

## **Hiding in the Concrete Jungle: Covid-19 and Eastern Europe's Built Heritage**

**Article by Adam Zoltan Szedlak**

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Lockdowns across Europe have meant a return to our most intimate spaces. For some, the longing for safety and comfort has given suburbia a new-found allure as constraints on access to quality housing and shared spaces have forced city-living to be seen in a new light. In Eastern Europe, **Ádám Zoltan Szedlák** argues that its built heritage and the ongoing pandemic make this reflection acute, and signal long-overdue reforms.

I'm a human: an exceptionally lazy one, yet I must roam. Not far – I do not need the Walden Pond or daily strolls through the mountains. I live in Budapest in a 65-square metre flat with three rooms, which I share with my brother. A typical Eastern-European “panel”, the apartment was built in 1975. Like most of Europe, Hungary spent much of the year in voluntary quarantine. Without space to roam, to be alone, and to work, the lockdown was a slow route to insanity. Of course, I am lucky. Not everybody has been.

Real estate prices in Hungary have gone through the roof in recent years. The Hungarian real estate market works in cycles. After a boom began in 2000, the crisis of 2008 saw demand collapse, foreign currency loans default, and prices fall. In the 2010s, the latest upswing began to form, driven by migration to the cities, tourism and the “Airbnb-effect”, and the government’s family homebuilding programme. The programme offers a maximum of 10 million forints in interest-free loans and another 10 million forints in grants for new homes for families willing to have three children. The amount changes with the purchase of an existing house or with fewer children. The programme has added roughly two million florins to average house prices.

While housing costs rise, wages continue to lag. With prices that regularly force the choice between rent and food on the table, professions such as nursing and teaching kindergarten have become luxury pursuits. A typical advert for a rented apartment reads: “Small, one-bedroom flat with loft available for one person or a young couple”; its floor space is probably 30 square metres. If you can count on the wonders of the outside world, these apartments are pleasant, affordable, and even spacious. But urban life in most homes means using the park, pub and cinema as your living room.

### **Giants of concrete steel**

During the Communist era, housing projects in Hungary grew from the soil like mushrooms after rain. Small villages were transformed into industrial cities: Dunapentele became Stalin City (now Dunaújváros); the barren land between Tiszaszederkény and Tiszapalkonya became Lenin City (now Tiszaújváros). Quaint towns became giant cities, built with concrete and steel.

In 1989, the regime collapsed but the built environment of communism remained. One-seventh of the apartments in Hungary are communist-era panels. It's the same in other post-communist countries: one-third of Slovaks live in panelák. Estonia and Lithuania take the unofficial trophy: two-thirds of their populations live in concrete towers.

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These housing projects aren't all bad. They kept some of their brutalist heritage and were designed around their inhabitants. The grocer, the market, the pharmacy, and the local doctor are usually not far; public transport is easily reachable, and the local school and kindergarten are nearby. The problem lies with the amount and division of space in the floor plan. With two rooms, 30 square metres might sound like ample space, but there are flats with one living room and two "half-rooms", equivalent to six or seven square metres of personal space. There are hacks to add some extra storage and make room for the capitalist inventions (washing machines, dishwashers, computers) that were not available when these buildings were first designed but you will not find a personal office space in a panel. You might have a built-in cupboard with a folding table.

In the 1990s, city councils across Eastern Europe began to sell their housing stock. In 1990, there were 703 000 council-owned apartments for rent in Budapest; by 2007, this number had fallen to 167 000. In Hungary, government building programmes slowed down this decline, but the problem is still waiting for a solution.

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Aside from panels, the average Hungarian house (around 32 to 37 per cent of the market) has two or three rooms. More recently, a new kind of apartment has emerged. Sharing only the uniformity of panels' floor plans; the configuration of space now differs to favour a stylish aesthetic and accommodate personal needs. The fashionable Kádár Cubes are popular, one-story, decorated buildings intended for a single family. There are also two-story family homes with gardens, intended for larger families that are usually left empty once the children have grown up and moved out.

But there is a common challenge that all these designs share: balancing multiple people who are working remotely. Managing children participating in remote learning at home, alongside their parents who are trying to do the same with their work, takes creativity. The same can be said for multiple flatmates in apartments and panels. Work desks have been fabricated from ironing-boards and garden tables for home offices. Those who could not move their work home faced different problems. People have realised that in a pandemic, the smallest and most meaningful unit of society is the household. Be it a family or a household of flatmates, a positive test of one means quarantine for all.

