⁴ Designed by Aladár Arkay, this villa at Dózsa György út 92/B (on the corner of Andrásy út), was built in 1904–5.

¹⁵ The propaganda machine under socialist regimes made frequent use of the symbolic dimensions of height, especially in the use of architectural decoration (see Lane 1981:199–200).

¹⁶ Preisich (1998:181) reminds us that the expansion of Budapest into the Buda hills over the last twenty years and the consequent eradication of the city's protective green belt has altered the immediate area's micro-climate with as yet unknown environmental consequences.

¹⁷ This figure is based on a monthly salary (before tax) of 46,837 HUF according to the 1996 *Statistical Yearbook of Hungary* (1997:2/1).

¹⁸ Fehérváry suggests that these views originate in the status of the house under state socialism as the symbol of the family *par excellence*, as well as in its role as a primary medium of autonomy from the state (1997:138).

¹⁹ This concern is understandable in the framework of a connection between the youthful age of a significant proportion of the new economic elite in Hungary, their often privileged schooling, and current concerns about health (influenced in part by Euro-American trends). Szirmai has pointed out that "Studies in the 1980s showed that those with higher qualifications, younger age and living in urban areas are more sensitive to environmental issues" (1997:32).

²⁰ Refer to Frydman, et al (1993:132–133).

²¹ This is chiefly due to the lack of a landscape design profession in contemporary Hungary—a direct result of official prejudices against non-functional design during state socialism.

²² The latter group includes teenage children desirous of social autonomy and married children who have trouble finding suitable accommodation within the tight urban housing market.

²³ Humphrey makes the same point for Russian villas (1997:93).

²⁴ Sidewalk parking is a distinct feature of suburban Budapest and sharply contrasts with the inner city where motorists generally park their cars directly on the sidewalks (due to planning precedents which did not take into account the explosion in vehicular traffic beginning in the 1970s).

²⁵ This is a critical reason why painted plaster remains the dominant exterior surface for residential buildings in central eastern Europe.

²⁶ Even the spatial division of guest rooms confirms this separation in that a special bedroom reserved for visiting relatives will often be located on the upper story while a similar bedroom for other guests can be found somewhere below it on the ground floor.

²⁷ A combination of television, video cassette recorder, radio and music player(s).

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