

Review Article

## The Memory Works: Between Monuments and Ruins, the Case of Contemporary Budapest

Rodrigo Rieiro Díaz

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### Introduction

'Memento Park Budapest. The gigantic memories of communist dictatorship.'<sup>1</sup> Thus reads the head of the website of this theme park about *honfibú*, next to pictures of the statues of the communist era that until recently embodied part of the Hungarian self-mythology.<sup>2</sup> All these statues, now stored in a park on the outskirts of Budapest, form a sort of contemporary Parco dei Mostri dedicated to tourism and memory.<sup>3</sup> Lying on vacant lots among electric poles, shrubs, and some small outbuildings, are the statues of the mythical characters of the past, scattered like fallen gods. Precisely the same price, the loss of divinity and its transformation into the demonic, was the price that Walter Benjamin said the pagan deities had to pay to survive the Christian era, their only conceivable salvation. Benjamin's project was to construct a political explanation of the surrounding cultural world in developed capitalist societies, where everyday life is lived among the buildings and industrial products of the recent past. He argued that the objective world of neglected objects expresses meaning.<sup>4</sup> The discarded material from earlier times could be raised to a source of knowledge about the historical truth.

The goal of this review article is to examine whether Benjamin's semantics of the fragment applies to the discarded materials of our own time. Some locations in present-day Budapest may be considered a perfect case of study for Benjamin's physiognomy, so they are surveyed in that light in the second, third and fourth sections. Benjamin

believed that in the metropolitan consumer's discontinuous experience of reality there was an emancipatory potential to break with the politically subjugating fantasy of progress. Therefore section five discusses Budapest's success as the locus of the redemption of the oppressed. Finally, in the last two sections the focus is directed towards the local phenomenon of *romkocsmá*. It is employed as a case of study to wonder whether urban phenomena of re-use of ruins could house an emancipatory potential or, conversely, serve the interests of the hegemonic groups and the contemporary dominant discourse.

### City of memorials

Memento Park encloses the rejection of a rejected past. It is a collection of historical objects exploded outside the historical continuum. We do not have to go far away to find that this peculiar way of intertwining the past with the fabric of the present is manifested in other nearby ruins. Újpalota (The New Palace) is the main urban development of Janos Kadar's Hungary. [figs. 1–2] Its speed of implementation, from 1968 to 1977, and size, 15,886 housing units, make it the most significant example of the Hungarian version of *plattenbau*: the *panelház*. This housing system proliferated vastly in the Soviet sphere of influence during Khrushchev's rule in the USSR. In Budapest, nearly one in four people still live in one of these housing units.<sup>5</sup> Only thirty-three thousand out of its more than sixty thousand inhabitants in the 1980s remain here today.<sup>6</sup> After the fall of the regime in 1989 and subsequent privatisation

of housing, there have been certain internal migration flows in the city. The abandonment of this large housing estate, relatively new and not far from city centre is not unconnected to its symbolic status.

However, to visit the stage of Hungarian real socialism one must go a little further – and farther back in time. Dunaújváros (the new town on the Danube, formerly Sztalinváros) was the first and most important of the fourteen new towns that were built in post-war Hungary. It was built mainly between 1949 and 1961 along the Danube, some 50 km south of Budapest next to heavy industry pole Dunafer. The ideal city for the workers, image of a new society, it fit into the line of the Stalinist era and its resolute belief in the omnipotence of planning. Weiner Tibor, the architect of this goulash Magnitogorsk, was trained alongside Hannes Meyer in 1930s Moscow, and went on to working with Grete Schütte-Lihotszky in Paris for several years afterwards. Despite this impeccably modern training, representative and spectacular aspects were fundamental in the design of the city, ordered around Vasnű Út (Iron and steel industry Avenue), 'creating a close relationship, both in spatial and spectacular terms, with the industrial pole.'<sup>7</sup> Particularly during the rule of Kádár's government, the city came to symbolise the new Hungarian socialist society and therefore the inclusion of the city in the particular mythology of at least a couple of Magyar generations, as a constant presence in the mass culture of goulash communism. Postal stamps and postcard collections were issued, and it served as the setting for novels or musicals, but above all, it became the filming location for numerous films by the state film producer Hunnia. *Kölyök* (Kid) by Szemes Mihály (1959) is the best known example of these slightly moralising films of manners. The story of the orphan – starring the then very popular Töröcsik Mari – accompanies long descriptive sequence shots of the city. The film contributed to construct Dunaújváros as a popular symbol of the sociocultural model that it supposedly embodied. [figs. 3-4]

