

Margins and Limits of Local Protection in Budapest. Salient Examples and the Case of the Körszálló Hotel

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Abstract

Post-war architecture received little consideration in national listings in Hungary. Instead, local protection has become the favoured means of translating growing recognition into regulatory frameworks. However, the effectiveness of this tool is called into question by the most recent plans, which even involve demolition work. This contribution explores the margins and limits of local protection in Hungary, examining the controversial case of Körszálló in Budapest. The cylinder-shaped hotel built at the foot of the Buda Hills in 1967, was closed in 2025. Despite its local protection status, it was completely demolished. The idea is to comply with local protection by recreating architectural features, while changing the number and height of floors, among other things. Analysing the case of Körszálló, the aim is to identify existing opportunities and issues relating to heritage frameworks in Hungary, with reference to debates surrounding the concept of safeguarding more recent architecture.

Keywords

Local protection, Post-war architecture, Modern heritage, Hungary, Budapest.

Between 2022 and 2023¹, the municipality of Budapest granted 128 post-war buildings the status of local protection². Among these, we find 13 that were attributed to the «transitional period» (1945-51), 14 to «Socialist Realism» (1951-56)³ and 78 to the alleged time of «consolidated modern architecture» i.e., the time after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The selection was the result of a participatory process involving a pre-selection by an expert committee and public consultation meetings. With this, the city took a stand for the conservation of the more recently built environment in the capital, but also expanded the scope of cultural heritage recognition in Hungary as a whole, listing, for instance, the Protestant Church by architect Szabó István built in 1981 or the Hungarian Telegraphic Office by architect Virág Csaba built between 1985 and 1990.

The decision to grant local protection to the most recent listings in Budapest is telling for the current state of preservation in Hungary. Indeed, in recent decades, local protection has been the favoured means of extending protection to more recently built legacies. National listings comprise merely 135 post-war buildings⁴ that are distributed rather unevenly across Hungary. Entries reflecting the variety of typologies are the Radio Transmission Facility near Solt built 1976-77⁵ or the Sputnik Observer Station near Szombathely from 1968. With 12 new entries, the latest additions in 2024 have focused on the buildings of architect Makovecz Imre⁶. This comes as no surprise, given the controversial discussions surrounding the 2023 Law on Hungarian Architecture. The latter considered Makovecz besides Lechner Ödön and Kós Károly as the «yardstick for most advanced traditions of national architecture» in Hungary.

The new local protection listings in Budapest were not a singular event but the result of an ongoing process of patrimonial acknowledgement which – against the recent odds⁷ – is reflected in the growing number of research, exhibitions, as well as in professional and public debates⁸. Going back in time, the codified term of ‘local protection’ appears first in the 1990s⁹



Fig. 1 Budapest, Körszálló, Tower (Bittenbinder, 2025).



Fig. 2 Budapest, Körszálló, Flat Slab (Bittenbinder, 2025).



Fig. 3 Budapest, Körszálló, Interior / Staircase (Györfy, 2024).

and relates closely to the administrative reforms after the regime change¹⁰. At a closer look we can see, however, that a legal tool similar to local protection was in use already under socialism. Since the mid-1970s, indeed, ‘council protection’ could be granted to individual buildings or even urban areas restricting new architectural interventions. It is noteworthy that it appeared first in the building codes of Budapest before being implemented in other cities. Overall, council protection was presented as a tool to distinguish geographic relevance but also potential phasing recognition. Salient promoter Winkler Gábor (1941-2015) regarded it as an «effective way of preparing protection»¹¹. Against the background of a long history of council / local protection in Hungary, the question emerges which role it holds today. To reflect on this, we shall look at the case of Körszálló, a hotel completed in 1967 which is currently at the centre of professional debates.

