



## Modeling post-socialist urbanization. The case of Budapest

Virág Molnár

To cite this article: Virág Molnár (2019): Modeling post-socialist urbanization. The case of Budapest, *Planning Perspectives*, DOI: [10.1080/02665433.2019.1644847](https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2019.1644847)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2019.1644847>



Published online: 26 Jul 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 8



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Modeling post-socialist urbanization. The case of Budapest**, by Daniel Kiss, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2019, 2018 pp., €39,95 (cloth)

No book-length, English-language monograph on the post-socialist development of Budapest has appeared since Judit Bodnár's *Fin de Millénaire Budapest: Metamorphoses of Urban Life* (University of Minnesota Press) in 2001. While there has been a palpable surge of interest in the architecture of the socialist period in planning and architectural history, in-depth studies of the post-1989 trajectory of former socialist cities available to English speaking audiences remain scarce. The only notable exception is, of course, the special case of Berlin which seems to have usurped most of the scholarly attention devoted to this region. Daniel Kiss' book thus fills an important gap, and is especially noteworthy because it offers a detailed, empirically grounded account of Budapest's post-socialist transformation while simultaneously aspiring to develop an abstract model of post-socialist urban change to encourage more comparative research beyond his single case study.

The book's central aim is to uncover the main structural factors that shaped Budapest's post-socialist urbanization in the years between 1990 and 2010. The two dates mark two watershed elections providing a political frame for the analysis: 1990 was the year of the first free parliamentary elections that punctuated the end of socialism while 2010 turned out to be the beginning of a new 'illiberal' era with the triumphant return of Viktor Orbán's populist Fidesz party.

Kiss identifies three key narratives: the socialist legacy narrative, the decentralization narrative and the *Kulturkampf* narrative that constitute the building blocks of his explanatory model. He argues that these narratives capture the causal nexus between historical path dependence, the systemic features of large-scale political and economic change unleashed in 1989, and the competing ideological visions of architects, planners and policy makers. They also expose the inherent tensions and contradictions of post-socialist urban development. These master narratives highlight the iterative analytical strategy the author follows in his research. They emerge both inductively from his close analysis of micro-processes and are in turn illustrated through a set of 'micro-narratives' such as the controversial urban renewal process, the Corvin-Quarter project in Budapest's 8th district. With the help of this analytical framework, Kiss arrives at the conclusion that Budapest's recent urbanization can chiefly be characterized by a 'conspicuous scarcity of large-scale public projects of cultural and symbolic significance' and urban development dominated by private investor projects 'not integrated into any grand urban design' (p. 11).

Following the introduction of his analytical model, Kiss moves on to spell out the three master narratives in Chapters 2–4. The discussion of the socialist legacy narrative in chapter 2 revisits a long theoretical debate about whether a distinctively socialist model of urbanization existed at all. Informed by the competing positions of this dispute, he pinpoints five substantial tensions of socialist urbanization – unequal access to the socialist state's redistributive systems, to housing in particular; underurbanization as a result of forced industrialization; irrational land use despite highly centralized planning; chronic shortages of space due to a constant drive for expansion; and an underfinanced but paternalistic welfare state – that continued to affect post-socialist urban trajectories. The chapter also offers a short overview of six major investor-led development projects that unfolded between 1998 and 2010, giving physical shape to post-socialist urbanism. Chapter 3 outlines the drastic decentralization of urban governance that resulted in a two-tier municipal system in which city-level governance was essentially crippled while district-level governance became unusually powerful and autonomous. This was coupled with a massive and rapid privatization of the city's collectively owned housing stock, exacerbating the adverse effects of decentralization, increasing urban inequalities, and intensifying institutional fragmentation. The *Kulturkampf* narrative in chapter 4 reveals the deep ideological rifts between pro-Western modernists and

vernacular traditionalists that originated in the pre-socialist period, were repressed under socialism, only to violently burst open again after 1989, complicating and often deeply politicizing urban development decisions.

A brief chapter following the three master narratives offers a useful visual summary of the book's abstract model and central causal argument. Chapter 6 in turn provides the most detailed 'micro narrative', a case study within a case study, of an urban renewal project in a physically dilapidated and socially segregated area of the city's historical core. As Budapest's biggest tabula rasa urban development project, the Corvin-Quarter plan aptly exposes all the challenges and ills of public private partnerships in the post-socialist context: a pressing need to physically upgrade neighbourhoods while preserving their social profile and historical heritage coupled with a chronic shortage of public funds in a severely fragmented urban governance structure. This combination of factors was doomed to deliver urban planning to private interests, generating mixed and contentious results in the process.

The book closes with a short conversation with two scholars from ETH Zürich, Kees Christiaanse and Ákos Moravánszky, about building abstract models and general theories from single case studies. This is a clever device to spare the reader from a dry methodological appendix, though it also illustrates the author's somewhat excessive preoccupation with squeezing some generalizable theoretical model out of the study of Budapest. As if this could be the only way to justify detailed research on this city.

Kiss' analysis is comprehensive, erudite, carefully constructed, and richly illustrated. Some of the book's underlying normative assumptions are perhaps slightly ambiguous: it is hard to see which city in our neoliberal era still manages to integrate urban planning into a 'grand urban design' or engage in 'large-scale public projects of symbolic significance' that are not merely exercises in city branding or political propaganda. Nevertheless, scholars will hopefully respond to Kiss' call to test his model through similar city case studies to enhance our understanding of post-socialist urbanization.

Virág Molnár  
*The New School for Social Research*  
✉ molnarv@newschool.edu

© 2019 Virág Molnár  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2019.1644847>