The symbolic status constructed by the cultural industry of real socialism for Dunaújváros is equivalent to that of the statues that are now in Memento Park. So is the dilapidated condition of both, after the decline of the world that gave birth to them. The city, which had more than sixty-two thousand inhabitants in the late 1980s, has now lost about a quarter of its population, the result of an evolution which is neither unlinked to the process of restructuring heavy industry throughout Europe, nor to its symbolic status.<sup>7</sup> Dunaújváros – *Kölyök* in particular – symbolises a world of national unity, patriotism and promotion of consumption, which appeals to the collective in a dreamlike state, in a rather strangely familiar recipe.

#### **City of oblivion**

The communist revolution that took place in Budapest after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the First World War and the following Hungarian Soviet Republic that ruled briefly the country between March and August 1919 were also central in the mythical construction of the People's Republic. The central stage of this revolution was the working-class district of Csepel. The main industrial area of Budapest, located in an island in the Danube near the river port, has been, since its industrialisation in the late 1800s, a recurrent focus of insurrection and has a peculiar tradition of urban guerrilla. The last worker's councils resisted the countrywide white Romanian invasion on the island in 1919, and their leading role in the revolutionary process gave the neighbourhood a place in the mythical historiography of the later People's Republic. A bust of Kalamár Jozsef, revolutionary leader of Csepel, rests in Memento Park. However, Kalamár was tortured and killed by new urban guerrillas during the 1956 anticommunist revolution in Csepel.<sup>9</sup> Then too, the last pockets of insurrection were suffocated on this industrial estate. The few Transylvanian migrants who now live and work among the last operating factories of the extensive industrial area at Csepel could hardly make any fuss



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4

Fig. 1: Memento Park, 2006. Photo: Author.

Fig. 2: Újpalota, 2006. Photo: Author.

Fig. 3: Kölyök, Mihály Szemes and Miklós Markos, dirs., (Hungary: Hunnia 1959). Source: Hunnia Records & Films Production.

Fig. 4: Dunaújváros, 2006. Photo: Author.

today. Among them, as in Memento Park, only the phantasma remains.<sup>10</sup> [figs. 5-6] 'The destruction of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilisation become evidence of change in its transience'.<sup>11</sup>

However, real socialism is not the only ideology whose ruins are today enclosed within the walls of Memento Park. It also contains the rubble of at least three other ideologies that have shaped the history of Europe in the twentieth century: the colonialism-imperialism (of the Austro-Hungarian Empire here), the late-capitalism that followed the collapse of the economic system that ruled the Eastern countries, intertwined with the nationalist ideology that served both of them. Pest, the town on the left bank of the Danube, is arranged based on rings and radii, starting from the ruins of the Roman settlement of Contra-Aquincum. The same academic composition based on symmetries and axes found in the Haussmanian layout of this Paris that Hitler did not forgive, is reproduced in the suburban deposit of statues. The disposition of Memento Park in plan evidences the Austro-Hungarian imperial ideology in Budapest. An ideology, also in its Hungarian variant, that appears combined with the claim of certain founding or colonial myths. In this case, the myth is of the seven Magyar tribes, unified by the legendary Árpád, to leave the steppes near the Ural Mountains and find in the plains of the Danube their promised land. The composition of the statues park by Eleőd Ákos of seven circles together as one village of seven yurts, could hardly be unaware of this symbolism. [figs. 7-8] In fact, Memento Park has a symbolic component relevant to the renewed Hungarian nationalism, given the foreign occupation component of postwar communism in Hungary. Even the kitsch entrance to the theme park appears as a post-modern reflection of the neoclassical National Museum, expression of the imperialist ideology that culminated in World War I. At the zenith of that ideology, when the Millennium of Hungary Exhibition was held in 1896, another

group of statues was erected at the end of the great avenue Andrássy in Pest: the monumental statuary Hősök Tere (Heroes' Square), including representations of the seven Magyar leaders led by Árpád. After restoration during the 1990s historicist revival, it became one of the tourist spots of the Prague-Vienna-Budapest tours, as well as the meeting point of the neo-fascist party Jobbik.<sup>12</sup> [fig. 9-10]

### City of ruins

Memento Park simply condenses the ruins of its surroundings: the ruined city of Budapest. The whole city conserves many traces of the recent past, which provide a report on the material from which our present is made. Budapest is the first derivative, the second is Memento Park. The particular arrangement of historical events during the twentieth century in Budapest enabled this sort of densification. They were not very different from those in many other European cities (from East Germany in particular); the singularity of Budapest is that the destructiveness of the periods of crisis, its prolonged economic effects and their concatenation in time left less opportunity for concealment.

