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## The Venues of Recreation in a Former Socialist Town

### Abstract

In Hungary 10–14 towns were classified as socialist towns. In 1953 the construction of the would-be *Leninváros* (present day *Tiszaújváros*) was started. The town planners laid stress on building facilities for the relaxation and recreation of people and parks, playgrounds, beaches and holiday homes were available for everyone. However, the public places designated as recreational facilities for the inhabitants of the town, which was intended to be an idealistic one, did not satisfy their needs. They preferred to spend their free time in their ‘household plots’ in town. Small gardens and garages complemented a lot of apartments in panel blocks, thus increasing the available living space in a special manner. These “private properties” mostly had the function whose mass demand was unexpected for the planners of the city. The author describes how they helped residents, who often had a village background, making the socialist type of town more liveable.

**Keywords:** socialist town, public spaces, recreational facilities, small gardens, garages

After the Second World War, new cities were established worldwide, which were looked upon as the symbols of a new world.<sup>1</sup> Utopian rhetoric and conception were common characteristics of these projects. Its Eastern-European variant was the socialist town, an experimental site of the new society where harmony and happiness were to prevail, according to this conception.<sup>2</sup> In these towns, theories of modern architecture and urban design were complied with in a greater degree: not only industrial factories but also the towns connected to them were built according to unified plans.

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<sup>1</sup> The study was supported by the Eötvös Loránd Research Network, project title: Social and cultural resilience in the Carpathian Basin.

<sup>2</sup> Wakeman 2014: 105. For more see: Lebow 2016; Szirmai 2016; Horváth 2017.



In Hungary 10–14 towns were classified as socialist towns in various geographical, sociological and historical studies.<sup>3</sup> In connection with the forced industrialization in the 1950s, the construction of these towns was begun already in the initial stage of socialism. After the first wave of town building when *Sztálinváros* (today *Dunaújváros*) and *Kazincbarcika* were also built among others, in 1953, as part of the so-called green field investment, the construction of the would-be *Leninváros* (present day *Tiszaújváros*) was started. Prior to the construction of the town, two factories, the Tiszapalkonya Thermal Power Plant and the Tisza Chemical Combined Plant (TVK) were planned and built.<sup>4</sup> The new towns – besides *Budapest* and the big cities in the country – were in the focus of migration, which was driven by the forced collectivization and requisitioning, and many workers with peasant roots and first generation white collar workers settled down there.<sup>5</sup> The population of *Leninváros* was dynamically increasing, although to a lesser extent than in the plans.<sup>6</sup>

The first plan of the town, initially designed for ten thousand inhabitants was drawn up in 1955, but tailored to the development of chemical industry, the planned number of inhabitants was adjusted to forty thousand in 1962. According to the new plan drawn up in 1964 – complying with the principles of socialist urban design<sup>7</sup> – the territorial organization was based on neigh-

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<sup>3</sup> Germuska 2004: 47–52; Germuska 2008.

<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the practice of those days, it was not the town that attracted the industry, but the industrial facilities (and the workers in them) constituted the basis of a new town.

<sup>5</sup> During the Socialist era, the majority of the people were employed by local factories, mainly working in the industrial sector and in the construction industry, whereas the proportion of those living from agriculture did not make up 5% of the population by 1970. (1970. évi népszámlálás 1972: 19.) The change of the political system brought about changes in the structure of employment too: the proportion of intellectual workers and those working in the service sector rose, while the number of those employed in the industrial sector fell. The old industrial companies were replaced by an American company manufacturing electronic products as the main employer.

<sup>6</sup> In 1960 the population of the town was little over 3,000 and 11 years later it was well over 11,000. It peaked in 1990 with a population of 18,685, but since then, its population has been decreasing continuously, in 2021 the town had only 14,649 inhabitants. 1990. évi népszámlálás 1992: 6.

<sup>7</sup> The principles of socialist urban design laid down in the 1950s can be summarized in the following way: creating zones; a homogeneous composition of the town; the prominent, almost sacred location of the industrial factory; constructing city districts in the same quality and building a monumental main square; organizing apartments into blocks, neighbourhood/vicinity units. Germuska 2004: 209.

bourhood units.<sup>8</sup> In the four units, with ten thousand inhabitants each, contained various commercial and cultural facilities as well as public educational and pedagogic institutions. The town centre with the community buildings was built in the area bordering on the four neighbourhood units. In the town predominantly multi-level buildings were constructed as in this manner more opportunities were created to establish green areas. According to the plans, the distribution of buildings with 4–5–6 and 9–10–11 storeys followed a regular pattern, whereas 8–16 level buildings were to be distributed a chequered pattern.<sup>9</sup> The participants of the discussion of the plan from the town were proud to announce: “the ideal picture of the socialist type of towns is presented to us”<sup>10</sup>.

The town, which constituted a unified composition on the drawing board – with its modern, multi-level buildings, unique space distribution, loose structure, numerous green parks and community facilities – seemed to be really ideal provided that the residents wished to lead their life in compliance with the socialist lifestyle, prioritizing collectivity and active social life, striving to achieve social equality.