## **The future of suburbia**

In the age of Covid-19, suburbia has gained a new allure in Eastern Europe. A report by the real estate agency Duna House explains how housing requirements have changed. According to their data, buyers are more cautious, houses take longer to sell, and investments have decreased – natural phenomena during a downturn and a pandemic. What is new is that the average size of the apartments sold has risen to fairly spacious 50 square metres. Another industry analysis shows that detached and semi-detached homes have become more desirable. Since April, 52 per cent of potential buyers are looking for houses with gardens.

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*uninspiring now carries an air of safety.*

Writer and philosopher Ian Bogost has called this the “revenge of suburbia”: what was once considered dull and uninspiring now carries an air of safety. Suburbia is less crowded and has fewer shared places with other inhabitants. This development is at odds with the pre-pandemic school of thought that envisioned the end of detached houses. In the 1980s, there was a major housing boom in Hungary: five- or six-room houses were being built with state support that became the homes for families with just two or three children. Nowadays, these usually stand half-empty, the result of divorces, early deaths, and the flight from the country’s secondary cities to Budapest. The government has tried to incentivise return to the suburbs with various support plans for new families with children but their success remains to be measured.

## **Where do you go in a closed-down world?**

A “new normal” for housing has been established in Hungary. The dramatic public health crisis and the lockdown have prompted a necessary conversation about urbanism, shared spaces, and desirable homes. It’s not a matter of *hygge* or *lagom* but about a meaningful reassessment of what constitutes a “homely” home.

Building more suburbs is not the solution. The traffic jams of commuters are already long enough, clogging up the air for city-dwellers who resisted the siren song of suburbia. Europe has tried this approach already; its logical endpoint is the urban flight seen in New York and Los Angeles. Only in a car-based world can suburbia that is safe, green, and close to the city exist. Even in these circumstances, this security is only a perceived feature. According to Bogost, the resistance to mixed spaces will become a commercial catastrophe: coffee houses, ice cream parlours and other gathering spaces will not survive social distancing. Suburbia cannot sustain its businesses, and so will become single-use and continue to depend on a car-based lifestyle.

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The alternative is to design dense, modern, urban housing and spaces that can withstand the pandemic. Density is not the same as crowdedness, even if they look very similar. Dense housing can be built with resilient heating and cooling systems and access to outside space that make quarantine possible, even in a panel. But even with dense, modern, urban housing, there are still challenges to overcome.

In Hungary, panels are too expensive for young professionals and yet there are only a handful of housing units available for rent from local government. The landlords mainly come from the private sector and rents are not controlled. The result is a market free-for-all. The problem is not simply a class issue as even white-collar workers and the aspiring intelligentsia are priced out of the market. The Fidesz government’s idea of a solution were subsidised loans and grants for new homes aimed at couples willing to have children. This kind of support is not available for singles, childless couples, or LGBTI couples. NGOs such as Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület are campaigning for housing policies that work for people beyond the traditional families.

In May 2020, the government announced a programme of tax incentives to build affordable apartments for rent in brownfield sites in Budapest. However, Balázs Fürjes, the secretary for urban development, clarified that they will not be social housing. Since the governing party’s voters are concentrated outside of Budapest, it’s hard to fathom whether this programme will be meaningful.

The opposition parties running Budapest – a coalition of Social Democrats, centrists and liberals led by the Green

mayor Gergely Karácsony – are starting to renovate the city’s social housing units. But the total number remains low as most of these apartments were privatised in the 1990s. In Budapest, there are 919 000 apartments of which only 39 000 are owned by local government and available to rent. By contrast, the number of subsidised rents is much higher in Vienna.

## **Decommissioned silo needed**

Even if we continue to live in our concrete towers, – because, let’s face it, you cannot change half a country’s housing stock – there needs to be a re-evaluation of how space in the home is used. The larger family homes of the 1980s were designed with storage space in mind, with pantries, storage rooms, and places to store necessary reserves. But panels lack such features; small, downtown homes don’t have pantries. Square meters are expensive and a storage room looks like an unnecessary premium in normal times.

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work.*

None of these problems are new. None of them are the product of the coronavirus. They simply resurfaced because it became pressing to ask these questions. Cities need to be affordable for the people who make them work. What’s more, they also need to be places where you can move, social mobility is possible. For much of Eastern Europe, housing reform is long overdue. There can’t be a copy-and-paste solution. In Romania, the homeownership rate is over 96 per cent. Increasing social housing will not be a silver bullet for access to housing, to services, and affordability. Virus or not, they need to be solved. The ideal, homely, dense urban house is something yet to be seen in Eastern Europe.



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