One of the main objectives of Benjamin's project, to adopt the point of view of what has been excluded, in order to face the destruction of material nature as it has actually happened, is to provide a dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress, which could only be upheld through forgetfulness of what had happened. Forgetting what happened is particularly difficult when the material traces of the recent past accumulate in the way they do in Budapest. The ruinous condition of the Austro-Hungarian imperialist ideology, latent under decades of real socialism, which can be found both at Hősök Tere and in Memento Park, is evident in much of the extensive historic centre of Pest. Before the Second World War the centre of Pest was already hoary, afterwards it was devastated. However, the housing policies of the People's Republic were always aimed at the construction of new housing estates, leaving



fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7

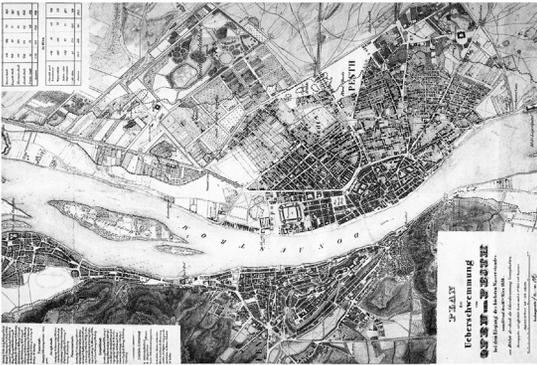


fig. 8

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Fig. 5: Memento Park, 2006. Photo: Author.  
Fig. 6: Csepel Művek, 2006. Photo: Author.  
Fig. 7: Aerial view of Memento Park. Source: Szoborpark.  
Fig. 8: Plan of Pest, 1838 Source: Szoborpark.

the city centre in a state of relative neglect. After the fall of the socialist regime, ideological motives steered Hungarian authorities to promote private property, favouring home-ownership by the residents already living there. This policy consolidated in very degraded buildings residents who lacked the resources to repair them. A hundred thousand flats in central Pest need major repair today, and up to thirty thousand of them should be evacuated if Western standards were applied.<sup>13</sup> Ideological and economic reasons have so far prevented municipal and national authorities to undertake major strategic operations of beautification through public investment that would trigger gentrification in similar situations in other places. Despite the apparent profitability for tourism and real estate speculation which such processes would bring, the insoluble contradiction of Budapest housing policy maintains the status-quo of degradation of the housing stock, limiting both public and private renewal operations.<sup>14</sup>

Today, the arcades of Paris do not exist other than as a simulacrum. But in Budapest, they are kept, seemingly for no other reason than the lack of money to tear them down. They are the everyday material reality at the heart of current Pest.<sup>15</sup> This has been the working material for the Hungarian filmmaker Forgács Péter. In his series *Private Hungary*, Forgács has worked since 1988 with home-made films shot primarily by members of the bourgeoisie of 1920s Budapest, where the daily lives of families in peaceful everyday environments were registered before, and sometimes after they were truncated by the historical dramas of the twentieth century. [figs. 11-12] This author explodes out of the historic continuous home images, originally filmed to be displayed in the family and private life, and gives them a new meaning. Combining archival work, documentation and interpretation, the private films rescued by Forgács – like a *flâneur* of waste material of previous generations – consist of images stripped off the flow of the here and now. 'What yesterday – or a hundred years ago – was deep

and exciting, can be comical or sentimental today, [which] suggests that life can be lived another, and not this way'.<sup>16</sup> Forgács works over images of the past intertwined with the present in the dilapidated centre of Pest as another renowned Budapesteer did before him: André Kertész. Kertész was one of the greatest photographers of his generation and one of the pioneers of photojournalism. He made his first works in pre-war Budapest but looking at his photographs, many contemporary urban features are recognisable – not always the concrete buildings, though often those too. At the end of his life, Kertész would come back to photograph his home town. He made a series of photographs in 1971 entitled *Budapest*, particularly telling about the nature of the city. It contains images of girls and young women with statues in urban settings. The juxtaposition of petrified and transitory nature in this series has the power to show the atmosphere of Budapest, where present-day everyday life coexists with the phantasma of the recent past. [figs. 13-14]