In the following, focusing on the facilities of the town serving recreational purposes, I intend to give an account of what type of public places characterized the socialist town, what functions were assigned to them in the plans, how it was overridden in practice by the delaying process of town construction and the use of space characteristic of the people moving in from villages. It is a general conclusion drawn in studies on immigrants coming from villages that the first generation retain and re-creates countryside mentality and lifestyle, instead of adopting city culture. As an example of this, I describe the role of small gardens and garages. To present contemporaneous public discourse and power perspective I make use of the local press of the socialist era (*Borsodi Vegyész, Leninvárosi Krónika*) and in a lesser degree, the documents of local administration, while I intend to grasp individual dimensions through the interviews I made.

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<sup>8</sup> The system of neighbourhood units, which originated in America, became common when the new European and Soviet towns were designed and they were also applied in town plans in Hungary too from the 1950s onward. Imre Perényi in his groundbreaking book on socialist urban design, defined it as a functional-social unit – in terms of size it is between a block of flats and a town quarter with 2000-5000 residents – whose most important public institution is the primary school. Perényi 1952: 49–54. The size of the neighbourhood units in *Leninváros* was different from the size defined here.

<sup>9</sup> N. A. 1967: 6. The town was not constructed completely in this manner, for instance the 16-storeyed buildings were not constructed and until the end of the 1980s only two neighbourhood units were built.

<sup>10</sup> N. A. 1964: 3.

## Cultural houses, parks, playgrounds, leisure centres

In the functional division of the socialist town the venues of recreation played an important role, besides residential buildings and workplaces. Leisure activities were considered to be a part of culture, elevating people's level of knowledge and strengthened their physical conditions. The institutional system necessary for this was regarded as an important task of the state.<sup>11</sup>

Cultural palaces or cultural houses comprising several functions were prominent elements of socialist towns. According to the rhetoric of the newspaper articles, the important problem of the first decade in *Leninváros* was the continuous delay in the construction of the cultural house, which not only deprived people of a long-awaited opportunity of entertainment, but the construction area and the buildings attached to it in the middle of the town spoiled the cityscape. The problems with the construction of the cultural house derived from the schedule of the city's construction. Due to the increase of the population, which was adjusted to the industrial development, the construction of residential homes took precedence over community buildings. The problem arising from this situation was highlighted by Lajos Füle, an architect and the chief city planner of the town, back in 1964. In his opinion, those new housing estates that were built in historical cities, around them, may lack the construction of a town centre, as the historical centre may serve this purpose instead of them.

“But such a new town as Tiszaszederkény,<sup>12</sup> whose construction has been going on for ten years out in the prairie, cannot do without a town centre for long because people want to get organised, to entertain and to gravitate somewhere busy and exciting where they can relax, recreate and socialize in various ways and according to high standards.”<sup>13</sup>

In the articles published in the 60s from the construction of the cultural house was expected to boost entertainment and culture as in *Leninváros* it had separate rooms for showing movies, theatrical plays, a rehearsal room, a dance room, a library, an exhibition room and separate rooms for clubs, but it lost its popularity by the 80s, especially with younger generations. The shortage of catering facilities, especially in the 60s, is a recurring topic in the

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<sup>11</sup> Shaw D. 1979: 122.

<sup>12</sup> The nearby village of *Tiszaszederkény* was incorporated in the new town by the name 'old town' and the housing estate of the town was built in its outskirts.

<sup>13</sup> Füle 1968: 20.

local press of the time and in the reminiscences of the interviewees: apart from a few pubs, restaurants and confectionaries, there was no other place for this kind of entertainment.

Based on Ebenezer Howard's concept of garden cities,<sup>14</sup> the planners envisioned the Soviet town as the city of gardens and parks. Integrating nature in the structure of the town was an important element of the plans and to achieve this, a whole network of green areas was created in the residential area, but they also tried to place the institutions of the industrial zone in a green environment.<sup>15</sup> In the case of *Leninváros*, due to the air pollution caused by chemical industry, green areas were to be assigned an even greater importance for the purpose of health protection and such a town was planned embedded in forests where the dimensions of the town ensured that nearby parks were a five-six-minute walk from anyone's home.<sup>16</sup>

According to the plans, the network of green areas was to ensure the health regeneration of the population and to enhance the aesthetic experience provided by the town and to contribute to social communication. Depending on the demands street, squares and parks could provide "quiet retirement and relaxing recreation on the one hand, and the cultured venues of social gatherings and community meetings on the other hand"<sup>17</sup>. As apartments were tight and uncomfortable, they were expected to gain a greater significance in social life. Parks (e. g. culture park,<sup>18</sup> youth park, KRESZ park [Highway Code Park],<sup>19</sup> playgrounds<sup>20</sup>) constituted a part of not only the social but also the educational infrastructure. By way of the sport and cultural events organised here, they provided a framework for spending one's free

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<sup>14</sup> It was Ebenezer Howard who first described his ideas on the agreement of the values of town and country life in his 1898 book (*To-Morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*). For more details on the concept of garden cities, and the effects it had on American and European urban design, see: Parsons-Schuyler (eds.) 2002; Meggyesi 1985: 34–50.

<sup>15</sup> Engel 2006: 175.

<sup>16</sup> Füle 1968: 17–18.

<sup>17</sup> N. A. 1983: 4.