The Budapest Hotel from construction to contemporary situation

Known to locals as Körszálló (Circle Hotel), Hotel Budapest was built 1964-67 by the designs of architect Szrogh György (1915-99)¹². The building comprises a 64-metre-high cylindrical tower on top of a low-rise slab. The tower contains the hotel rooms and the rooftop bar, while the slab features the lobby, restaurant, wine bar, and all the necessary supporting functions, such as the kitchen and offices¹³. Its architecture was allegedly inspired by Polónyi Károly’s hotel in Siófok (planning since 1958)¹⁴ and has similarities to projects abroad¹⁵. Overall, Körszálló was part of a larger hotel programme, which, starting in the 1960s, aimed at new accommodation facilities for tourists – from ‘socialist brother states’ and the ‘West’. As such, it embodies a paradigm shift in foreign politics, which sought to establish a more liberal attitude to international travelling. Back then, the construction of Körszálló was considered innovative given the use of ‘sliding’ concrete formworks, which had so far only been applied in industrial architecture like agricultural silos or water towers¹⁶. The collocation of the hotel at the foot of the Buda hills was subject to debates due to its exceptional height in the low-rise cityscape of Budapest¹⁷. In the 1970s, Hotel Budapest became highly popular among tourists and those looking for nightlife. With time, Körszálló entered the collective urban memory¹⁸.

In 2019, a document was issued to assess the «value of the building» and Körszálló was placed subsequently under local protection of the respective district government¹⁹. In 2022, it was also proposed (unsuccessfully) for local protection of the municipality of Budapest. However, by then, economic pressure had already led

to an emerging risk of redevelopment. Reservations had dropped, and new usage scenarios had been trialled in an attempt to offset mounting deficits²⁰. At this stage, first studies for redevelopment appeared. These included three scenarios of 'invasiveness' ranging from preservation of the existing structure up to the demolition and rebuilding of the tower. The respective plans were issued by KÖZTI Zrt., the legal successor of the state planning firm Szrogh had worked for. Linked to the sale of the property the preference for rebuilding has become public in 2024. With regard to the tower, thirteen floors plus a penthouse level were depicted, not fourteen. Neither the district government nor the owner had made any final decisions at that stage, as official consultations were still ongoing²¹. On the district level, there were also voices in favour of preservation. Some council members, have pointed out the need to «preserve as much as possible of the architectural monument and renovate the protected building to its original state in a manner that was 'true to the period'». The national planning council suggested to consider «what parts could be saved within the framework of the development» mentioning explicitly the «elegant staircase on the ground floor»²². In January 2025, however, Hotel Budapest closed for good and only some months later the official demolition and construction permits were granted. The press talked at this point about a «near-complete rebuild» under the planning of Tima Zoltán (KÖZTI). The final project includes around 50 luxury apartments, along with wellness facilities, restaurants, offices, and public amenities²³. Demolition started in August, 2025.

Salient issues of local protection in the case of Körszálló

Evidence of growing recognition and increasing redevelopment pressure can be traced back to 2021, when the official Hungarian architects' association (MÉSZ) selected the Körszálló building for its new database of Hungarian modern architecture. The selection criteria was «primarily quality and recognition, as well as potential vulnerability»²⁴. With a similar mindset Körszálló was included most recently in the database of *Virtual Architectural Salvage* – a project that documents endangered architecture via archive research and photographic surveys. In the case of Körszálló, the assessment highlighted the presence of «elements from the past» being «valuable testimonies of the [socialist] time»²⁵. Explicitly mentioned are hereby the panelling and veneered woodwork, the stone flooring, but also the representative stairways and the reception room with its counter from the 1980s. The latest assessment of potential values was issued by museologist Branczik Márta and art-historian Kovács Dániel who elaborated on potential architectural, artistic and cultural values of the buildings. Their document internalises the urban role, applied structural and architectural solutions and interior design. Special emphasis was given to the proportions of the cylinder and the flat slab, the terraced arrangement of the latter, and the design of the tower façade, including the proportion and contrast of the surfaces and openings, and the articulation of the parapets. The interior elements were also considered, including the preserved spiral staircase and the ramp-like double stairs connecting the lobby and the first floor²⁶. The question emerges whether some considerations have been already part of the local protection status.