### City of trash

In Memento Park too one finds examples of the petrified images of the past coexisting with the fleeting experience of the present. The park contains another layer of debris, interspersed with the older ones: the ruins of late-capitalist ideology, exalting its banality in the phenomenon of tourism which is the economic infrastructure of the park. The break of the aura of the 'fallen gods' is perceptible, from the cultural value that those reified heroes of communism must once have had. At the same time, the overlapping ruins at Memento Park bring the clear flash of truth about the process of cultural transmission as a triumphal procession in which the rulers of today pass over those now underground.<sup>17</sup> Benjamin's project of questioning the view of history as progress as such, not dependent on the conscious will of individuals, is based on his understanding that this vision damages the efforts to confront critically the present and to promote an in-depth transformative praxis. He hoped that the



fig. 9



fig. 10



fig. 11



fig. 12

Fig. 9: Memento Park, 2006, photo: author.

Fig. 10: Hősök Tere, 2006, photo: author.

Fig. 11: Forgács Peter, Dési és Jenő, 1989. Source: Forgács Peter.

Fig. 12: Pest, 2006, photo: author.

surrounding discarded material world in capitalist societies could be raised to a source of knowledge about the historical truth. For Benjamin, the cognitive explosion in a political sense occurs when the present as now-time is bombarded with empirical profane fragments of the past.<sup>18</sup> Well, that bombing is constant in Budapest. If the devaluation of nature and its status as a ruin could become politically instructive, they should be in Budapest. It is possible to distinguish between the tradition of the culturally and socially dominant groups, owners of the means of cultural transmission, and the broken tradition of the oppressed, ill-concealed by the hegemonic groups due to the peculiarities of recent history in the city. If those images contained the strength to awaken from the world of our parents,<sup>19</sup> there should have arisen in this city a reform of conscience to shake the dream world outside itself.<sup>20</sup>

It is not foreseeable, however, that the revolutionary pedagogy of the already-there will announce the dawn of the day of the revolution in Budapest in the near future. On the contrary, the most ruthless capitalism develops with great success in the city, supported on a thriving nationalism. In fact, the situation of the Hungarian Roma minority after the neo-Nazi rise in the country finds physical expression in the ongoing urban developments in the city.<sup>21</sup> Corvin Promenade was a recent renewal process of Pest that entailed the gentrification of twenty-two hectares in Józsefváros district, one of the neighbourhoods where the Roma population is concentrated.<sup>22</sup> [fig. 15] The expulsion of the poorest stratum of the residents, including many Roma families, is a pattern repeated in Middle Ferencváros, the other main urban renewal project in Budapest,<sup>23</sup> and is actually fostered by the city's renewal policies.<sup>24</sup> After the discourse on the urban regeneration of degraded environments, the hegemonic groups induce the exclusion of all which might disprove the totalizing mythological construction serving the dominant discourse. Benjamin's hope

for the redemptive potential of a praxis triggered by a hermeneutic of discontinuity seems rather optimistic today. The city's situation begs the question whether the remnants of the material world of mass consumption are not ruins, but trash.

### City of ghosts

There is also in Budapest an improvisational culture, freed and even nourished by the rapid decline of the city, which finds its meeting point in the *romkocsm* scene – literally pub in ruins. The *romkocsm* phenomenon arose more than ten years ago in the district of Erzsébetváros, the old Jewish quarter in the centre of Pest, in a state of neglect at that time. It was in this context that cultural associations and private developers began to rent abandoned buildings at low cost, to use them as places of production and dissemination of contemporary art, cafés, etc. Everything developed in line with projects generated by the collectives themselves, artists or associations, and the young people who frequent them. [fig. 16] Of course, this scene of temporary re-use of urban ruins has much in common with other contemporary urban phenomena, especially in Germany. However, some notable differences exist. Real estate pressure is lower in Budapest, which has contributed to lesser erosion of the scene over time. The peripheral location of major tourist circuits – few tourists go into the city beyond the week-end – has also slowed its commodification. The question is whether the ruined built environment already-there in Budapest has a sort of atmospheric agency that has contributed to trigger phenomena such as *romkocsm*. It may be possible to read these phenomena of re-use of urban ruins as