<sup>18</sup> According to the original Soviet conception, these were places where visitors were informed about the latest technological and scientific achievements, culture, they could pursue sports, relax and where monuments and reliefs strengthening the ideology of the system were placed. See: Engel 2006: 175; Shaw C. 2011; Shaw D. 1979: 125.

<sup>19</sup> On the miniature network of roads fitted with pedestrian crossings and road signs, children could learn the rules of city traffic. N. A. 1979a: 5.

<sup>20</sup> In time, playgrounds were built next to nearly all blocks of flats (in 1972 there were forty-two), which also functioned as the central green area of a particular zone. The playgrounds between the blocks could only be approached on footpaths and car traffic was limited to vehicles parking in front of the houses. These squares could serve as recreational places apart from the noise of children. N. A. 1979c: 1. Cf. Engel 2006: 177–178.

time in useful way “from an ideological point of view”. In consequence of the increased importance of conservation and nature, which could be observed from the second half of the 1970s on, the educational park of conservation was opened in the neighbourhood of the youth park in 1984, where an open air educational room, trails and signs were intended to help students to know more and to love nature.<sup>21</sup> Certain companies also established leisure parks because they considered it of utmost importance “to take care that workers could spend their free time in a useful and pleasant way”<sup>22</sup>.

The network of town parks made the leadership of the town proud, however, they were less satisfied with the way certain residents used them. Reports appeared in the local press regularly on the damages improperly behaved people caused, e. g. in 1964: “some misbehaved individuals have already caused damages to the tune of thousands of forints by treading on the lawn in parks and ravaging the flowers planted outside during the night”<sup>23</sup>. A 1974 announcement of the council urged people not to step on the lawn in parks and not to pick flowers. The local decision makers could be induced by the fact that in that year, a movement was started by the Leninváros Council and the Patriotic People’s Front (*Hazafias Népfront*) by the name of “Clean, Leninváros in bloom (*Tiszta, virágos Leninváros*)”<sup>24</sup>, whose aim was to receive the title of “Clean, town in bloom”. The movement achieved its greatest success in 1976, when the challenge cup of the movement called “Clean, town in bloom” was awarded to *Leninváros*, among the towns of *Borsod* County, after being won by *Kazincbarcika* for several consecutive years.

By participating in the movement, the towns not only won an award, but they acquired a catchy slogan that boosted the image of the town. A drawback that has often been mentioned in connection with socialist towns is the lack of unique features. As the industrial manufacturing methods of panel buildings incurred lower costs and shorter time of assembly, these characteristics made them indispensable for socialist urban design. An architecture developed, characteristic of all the socialist countries with uniform structural elements and buildings. Owing to the improvement of panel technology,

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<sup>21</sup> N. A. 1984c: 4.

<sup>22</sup> The first beach was opened next to the Tiszapalkonya Thermal Power Plant, back in 1965, then, in the early 1980s the TVK started to build a large-scale leisure park (which included a beach and an ice rink too), which helped make the town a tourist destination. N. A. 1986: 4. The third big company, the Tisza Oil Refinery, opened its leisure park in 1987, which included three tennis courts, a handball court and a brigade park. N. A. 1987: 1.

<sup>23</sup> N. A. 1964: 2.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 18 June 1976. MNL BAZML. XXIII. 572. 13. d.

higher buildings could be built, which led to a structural transformation of socialist towns.<sup>25</sup> However, panel buildings, which reached their top in the 70s, did not live up to the expectations as it resulted in monotony.<sup>26</sup>

All the socialist towns had to cope with the issue of a monotonous cityscape, which was the result of their housing estate-like character and the uniformity of panel buildings, while the measures they took to enliven the cityscape were quite similar. *Leninváros*, like *Kazincbarcika*, tried to excel with its parks full of flowers and the numerous statues placed throughout the town and although reports were regularly published on the achievements, the latter town was always a step ahead concerning the acquisition of slogans. The construction of detached houses from the mid-1980s and facilities that had been neglected for either economic or ideological reasons (churches, new forms of the commercial and service providing sector such as the comecon open-air market,<sup>27</sup> separate pavilions for boutiques) at the time of the change of the political regime, meant a real breakthrough.<sup>28</sup>

### **“Household plots” in town**

Activities done because of some forcing material incentive have been distinguished from those done voluntarily on one’s own initiative in the research of free time, which have been carried out since the 1960s. The goal of the latter ones may have been relaxation, entertainment and personal development. There were some activities where the two big groups overlapped,

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<sup>25</sup> Engel 2006: 155.

<sup>26</sup> The urban problems caused by standardisation were disputed by architects too. One such attempt made to eliminate monotony – the huge panel building of the nuclear power plant in *Paks* decorated with tulip motifs – triggered a dispute all over the society. The criticism of the buildings expressed by Máté Major, an architect, was answered by the poet, László Nagy (which triggered an argument), in which, besides welcoming the attempts to make something new, he missed human, aesthetic and modern architecture. Nagy 1975. Gábor Preisich, an architect, explained the desolate character of housing estates by the preference of quantity over quality, by the behaviour of construction companies opposing any attempt to achieve variety and by the strict rules of factory panel technology. Preisich 1975. For more, see: Molnár 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Czakó–Sík 1999.

