

The Anatomy of Budapest

by Adrienn Nyircsák (ASA Alumna 2013)

Budapest has been my home town for the past seven years. When asked to describe it, I often hesitate. Beautiful, poised, historic, cultural? I am not content with these empty signifiers, because they do not capture the spirit of this city, nor do they distinguish it from other European capitals.

I have realized that what bothers me is the static nature of these descriptions. Budapest cannot be categorized in architectural terms, instead, it should rather be compared to a living organism.



Budapest has a beating heart. You can feel its pulse everywhere, any time of the day. The circular regularity of the daily commute, runners along the Danube, the jingling sound of trams all set the base of the rhythm. Palpitation grows in times of festivals, protests, powerful artistic experiences. Just the other day I found myself developing a strong awareness of my surroundings while practicing in a dance studio inside a riverside building. Folk music from the other room was interfering with our jazz tunes, and later when I stepped outside I felt as though the dancefloor was extended to the street as restaurants around me echoed the same smooth riff to which we had just performed our routine. The feeling of liveliness never ceases: the streets of Budapest are just as busy at night as during daytime, and when it is warm, you even have to cut your way through the crowds in front of bars, theatres and other popular venues.

Budapest has blood circulating in its body. The vein of the city is the blue Danube that carries trade nutrients to various parts of the country and beyond and alimnts the population with its precious fluid. As a warm-blooded creature, the city is sown with capillaries of thermal water running in underwater creeks, springing from rock-sheltered sources and mosaic-tiled public pools. The intimate connection of the city with natural formations reinforces the impression that it has

somehow organically evolved from the ground. It is well worth visiting places where human activities take place in an organic setting, as in the case of the Gellért Hill cave church and the Hospital in the Rock at the base of Buda Castle.

Budapest also has lungs, the bronchi of which extend from the Buda Hills through the Margaret Island towards the City Park. Parts of the lungs have suffered damage due to heavy smoking and the inhalation of exhaustion fumes. A particularly healthy patch can be found in the lower side of the left lobe, at the Kopaszi Dam, where the Danube takes a rest in a bay surrounded by trees and fresh air.



Budapest loves to eat. Its stomach seems bottomless as it accommodates more and more diverse cuisines. In the downtown area of Pest the number of restaurants, coffeehouses, pubs, food markets, bakeries, sweet shops, liquor bars, and breakfast places is approaching some 250 within an area of 0,4 square kilometres. Budapest is a place for gourmets, it invites all our senses to taste its fine wine, sophisticated pastries and cakes, artisan coffee, and other marvelous culinary treats. Budapest eats on the streets, in markets, on boats, in abandoned warehouses.

Budapest is vain, and cares a lot about its appearance, but it is overly obsessed with its face, i.e. the hallmark landscapes of the Buda Castle, the Parliament, Gellért Hill, and the Basilica and its surroundings. At the same time the city seems less concerned with hiding its flaws and repairing damages in other parts of its body. For Budapest has numerous scars from its past which are visible on the surface of buildings, such as bullet holes on walls that have been left untouched for decades due to negligence or lack of funding. Other marks are proudly flaunted and displayed as mementos of past periods of glory, as some of the best preserved historical sites show: Vajdahunyad Castle, the Roman ruins of Aquincum or the Castle Garden Bazaar.



The shadow of the 20th century still lingers over the city in a pervasive way, sneaking in people's everyday lives. Residential buildings in Budapest guard thick and sombre memories of occupation oppression, persecution and revolution. These buildings – some of which are open to the public during the days of the Budapest100 programme – represent the brain and soul of the city. They are eclectic in style: some are classic beauties, others are torn and ragged, but stand with dignity, and many take on modern clothes but hide surprising anachronisms (e.g. an elevator that you have to send manually downstairs). Navigating between and inside these buildings is an exciting adventure for natives and tourists alike.



Budapest is an old, tormented soul. Its monuments are not static but always evolving and reflecting on our present: as constant reminders of the fragility of our present peace, the House of Terrors submerges us in the darkest cells of dictatorship, while the "living memorial" that was formed spontaneously as a reaction to an ill-conceived statue commemorating the victims the Nazi occupation of Hungary (and simultaneously exonerating collaborators) invites the people of Budapest to act upon the preservation of the memory.

Budapest is a wonderful creature. It is lovable, because it reminds us of ourselves, our problems and joys, of human miracles and tragedies. Budapest leads an unhealthy lifestyle yet it recovers from the gravest injuries of war, shakes off its "human parasites" and goes on its way. It does not pretend to be perfect, sometimes it is outright repulsive and plain, but this fallibility is what makes me and many other lovers of the city feel at home.

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Photos: Stefan Roch