concrete political acts, and in each case limited, of opposition, claiming, construction, and resistance from below as being able to find a motivational basis of their reflective linkage with the broken tradition, marked by defeat, of the struggles for the emancipation made in the past.<sup>25</sup>



fig. 13



fig. 14



fig. 15

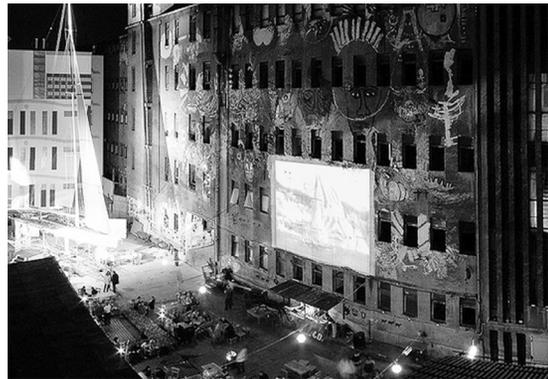


fig. 16

Fig. 13: Mother and daughter, Budapest 1971. Source: André Kertész.

Fig. 14: Memento Park, 2006, photo: author.

Fig. 15: Corvin Promenade, photo: author.

Fig. 16: Romkocsma Tűzraktér, photo: author.

### City of angels

Nevertheless, Benjamin's hope for the emancipatory potential of the discontinuous experience of reality by metropolitan consumers finds a sinister reflection in the fragmentation of experience by the contemporary dominant discourse. In fact, the rise of inequality, one of the features of late capitalism, has been identified at the core of the patterns of informalisation proliferating in the Western cities.<sup>26</sup> When the most effective marketing strategy becomes blurred with simulacra of cooperative constructions, and temporary re-use of urban ruins becomes, in the name of flexibility and innovation, a catalyst of city branding, all the while displacing and dispossessing the excluded, the role of phenomena like *romkocsmá* has to be balanced in terms of what they mean for the democracy and the quality of urban life from the subaltern point of view.

However, the potential ability of everyday spaces to become, however briefly, places where lived experience and political expression come together must not be underestimated. Temporary use of the city entails the possibility of a 'social decommodification' and a weakening of the land tenure.<sup>27</sup> In Budapest's post-commodification context, use-value of the city prevails, at least for a while. Budapest, especially the centre of Pest, poses an unbeatable context for a collective transformation of the built environment. The *romkocsmá* scene can be read both as a simulacrum and as a rehearsal of the long-awaited housing renewal of the city: the practice of transformation of the city for the benefit of all which would foster democratic practices in the everyday and regain public influence over urban life after the mass privatisation of multi-family housing. The tension between the melancholic oppositional encounter with the ruined built environment in a sublime perspective and the motivational basis for a cooperative reconstruction of the surrounding material world from the fragments of the past remains unresolved in the *romkocsmá* scene. Gentrification

through *honfibú* or new democratic practices in the city, that is to be solved by the residents of Budapest.

### Notes

1. *Szoborpark. A kommunista diktatúra gigantikus emlékművei* in Hungarian. Note that the root *emlek-* in *emlékművei* (monuments, memories) means memory. A literal translation of *emlékművei* would be 'the works of the memory'.
2. The *honfibú* or patriotic sadness defines a general mood marked by melancholy that would supposedly define the character of the Hungarians.
3. The Sacro Bosco (Sacred Grove), colloquially called Park of the Monsters (Parco dei Mostri in Italian), also named Garden of Bomarzo, is a Manieristic monumental complex from the sixteenth century located in Bomarzo, Italy. It is populated with sculptures and small buildings among the natural vegetation.
4. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialéctica de la mirada. Walter Benjamin y el proyecto de los Pasajes*, trans. Nora Rabotnikof (Madrid: Visor, 1995), 253. First published as *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
5. 'Panelpiac – túl a mélyponton?' [Panelház market, beyond the lowest point?], Otthon Centrum, August 2006, accessed June 29, 2015, <http://www.oc.hu/ingatlanpiac/269>.
6. 'Magyarország Helynévnyvtára, 2012' [Hungarian Census 2012], KSH (*Központi Statisztikai Hivatal*), accessed June 29, 2015, <http://www.ksh.hu/apps!cp.hnt2.telep?nn=23649>.
7. Pál Germuska, 'Between theory and practice: Planning socialist cities in Hungary,' in *Urban Machinery: Inside Modern European Cities, 1850–2000*, ed. Tom Misa and Mikael Hård, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008), 233–255.
8. 'Helynévnyvkönyv adattár 2011' [Cadastre 2011], KSH (*Központi Statisztikai Hivatal*), accessed June 29, 2015, [http://portal.ksh.hu/pls/ksh/docs/hun/hnk/Helysegnevkonyv\\_adattar\\_2011.xls](http://portal.ksh.hu/pls/ksh/docs/hun/hnk/Helysegnevkonyv_adattar_2011.xls).
9. Sándor Hegedűs, 'Védnökség a mártírsírok felett:

- Kalamár József [Patronage of the tombs of the martyrs: József Kalamár], 2008, accessed June 29, 2015, <http://www.aszabadsag.hu/cikkek/2008/19/mozgalom.html>.
10. In the sense of immaterial images related to memory, imagination, and time.
  11. Buck-Morss, *Dialéctica de la mirada*, 193.
  12. Third political party in the National Assembly of Hungary.
  13. Ivan Tosics, 'Housing renewal in Hungary: from socialist non-renovation through individual market actions to area-based public intervention', in *Renewing Europe's Housing*, ed. Richard Turkington and Christopher Watson, (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 161–186.
  14. The main exceptions to the rule, the largest-scale attempts at the gentrification of Pest, are addressed below.
  15. The recent renewal and opening to the a rather international public of the large Gozsdu Udvar (Gozsdu Arcades) as a leisure venue, as well as the ongoing restoration of the emblematic Parisi Udvar (Arcades of Paris), point to the transience of this status too.
  16. Forgács Peter, 'Arqueología del tiempo o memorias alternativas' [Archaeology of time or alternative memories], in *Documentamadrid 2011* (Madrid: Documentamadrid, 2011), 320–322 (322).
  17. Walter Benjamin, *Obras. Libro I, vol. 2*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser, with the collaboration of Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Sholem, Spanish eds. Juan Barja, Félix Duque, and Fernando Guerrero, trans. Alfredo Brotons Muñoz (Madrid: Abada, 2008), 309. First published as *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 1–2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989).
  18. Walter Benjamin, *Libro de los pasajes*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Luis Fernández Castañeda, Fernando Guerrero, and Isidro Herrero (Madrid: Akal, 2005), N2a, 1-3. First published as *Das Passagen-Werk* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982).
  19. Ibid. Ms. 1126, note 8 to 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century'.
  20. Ibid., Marx cited as an epigram to convolute N.
  21. The events in the village of Gyöngyöspata during Easter 2011, with Roma people fleeing from the neo-fascist militias that controlled the village, reported in the international press, spread abroad the worsening fate of the Hungarian Roma people after the rise of the extreme right.
  22. Ian Cook, 'Are you ready to move?', Museo de los desplazados [Museum of the displaced ones], 2009, accessed June 29, 2015, [http://www.lefthandrotation.com/museodesplazados/ficha\\_cook.htm](http://www.lefthandrotation.com/museodesplazados/ficha_cook.htm).
  23. Tosics, 'Housing renewal in Hungary', 173.
  24. Ibid, 185.
  25. José Manuel Romero Cuevas, 'Sobre la actualidad de Walter Benjamin' [On the present relevance of Walter Benjamin], *Constelaciones 2* (2010): 371.
  26. Saskia Sassen, 'The informal economy: Between new developments and old regulations', *The Yale Law Journal* 103 (1984): 2289-304.
  27. Margaret Crawford and Tobias Arnborst, 'Don't obsess about permanence... A conversation between Margaret Crawford and Tobias Arnborst', in *Urban catalyst. The power of temporary use*, ed. Philipp Oswalt, Klaus Overmeyer, Philipp Misselwitz, (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2013), 105-116.

## Biography

Rodrigo Rieiro Díaz studied architecture in Madrid, Barcelona and Budapest, where he attended the Budapesti Műszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem. He practised in Madrid, Istanbul and Copenhagen, and is completing a PhD at Escuela Técnica de Arquitectura de Madrid, on participative processes of transformation of housing, focusing on small-scale interventions. He is currently on a research stay at Statens Byggeforskningsinstitute in Copenhagen.