<sup>28</sup> According to the 1964 plan, no houses with gardens were to be built in *Leninváros*, due to the expenses incurred by the construction of amenities, their “natural place” was thought to be in villages around the town and in the area of the “old town”. The construction of residential houses with garden gained momentum when in 1982 state financed house constructions were stopped and the council started to divide land plots to satisfy the demand.

although by doing these activities, some income may have been earned, interest and passion also played a role in cultivating them. DIY and gardening were classified into this category. The latter one was one of the most popular among the pastime activities of the time. Gardening was mentioned in newspaper articles as “a real social movement” in which people from all walks of life participated. Its popularity was explained by the peasant background of those with green fingers, the upswing of the gardening movement,<sup>29</sup> the healthy nature of gardening and the increasing economic and material importance of the fruits and vegetables produced for home consumption or for sale, and by the attraction of moving in fresh air after the environment of the factory-coop or we can add that of the housing estate.<sup>30</sup>

In *Leninváros*, right at the time when the town was established, vegetable patches and kitchen gardens appeared in empty, (temporarily) undeveloped plots. For example, in front of the eight-level buildings or in the site of the would-be youth park, some parcels were appropriated by the residents most of whom moved in from villages. Tibor, a mechanist and his wife, a sewer came to town from a village in the neighbouring township. They were immediately given an apartment by their employer, which they exchanged for a bigger one in the first half of the 60s. The residential house was located across from the youth park and like the other residents in the building, they also established a little garden in an area that was left undeveloped back then, where they liked to take their little children too.

*“The council allowed it, we didn’t have to pay for it, we cultivated it and it wasn’t overgrown by weed. Someone started it and we, the others, were digging next to him. [...] Later some trees were planted and the trees were taken special care of and when the tree grew, nothing could thrive under it, then they came away from under it, and the whole thing was over. Until then, they had dug and raked it, and they had hoed it. When I needed anything, I just ran out and brought some vegetables and we cooked.”<sup>31</sup>*

However, this type of agricultural activities were mentioned in a negative context in the contemporaneous press, especially because in their opinion,

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<sup>29</sup> Gardening clubs and associations aimed to enhance the professional knowledge of their members, to buy specialized books and periodicals, to organise lectures, practical shows specialized in growing crops, exhibitions, competitions and the common purchase of grains, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and other tools.

<sup>30</sup> Fukász 1983: 134–135. The popularity of gardening and the use of small gardens can be observed in other socialist countries too, which can be explained by reasons similar to the aforementioned ones. Németh 2019: 215–264.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Tibor and his wife, Éva. Sajtószöveg, 12 February 2016. The names of the interviewees have been altered to protect their personal rights.

besides growing vegetables and fruits, animal were raised on a growing scale.<sup>32</sup> A 1965 article mentions that pig sticking became a “folk custom” in town and in connection with this, smoking sheds appeared at various points in town, on balconies and in playgrounds.

“How did these contraptions, resembling village toilets get to various points of our town...? Will stabbing, singeing and smoking be accompanied by raising pigs? And in the sign of striving for complete anarchy, will some pigsties be built here and there...?”<sup>33</sup>

Although in consequence of the gradual development of the area of the town, smoking sheds disappeared and small gardens retreated to the fringe of the town, the journalist’s fear was not without any basis. Back in 1969, at the session of the party committee of the town and the factory, the director of TVK disapproved of the fact that some people kept animals in the safety forest between the town and the factory (“ranging from keeping pigs to nutrias”), as they unleashed an invasion of pests on the town and the factory.<sup>34</sup> Later, illegal animal husbandry not complying with the hygienic regulations was discussed at the session of the town council,<sup>35</sup> and finally, the case received greater media coverage in 1977:

“Well, at first it was only one or two citizens, who did not respect the law at all, who encircled a little garden for themselves (under the electric line!), later their example was followed by more and more people. Today more than a hundred families are working in their free time on their »household plots« of 50-60 quadrats, which they enclosed arbitrarily. Everyone grows the vegetables they need and there are some who planted fruit trees under the electric line. I don’t envy anybody’s little pepper or tomatoes they worked for, but...! There came meat programme. More and more of the owners of little gardens built pigsties (a fascinating sight), and more and more people started to keep pigs. Today more than a hundred pigs and piglets are running around the little gardens. But what kind of little gardens are they? Most people cut the timber for the fence in the protective forest strip.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In connection with *Sztálinváros*, the adaption of village migrants to city lifestyle and the opposition of “town” and “village” norms (e. g. condemning keeping animals in the city and damaging parks) are described: Horváth 2017: 81–112.

<sup>33</sup> N. A. 1965: 4.

<sup>34</sup> N. A. 1969: 3.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of the Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 16 August 1974. MNL BAZML XXIII. 571. 10. d.; Minutes of the sessions of Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 16 April 1976. MNL BAZML XXIII. 572. 12. d.

<sup>36</sup> N. A. 1977a: 5.