To answer this, we must look at the Value Assessment Document made as a base for protection in 2019²⁷. Unfortunately, it contains only a limited number of prescriptions. One of them concerns the «reason and object of protection», the other the «restoration and renewal proposals». The former refers to the «building mass and unique form to bear relevance in

architectural history», the latter specifies that «the existing mass of the building cannot be dismantled». This left room for interpretation, particularly regarding the possibility of dismantling the mass temporarily to rebuild it. Consequently, the report of the Budapest Chamber of Architecture (BÉK) criticised the «lack of a detailed inventory of values»²⁸. In this context, the District Government stated that the protection status refers to the «form and heritage-character of the building, and safeguards its original appearance»²⁹. While «appearance» clearly suggests a subordination of material legacies, it remains unclear which elements/detail level was implied. Particularly problematic is the use of the term «original» reflecting a bias against architectural stratification (new strata are less worthy of preservation) and the controversial belief that the «original» can be recreated. Their combination can be found in the aforementioned document which deems it «desirable to restore the original window and door colours and the solid parapets of the slab building». Beyond, there are diverging ideas about the moment in time taken as reference point for 'the original'. To some, it is the passed-down state with all extensions and transformations (as been passed-down to us)³⁰. To others, it is the state at completion i.e. when there was still the roof terrace³¹. Finally, there are those who cite the architect's ideas and 'vision', even if they were not implemented, as the benchmark for the 'original'. For this, we must add that Körszálló was initially planned as a 'seasonal hotel', meaning that it was budgeted to accommodate guests only in summer. Albeit the project was modified to an 'all-seasons hotel', the budget was not aligned accordingly³². Several architectural features were never being implemented, such as (1) the roofed connection from street to parking to the main entrance (2) the copper cladding of the roof as closing element of the staircase and elevator core and (3) the large-size tempered glass panels on the rooftop terrace³³, or the (4) panoramic windows that could be opened across the entire width of the hotel rooms³⁴. As surprising as it may seem, the 'lack' of architectural solutions that were envisaged but not implemented is currently being used to support the demolition-reconstruction narrative. The argument is that the current building does not reflect the architect's original vision, and that the reconstruction provides an opportunity to create a more authentic version.

Körszálló as the object for reconstructivist narratives

While Walter Benjamin analysed the loss of the artwork in the 'age of mechanical reproduction' and Boris Groys investigated the cityscape in the 'age of touristic reproduction', the case of the Körszálló raises the question of how the given example of late-capitalist reproduction can be framed in theoretical terms? Certainly, Körszálló can be contextualised within the contemporary architectural phenomenon of Central European 'reconstructivism'³⁵. It is nevertheless different in that the post-war built legacy in question is replaced not with historicizing appearances but those of the demolished building. Yet, the underlying narrative appears to remain the same: late-modernist buildings are allegedly unfit for adaptive re-use due to architectural deficiencies (an insufficient load-bearing structure, an improper spatial distribution for contemporary fire-protection standards, low ceiling heights unable to accommodate contemporary building service engineering/HVACR units etc.). These are attributed to generalised issues under the former Eastern bloc namely poor construction materials and techniques.

According to chief architect Tima Zoltán, this holds true also for the Hotel Budapest. He stated that «the domestic construction technology of the time and the general standard of the construction industry could not keep pace with Szrogh's grand ideas. The building was constructed using controversial technical solutions; its structure is only suitable for the purpose for which it was built». He also called it «technically obsolete»³⁶. Beyond, Körszálló has become the object of yet another reconstructivist narrative that puts the 'vision of the architect' above all preservation efforts. This becomes

apparent from one of Tima's other statements in which he stresses that «the generous architectural concept of the building is its strongest asset, therefore the planned development will primarily preserve the unique features [...] that give the building, completed in 1967, its character.»³⁷. To «preserve the character» is hereby intended in the sense of granting continuity via the selective and approximate reproduction of appearances that are attributed to the visionary genius of the architect. The idea to return to the 'original concept' was arguably first applied in Hungary in the frameworks of the controversial governmental Steindl Imre Program, in which the Ministry of Agriculture (built 1885-87) by architect Gyula Bukovics (1841-1914), was demolished almost entirely, to create the 'original vision of the architect' that had been corrupted (allegedly) first by budget issues and then by the transformation of the building during socialism. While in the Steindl Imre Program the repatriator was impelled also by a political rationale, in the case of Körszálló the investor is motivated purely on an economical level. Remains the general doubt whether the reproduction of Szrogh's architecture would have been ever considered, if it wasn't for the opportunity to construct a high-rise building in the area. However, at this point, we must stress that the investor has spared no effort or expense in searching for a compromise, however ambiguous it may be. Unlike state programmes, the firm actively engaged with experts and the public. It financed a value assessment, initiated the conference on the use of post-war built legacies, and opened the building to the public for tours prior to demolition.

