

Observatory Case update

Jewish District, Budapest, Hungary

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The Jewish District of Budapest

The so-called Jewish District is a historical neighborhood in the center of Budapest. Recently, it has also been known as the "Party District" or "Ruin Bar District," referring to a phenomenon that emerged around 2000 when courtyards of dilapidated empty buildings signed for demolition were turned into combined hospitality and cultural venues. Ruin bars bringing life to the run-down district after the Socialist era became very popular among locals and tourists, and since the 2010s, grew into a mass phenomenon. The district is now in the focus of interest of investors, and its economic, social, and cultural profile has changed to a great extent, including problems such as gentrification and overtourism. The preservation, renovation, and uses of the historical building stock lead to questions about heritage values and processes as well as the roles of various stakeholders in this respect. The case study chosen from among the inhabitants of the historical buildings in the Jewish District, Szimpla Kert, is one of the first ruin bars, with a clear vision about the district as a livable place where social diversity, inclusiveness, empowerment, and cultural heritage is respected and sustained.

Update: the renovation process in 2019-2022

Local elections held in November 2019 created a new context since the political opposition took over the capital and the district's leadership after a long period. Consolidating the situation in the Party District was one of the decisive elements in their campaign. In June 2020, they regulated the activity of hospitality venues in unprecedentedly strict terms (Sajó 2021). The decree, however, defines the conditions of the permission in such broad terms that in practice, it does not limit the activity of the venues. The new mayor's ambition was to strip down the name of Party District from Inner Elizabethtown. However, the COVID19 pandemic had hit hard on the venues by that time. The Party District suddenly became empty (Márton 2020). The lockdown of hospitality venues was enforced by the government from November 4, 2020 (Márton 2021). However, many places closed forever, and even in 2021, one of the most popular streets, Kazinczy utca, was only half-open and only around Szimpla. Budapest residents did not find their way back to their former Ruin Bar District, now abandoned Party District, but discovered other parts of Budapest, so only international tourism can bring back life there (Sajó 2021; Presinszky 2021). In 2022, the tourism sector expects a good season in terms of international guests in Budapest – but what will be the consequences on the district? The problems of the Party District have already resurfaced – certain civic groups are currently collecting signatures for the restricted opening hours.

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