As a last argument, the journalist mentioned the in-confused amazement, foreign and Hungarian visitors showed at this phenomenon on their arrival at the factory. Two months later it was reported in the press that small gardens were discontinued in the forest strip.<sup>37</sup>

The council tried to regulate the arbitrary establishment of small kitchen gardens several times. Already in 1974, a gardening cooperative was planned to be established in the site of the forest strip and on the land of the local cooperative covering 19 “*bolds*” (Hungarian acre) lying waste along the railway tracks, unsuitable for cultivating in large-scale cooperatives, but these plans were not realized.<sup>38</sup> The demand for the possibility of small-scale farming was satisfied in a regulated manner only in 1978, when small gardens of 100 quadrats were established in the northern part of the town and divided them among 351 tenants.<sup>39</sup> Due to the growing demand, new parcels were designated in other parts of the town.<sup>40</sup> Later it was recommended to those wishing to do gardening – due to the limited availability of lands – that they should obtain properties in the closed gardens of the neighbouring villages.<sup>41</sup>

Below, highlighting the experiences gained by some interviewees, I will demonstrate the reasons why they started to cultivate small gardens in the town, what functions the gardens had, what hierarchy was between the various gardening possibilities (small gardens in town, closed gardens in neighbouring villages, weekend plots), and how their significance changed during the lifetime of the interviewees as they became more advanced in age.

Zoltán, who was born in 1929, grew up in the agglomeration of the capital and after a turbulent life the authorities assigned him *Borsod* county as his residence.<sup>42</sup> In his narrative, Zoltán emphasized it several times that he was

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<sup>37</sup> N. A. 1977b: 2.

<sup>38</sup> Minutes of the Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 16 August 1974. MNL BAZML XXIII. 571. 10. d.; Minutes of the Leninváros Council Executive Committee, 28 March 1975. MNL BAZML XXIII. 571. 11. d.

<sup>39</sup> N. A. 1978: 5.

<sup>40</sup> N. A. 1984a: 4; N. A. 1984b: 4.

<sup>41</sup> N. A. 1979b: 6. Closed gardens covered those lands in the outskirts of settlements, which were found to be unfit for cultivation in big cooperatives and therefore they were left private property. Private individuals could only obtain lands here, in a maximum size of 3,000 m<sup>2</sup>. It was part of the more or less private second economy, which worked upon market principles, but from a legal point of view, it differed from household plots. Bali 2005: 156–158; Andorka 2006: 477–479.

<sup>42</sup> He worked as a painter at the construction of Soviet and Hungarian “new towns” (*Angarsk, Sztálinváros, Leninváros*). He compared the significance of *Leninváros* with the experiences he gained elsewhere several times in his reminiscences: he described the inhabitants of the town under construction as “sundry” folks whose majority were workers, temporarily staying there. In accordance with this, in his description of the not enclosed

good at gardening as he had lived all his life in a house with a garden and they kept animals when he was a child. He mentioned as a natural thing that in the house with a garden he rented in the 'old town' he started to keep rabbits and he did not give it up even after he moved to town. At the abandoned premises of a company he was allowed to set up some rabbit cages in which he kept 47 rabbits for three years. He started to cultivate his first kitchen garden near his home when his daughter was born in 1964 and even after he moved out he continued this in the new site for a while. He said he gave up gardening because his vegetables were often stolen and the animals often did some damage to it. "Half of it was stolen. The prime of it was always stolen. By the time I got there, part of it had been stolen. It was stolen. Half the people who went there did not even have a garden. They were lousy people."<sup>43</sup>

Tamás was born in a village in the township in 1948, and after finishing his studies, he settled down in the town in 1975, where he performed geodesic measurements in his jobs. His wife also came from the surrounding area, as he put it: "they also moved here from a farm". With his wife together, they cultivated five or six land plots designated as gardens – so called "occupied parcels" – growing vegetables and fruit on them. He stated that these land plots were not profitable and their cultivation required a lot of effort as they had to break the ground – he transported the rotary cultivator in his small Polski from one place to another. He had a vineyard in his native village too, but he doesn't cultivate it anymore as the 50–60 fruit trees on the big plot he bought at the time of the change of regime on the edge of the town give him enough work. He talked about agriculture as a hobby,<sup>44</sup> as both he and his wife loved the land, but lately he also regarded his orchard as a source of income.

Balázs, a teacher, who came from the northern part of *Borsod* county, moved to the town with his wife in 1979 and they immediately started to cultivate a small plot of land: "...you could gain land here by going out to the outskirts, digging a piece of land or tilling it for yourself and that was it, you occupied the land." Later these lands were meted out by the council, and a

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kitchen gardens cultivated on the edge of the residential area, stealth and damages caused by wild animals were the lead motifs.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Zoltán. Made by Ágota Lídia Ispán and Csaba Kovács. Tiszaújváros, 30 April 2012–17 November 2012: 326–333. (manuscript)

<sup>44</sup> It can be seen that he considered it as a hobby when he described the difference between his harvesting practices and those of his father: "It had its own magic, the harvest. When you organised a harvest and it was not like in my father's vineyard at home that all the grapes had to be picked up, but I said that they should be harvested and I didn't care what was left there. If the grapes fall, you will bury them under a little sand so that we won't see them and that's it. They don't have to be picked up." Interview with Tamás. Tiszaújváros, 31 January 2010.

small sum was paid for them. He emphasized it in his narrative that he first started to cultivate a small garden next to the garden of his relatives who came from his native village to *Leninváros* like him.<sup>45</sup> Due to the construction of houses with gardens from the end of the eighties on, the lands available for kitchen gardening were gradually shrinking and in keeping with the pace of development, Balázs and his family had to exchange their small gardens for other plots several times, but this time the old acquaintances and relatives and the cooperation with them were not there any more. The interviewee mentioned that the main motivation of kitchen gardening was that they could break out of the environment of panel homes when they could fry bacon or have the billycan boiling together with the family.