Criticalities of local protection in safeguarding the more recent past

As we have seen, local protection in Hungary is generally available as a tool to protect post-war built legacies. Its increasing use in Budapest is a sign of growing patrimonial recognition, as well as intensifying redevelopment pressure. The case of Körszálló, however, reveals that its leverage in the 'age of neoliberalist reproduction' is highly dependent on prescriptions, which, in case of limited indications, can even result in the demolition of the protected object itself. The search for economic profit, so it seems, has discovered the local protection as an opportunity. Inversely, there might be hope that more extensive prescriptions might prevent the loss of material legacies in the future. For preservation, the next step would have to be the assessment of other protected instances to mitigate potential risks. Certainly, a transformation and adaptation of respective building will be inevitable, yet, salient narratives might lead to irreversible and far-reaching consequences. If passed down heritage is measured merely against contemporary requirements and judged upon the allegedly 'original vision' of the architect, the demolition scenario of Körszálló will not remain a singularity. The 'preservation of appearances' might have been sufficient for the permits of the given case, but what if Körszálló turned into a model for other projects³⁸? Without engaging in premature alarmism, we need to discuss regulatory frameworks that allow for suitable heritage preservation standards and consider new incentives for private developers to collaborate with existing frameworks rather than working against them.

- ¹ Since 2021, 64 buildings and 2 post-war ensembles. Public consultation held on January 20, 2022. Municipality of Budapest.
- ² 23 post-war buildings protected via the decree no. 6/2022. (III. 3.), 37 via the decree no. 10/2022. (IV. 26.), and 80 via the decree no. 8/2023. (IV. 6.) In addition, there were also building ensembles were protected.
- ³ In 1954, socialist realism was officially dropped as a stylistic imposition. Yet, the effective change is commonly attributed to 1956.
- ⁴ Author's interview with Branczik Márta in February 2022.
- ⁵ Ministerial Decree of 42/2013. (VIII. 9.).
- ⁶ 12 buildings by Makovecz Imre were protected. Ministerial decree 36/2024. (X. 31.).
- ⁷ FRANZ BITTENBINDER, RACHEL GYÖRFFY, *Overwriting a Difficult Past. Built Legacies and the Search for New Identities in Budapest?*, in Cristina Cuneo (ed. by), *Città che si adattano. Adaptive Cities*. Turin, AISU International 2023, pp. 112–127.
- ⁸ *Szocmodern épületek hasznosítása* (Use of Socialist Modern Buildings). Conference on March 6, 2025, MÉSZ, Budapest.
- ⁹ Local protection as category for Budapest was introduced in the 1990s. The legal basis for it was the Municipal decree 54/1993.
- ¹⁰ Reforms substituted councils in charge of cities and regions with local governments. Budapest got a dual self-government system.
- ¹¹ GÁBOR WINKLER, *A legújabb kor építészeti emlékeinek védelme* (The Protection of the More Recent Architectural Testimonies), «Műemlékvédelem», s. 30, vol. 1, 1986, pp. 59.
- ¹² Prior to Körszálló Szrogh visited England, the USA and Mexico as UNESCO scholarship holder. GYÖRGY SZROGH, *A dunavarsányi és mogyoródi iskolákról* (About the Schools in Dunavarsány and Mogyoród), «Magyar Építőművészet», s.78, vol. 3, 1987, p. 29.
- ¹³ GYÖRGY SZROGH, *Budapest szálló* (Hotel Budapest), «Magyar Építőművészet», s. 1968, vol. 4, pp. 26–37.
- ¹⁴ ANNA ZÖLDI, *Körszálló – Virtuális leletmentés: modern örökség* (Körszálló – Virtual salvage: Modern Heritage), in «Építésforum», I, 28, 2025.