The construction plots, closed vineyards bought in one of the neighbouring villages or the plots bought on the hillside studded with cottages in *Nyékládbáza*, which is also situated nearby offered predictability as opposed to small kitchen gardens. Many parted with their weekend plots when their children grew up or when their parents grew old and cultivating their parents' village yards became their task.

Cultivating small gardens is still practiced today, several interviewees have been cultivating a land plot since the 1970s or 1980s, in some cases this is the last piece of a “package of plots” (e. g. weekend plot, closed garden) they have retained. The temporary status of small gardens has remained. While earlier the plots that were cultivated as small gardens disappeared due to the expansion of housing estates and the construction of the suburban quarter with houses with gardens, since the 2000s the tenants were forced to move on and to start cultivating newly designated “virgin” soil in consequence of the appearance of new stores (Tesco, Spar, Lidl). The transitory feeling is strengthened by the current regulation providing that officially trees cannot be planted, wells cannot be drilled and sheds must not be built in small gardens and the local self government may immediately take away the land plot that has been rented for years. Some of the interviewees describe small gardening as a generational custom: they started it as young people (“that was the mood that everyone tinkered with such little watchamacallit”), but they have grown old together with the garden neighbours and today gardening on the edge of town is considered to be a pastime mainly of retired people living in panel homes.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Balázs. Tiszaújváros, 19 January 2010. A literary sociographic description pointed out this phenomenon in *Leninváros* already in 1965: “Kitchen gardens are cultivated by those who moved from the village into town. And that bunch who came from the same village got household plots in Szederkény next to one another!” Balázs 1965: 2.

## **The garage in a new function**

With the rising number of private passenger cars, the limited number of parking places in streets and the lack of garages providing permanent storage space posed an ever-growing problem.<sup>46</sup> In the countries of the Eastern Bloc the latter one was solved in a similar way in terms of architecture, ownership and location (using suburban or marginal areas). Garage blocks became elements of the landscape characteristic of socialist towns.<sup>47</sup>

The professional automobile magazine called *Autó-Motor* suggested already back in 1957 that – following foreign examples – for the night passenger cars should be kept in the rows of garages built between blocks of flats or in garages constructed on the ground level or the basement of residential buildings.<sup>48</sup> The Ministry of Construction prescribed in 1960 that places should be designated for parking or constructing garages in the urban designs of towns. Connected to this, *Autó-Motor* raised the topic again and reported on a block of garages built next to a housing estate in *Budapest* as a pioneering initiative, setting it as an example. Here, car owners built their own garages in groups of four, on state-owned land, according to plans provided for them by the town council, which were owned by those who built them afterwards. In the press, it was suggested at that time that it was more cost effective if constructions were carried out by construction collectives or garage building cooperatives should be established following the example of apartment building cooperatives, furthermore, they suggested that type designs and regulations on construction and ownership should be worked out.<sup>49</sup> At last a comprehensive regulation – the so-called garage decree – was created in 1970.<sup>50</sup>

In accordance with the nationwide regulation, the gradual increase of the use of passenger cars was included in the calculations in the urban design of *Leninváros* in 1964:

“At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there will be no cityscape without passenger cars, and town route without the threat of accidents, so the separation of pe-

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<sup>46</sup> In Hungary, in 1950 there were 13,054 passenger cars, in 1960 31,268, in 1970 238,563 and in 1980 1,013,412. The annual increase of the passenger car fleet was 10-15,000 on average until the mid-1960s and from the mid-1970s it reached 80,000 per year. Valuch 2021: 109.

<sup>47</sup> Tuvikene 2010; Tuvikene 2014; Siegelbaum 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Torjai 1957: 24–25.

<sup>49</sup> Reményi-Gyenes 1961: 24–25; N. A. 1961.

<sup>50</sup> N. A. 1970: 420–422.

destrian and vehicle traffic is an important task to be solved by modern urban design. In consequence of the increased traffic demands, new functional and cityscape elements appear: multi-level garages, car carpets of roads, squares, real »parking stations«. Masses of moving cars cause problems to the cityscape whereas standing cars pose a problem to the townscape and the town structure.”<sup>51</sup>

When designing parking capacities, for full capacity, the plan calculated with the following data: for 1000 residents there were 280 cars, out of them 150 in big garages, 40 in small garages, and 90 in parking lots. The engineer suggested that big garages requiring large areas should be built in the forest on the edge of the town and on the far side of the roads bordering the residential units. In *Leninváros*, the small number of parking places and garages became an increasing problem by the 1970s, therefore car parks were added to the new residential buildings in 1973,<sup>52</sup> besides, in several steps huge garage blocks were built in several places in the city, mostly by garage co-operatives. Nevertheless, some suggested that blocks of garages should be built not only in suburban areas – as in this case, cars could have been parked quite far, even a kilometre away –, but free places fit for this purpose should be made use of in the city centre too.

According to the memoirs, those could build garages who already had cars or who could produce a request for a car to the authorities of the city council. The garage builders were often organized along the lines of the network of connections at their workplace. The garages were built by the co-owners in community work according to the interviewees<sup>53</sup> (later ready-made concrete garages also appeared), and then the single units were assigned by drawing lots. Kati, a shop assistant and her husband moved to the city from *Miskolc* in 1976, with their family, as they thought they would have better chances here to acquire an apartment. From the beginning they had a garage in a garage block and since then, they have bought garages for each of their sons there. The garages were handed over with finished structure and they were completed according to the owners’ needs and material possibilities: some people simply laid concrete on the floor, many built in a T-shaped inspection pit or created a cellar or attic in them.

A garage had several functions: they were used for storing and repairing cars and provided venues for social activities. This multifunctional usage of garages was typical in other socialist countries too, and the characteristics of

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<sup>51</sup> Füle 1968: 15.

<sup>52</sup> The increasing motorization required related service units, so a car service was built in the town and the filling station was also expanded.

<sup>53</sup> Voluntary community work based on the principle of mutuality.

socialist car culture played a role in it. Socialist car culture was characterized by paradoxes and complications accompanying mass motorizations, according to the research done by Luminita Gajat.<sup>54</sup> Besides western influences, some of its features derived from the socialist economic system such as the insufficient supply of cars and spare parts, the long waiting lists, the high consumer prices, the special commercial and distribution patterns that resulted from the lack of market, the poor production quality, the system of privileges and the individual car repairs and the social activities resulting from them.<sup>55</sup> It was researched by Kurt Möser, who argues that due to the shortages of manufacturing and the related service infrastructure, the repair and maintenance of socialist cars required a bigger technical activity and knowledge and an emotional attitude and practical care for the car different from the west, so the method of car use did not only involve driving. Maintenance and repair activities took place in garages.

In the following interview excerpt I would like to show what was the role of a garage in the owners' life and how they were used in everyday life. As the majority of the interviewees remained owners after the change of the political regime, we can see how certain functions were transformed. In their narrative the time planes are sometimes jumbled – some examples given by them to demonstrate the methods of uses are taken from the socialist era, others from our days, which indicate that some functions spanned various historical periods.

Imre, an electrical technician, who liked riding his motorbike in his youth from the '60s on and later he had several cars, spent much of his time in the garage as the second hand cars he bought required regular maintenance. His way of speaking – as has been pointed out by Möser in his research – expresses a unique emotional attitude and care in connection with cars:

“These had to be massaged, as there was always something to be done. [...] Everyone tried to ensure that it would not break down when they drove somewhere, you know, and they tried to inspect and maintain them and as they had had motorbikes they caressed the car, cleaned it and found out that this or that part is faulty or had broken down and they required repair.” In the beginning, he went to the garage to get acquainted with the car: “I looked into it here and there, I repaired this on it, I trimmed it, I repaired that on it. On the other hand, you had to pass the time somehow. Where shall I go when I get home from the factory at two, what the hell shall I do in the summer until 8? Or in the afternoon? Then I went out to the garage.”

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<sup>54</sup> For more see: Urry–Larsen 2004: 25–26.

<sup>55</sup> Gatajel 2011: 155–156.

He also mentioned storing as another important function of the garage and social activities when garage neighbours helped one another with repair and they often tasted the wine they received from hometown.

*“Well, going to the garage was a social activity [he is laughing], to entertain and to talk. Garage life was a different lifestyle, so perhaps we didn’t do anything, but the three or four of us were there and we had such a wonderful time all afternoon. There were fewer possibilities back then and it was like this.”<sup>56</sup>*

The garage, as described by Gábor, who was born in a neighbouring village in 1950 and after graduating from the university he lived with his family in *Leninváros* for several years, did not only serve the purpose of storing the car:

*“the two rooms [of the apartment] did not provide any opportunity for a man. There the expression »I’m going to the garage!« had a special meaning for those living in town. It still has. It meant that the husband left his family and started a new life in the garage around the car. Which meant everything including washing the car, but the car was not so dirty that it should be washed every day, but if you felt bored, you could go down to the garage or away to the garage.”<sup>57</sup>*

Kati also talked about the garage as the venue of activities mostly done by men and social occasions for several generations:

*“my husband occupied himself a lot out there, tinkering with his fishing things, and got busy, trimmed himself, he has a small collection of artefacts, er...a collection of cigarette lighters, he was organizing it, [...] there are lots of items which I couldn’t imagine in the apartment but there it served the purpose well as it is displayed in a round along the walls and he can store the car in the same way. He was tinkering and he is still tinkering in the summer [...]. The other two garages, which belong to the two sons, are terrific, there is almost always some gathering even in winter, yesterday they met old colleagues, they went there, had a little talk and then they went to play bowling. In the summer there are no such boy parties, but we usually organise family gatherings. The garage neighbour opposite us, [...] he arranged things so that they can cook in a cauldron inside, it is constructed in a way [...]. We usually cook good meals in cauldrons, fish soup, goulash with beans and we usually celebrated there some remarkable days like name days or the birthdays of those who were born in the summer [...].”<sup>58</sup>*

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Imre. Tiszaújváros, 15 February 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Gábor. Tiszapalkonya, 12 August 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Kati. Tiszaújváros, 20 January 2010.