- ¹⁵ Oscar Niemeyer's Hotel Nacional in Rio de Janeiro (built 1968–72), Frank Lloyd Wright's project in Phoenix, Arizona (1967) see ANNA ZÖLDI, *Körszálló – Virtuális leletmentés...*, op.cit. Also: Bertand Goldberg's towers in Chicago (1963) and Marek Laykam's Okraglak tower in Poznan (1948–55). MÁRTA BRANCIK, *Kevés ilyen valóban ikonikus épület van Budapesten*, in József. Martinkó, Viola Pleskovics (eds. by.), *Szocmodern épületek hasznosítása* (The Use of Socialist Modern Buildings), Budapest, p. 31.
- ¹⁶ See ANNA ZÖLDI, *Körszálló – Virtuális ...*, op. cit.
- ¹⁷ More about the highrise-debate in MARIANN SIMON, *Újrakezdések / Restarts*, Budapest, TERC 2016.
- ¹⁸ In 2018, local historian Verrasztó even made a book about the history of the hotel. GÁBOR VERRASZTÓ, *A félig bevert szeg. 50 éves a Körszálló* (The half-hammered nail. The Körszálló is 50 years old), Budapest, Napkút Kiadó 2018.
- ¹⁹ The Value Assessment is available <https://masodikkerulethu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/masodikkerulethu/2020_05/evd_009_szilagy_i_e_fasor_47_ertekvedelmi_dok202001ho.pdf>
- ²⁰ After the regime change, the building functioned as a student accommodation, workers' hostel and educational institution (ANNA ZÖLDI, *Körszálló – Virtuális leletmentés...*, op.cit.). Since the conflict in Ukraine refugees had been accommodated, too. «Egy Hely» posted on April 2, 2022.
- ²¹ MIKLÓS VINCZE, *Nem bontaná le a tulajdonosa a Körszállót, a kerület az eredeti állapot visszaállításáért küzd* (The owner would not demolish the Körszálló, the district is fighting to restore it to its original condition), «24.hu», vol. X, n. 31, 2024.
- ²² Report of the Budapest Chamber of Architects (BÉK) available at <<https://www.bek.hu/bek.nsf/hir.xsp?id=LG%C3%81R-DJDAMX-3448>>.
- ²³ MIKLÓS VINCZE, *Nem bontaná ...*, op. cit.
- ²⁴ Data Base of Hungarian Association of Architects available at <<https://nka.meszorg.hu/magyar-modern/>>.
- ²⁵ Project launched by art historian Branczik Márta <http://kiscellimuzeum.hu/virtualis_leletmentes/budapestszallo>.
- ²⁶ BRANCIK 2025.
- ²⁷ Protection decree N. 29/2020.VII.08. Value Assessment No. ÉVD.009 by Mező Ágota Judit, 2019.
- ²⁸ BÉK Report.
- ²⁹ ZSANETT FÜRDŐS, *“Nem indulhat meg semmilyen bontás” a Körszállónál* (“No demolition can begin at the Körszálló”), «We Love Budapest», vol. X, n. 31, 2024.
- ³⁰ Including the changes to the truncated cone-shaped roof due to the 1994–97 renovation.
- ³¹ At the completion the wood panelling appeared also on the arched façade and in the window openings. The solid railing of the stair was still made of curved reinforced concrete.
- ³² The limited budget can also made responsible for the fast detachment of the light blue glass mosaics on the parapet-surfaces.
- ³³ GYÖRGY SZROGH, *Szrogh György. Architektúra vallomások* (György Szrogh. Architectural Confessions). György Pálkás (ed.), Budapest, Kijarat kiadó 1999.
- ³⁴ ANNA ZÖLDI, *Körszálló – Virtuális ...*, op. cit.
- ³⁵ GYÖNGYVÉR R. GYÖRFFY *Ikonoklasmus, Musealisierung und Hyperrealität. Eine Annäherung an den architektonischen Rekonstruktivismus in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, in Dinççağ Kahveci, Aysegül et al. (eds. by), *Censored? Conflicted Concepts of Cultural Heritage*. Weimar, Bauhaus Universitätsverlag 2023, pp. 48–63.
- ³⁶ ZOLTÁN TIMA, *A Körszálló újjáépítése* (The Rebuilding of Körszálló), in József. Martinkó, Viola Pleskovics (eds. by.), op. cit., p. 36.
- ³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 38.
- ³⁸ Similar to the Royal Riding Hall that inspired subsequent reconstructions in the Buda Castle District.