Female garage owners (singles, divorcée, widows) used the garage almost exclusively for storing their cars and they did not participate in garage life: “they loved tinkering, working or having a drink together outside and to come together so men were socializing there, so to say, but it was not the dream of women”<sup>59</sup>. Nevertheless, it was a divorced woman who mentioned a new way of using her garage because she and her friends had a musical rehearsal in there.

Tamás, who we have already quoted in connection with the cultivation of small household gardens, had his fourth garage at the time when the interview was made. He explicitly summarized the characteristics, mentioned in other interviews too. Although he mainly talked about present day garage use practices, they can be traced back to the 1970s and the 1980s. In his narrative, the garage had multiple functions.<sup>60</sup>

In his own garage there is an attic, a storage room for cars, an inspection pit, and a cellar with an entrance opening at the back of the garage. The proper use of the pits he connected to socialism, “as socialist cars had to be repaired on a regular basis, they had to go under them and so on”. He connected the disappearance of car repairs to the fact that socialist cars vanished, which involved a change in the function of inspection pits: since then they have been used as storage places. In the cellar section he stored wine, spirits and fruit gathered in the garden while in the attic plastic barrels, apple mincer and tools were stored. Garages built under panel blocks were not considered by him suitable for this purpose due to their higher temperature, neither did they provide opportunity for cooking and they could not make noise in them either. Due to the other function of the garage, he preferred parking his car in front of his house. According to Tamás, most garage owners have a garden somewhere and the crops or the wine are stored in the garage, they are taken from there to be sold or home. Therefore, he said that garages have dual functions: “storing cars and crops”. Apart from storing cars, he mentioned that in many garages “various jobs are done privately” (welding, metal work, woodwork) in some of them there is a turning lathe too.

He told at length about the community life in the garage. In her opinion, family gatherings were held in the garage only lately and it had the advantage of not “making a mess” at home and it provides a more convenient venue than the narrow apartments. He mentioned that cooking fish soup or frying fish or smorgasbord (cold buffet) were characteristic of these occasions.

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Magdolna. Tiszaújváros, 4 February 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Tamás. Tiszaújváros, 31 January 2010.

*“And garages completed rental apartments and most people go down to the garage to socialize and talks to people. For many people, for me too, that I had a vineyard, it was created..., my garage is created in a way that I have a cellar where all tools necessary for processing grapes can be found. Everything from a press, a mincer to barrels. [...] And then, when there’s a gathering, or something, you offer it to the others and they offer something for you. Or if I had some spirit distilled, it wasn’t for my private consumption. All right, I probably consumed it too, but such barter trade... when they came up, tilled my garden, I gave them three litres of spirit or if they did me some favour, then...”<sup>61</sup>*

He connected the golden days of garage life to the time of the change of the regime, but in time, when garage owners often changed, lost its significance. As the pub was the place where jobs or job assignments could be received, the garage row provided an excellent opportunity to exchange information. Thus, it occurred several times that they informed one another about where to obtain a spare part and from whom.

*“So if someone has a problem, well... people there deal with everything. From drilling wells with everything. With electric things, repairing cars, small welding jobs, repairs, painting and one man goes up to the other asking what can be expected [...] and so they help one another.”<sup>62</sup>*

These communities include garage neighbours on the one hand and workplace companies or friends on the other hand, which communicate with one another sometimes. For example, one of the garage owners joins the card game organized in front of the garage with interviewee’s friends. A retired elder brother of Tamás’s makes awnings and doors for garages. He said that retired people like him stayed there regularly and they “form such bands of regulars” like his brother. He mentioned “fishing friendship” as another important link connecting men. Besides the experiences connected to fishing, which is called the most popular sport in town, he mentioned politics as a topic they liked talking about.

Finally, the garage is also an investment for him serving as a property that could be cashed if need be, for example if his daughter gets married. Referring to others, he also said that by renting out several garages, one can earn a considerable amount of monthly income. At one time, he himself owned several garages.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Tamás. Tiszaújváros, 31 January 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Tamás. Tiszaújváros, 31 January 2010.

## Conclusion

As has been said, in *Leninváros*, the planners laid stress on building facilities for the relaxation and recreation of people and parks, playgrounds, beaches and holiday homes were available for everyone. However, the public places designated as recreational facilities for the inhabitants of the town, which was intended to be an idealistic one, did not satisfy their needs. They preferred to spend their free time in their 'household plots' in town. Small gardens and garages complemented a lot of apartments in panel blocks, thus increasing the available living space in a special manner. As they were nearby – mostly within a five-minute bicycle ride from the apartment – their importance was different from that of weekend houses, plots or the vineyards owned in neighbouring villages. In the case of the latter ones, the interviewees highlighted that due to their difficult accessibility, they became more of a burden for them. As opposed to this, the small gardens and garages on the edge of town were visited every day, especially in the summer. While the small gardens were also frequented by the housewives, garages were mainly visited by men. At the same time, small gardens and garages had a community forming/creating effect. For instance, garage rows of the cooperative were plastered by means of community work. In many cases they worked at the same place and it also contributed to the fact that the owners knew one another relatively well. Common programmes organised by garage neighbours (drinking wine, cooking in cauldron) were activities for which the public places of the town did not provide any facilities. These "private properties" mostly had the function whose mass demand was unexpected for the planners of the city. Besides embodying the desire for private property, they helped residents, who often had a village background, making the socialist type of town more liveable.

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