THE BUDAPEST OF TOMORROW: 1930–1960. CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES IN PLANNERS' THINKING ABOUT THE CITY THROUGHOUT THE PERIODS OF WAR, RECONSTRUCTION AND SOCIALISM

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This paper explores the process of the preparation of the first General Master Plan (GMP) of Budapest, which was approved in 1960. Preliminary work to create this plan had been initiated at the beginning of the 1930s. This planning process offers us the possibility to explore the resilience of planners' thinking and concepts: how did they try to adapt their plans to radical changes in the social and political environment, the ideological and cultural climate from the interwar authoritarian regime through the short post-war democracy to Stalinist dictatorship and early destalinization? How did they try to interpret war damage, post-war recontstruction and the elimininationof private ownership of urban land as an increased opportunity for planning a modern and well-functioning city? How did they try to adjust their plans and concepts to the requirements of Soviet planning principles at the beginning of the 1950s? How did they experience the formally greater role of planning in the emerging "socialist planned economy"? Did the GMP really function as a blueprint for urban development? The paper ends with some conclusions relating to the position of city planning in the socialist planned economy.

Keywords
Budapest, comrehensive planning, General Master Plan (GMP), Modernism, WWII, post-war reconstruction, Soviet planning, socialism, spatial expansion, urban form, zoning

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INTRODUCTION

The creation of Budapest as an unified municipality and the capital city of Hungary took place in 1873 with the unification of three cities: Buda and Óbuda on the right side and Pest on the left side of the River Danube. The character of the urban landscape is determined by the effect of the two riversides with sharply different topographical features: the hilly Buda side and the flat land of Pest. Buda was the traditional royal seat and the headquarters of the government, but the dynamic forces of modern urban development concentrated on the left riverside. At the time of the unification 76% of the population lived there, and at the turn of the century already 83%. From the unification era onwards we can witness the beginning of comprehensive city planning. The framework of development of the urban fabric was laid by the "general regulation plans" of Pest (1872) and Buda (1876) for decades. These were the typical regulation plans of the 19th century, concentrating on laying out the street and building lines, the squares and the plots for public buildings and utilities. From this time the planning authorithies reacted to the new phenomena of city growth by continous ad-hoc adjustments of the regulation plans.

Around the unification period the boundary of the densely built urban area was near the future Great Ring Boulevard (Nagykörút) the creation of which was decided in 1871. The line of the boulevard followed an ancient dried-up arm of the Danube, because it was deep enough for the future main sewer. This Ring Boulevard connected the different sectors of Pest. Another completely new thoroughfare created by modern planning was the radial promenade connecting the Inner City with the City Park (Radialstraße, today Andrássy Street). The basis of the general regulation plan of Pest was a spatial structure determined by the radial and ring arterial roads.

Until World War I the driving force of the growth of housing stock was big business investing in tenements. This resulted in the covering of a compact urban area with multi-storey tenements, but this process was never completed. This compactly-built area was surrounded by a zone of large elements of the city's technical and social infrastructure (public parks, hospitals, railway lines and stations, industrial establishments etc.). Between this zone and the administrative border of the municipality remained enormous unbuilt areas, while an industrial-suburban belt erupted beyond the borders. The overriding idea of municipal policy and official planning was the avoidance of extensive sprawl, pleading the costs of infrastructure as the reason. Building regulations blocked the emergence of garden suburbs in the green areas within the city border.[1]

THE CITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME, 1940

The development of Budapest seemed to be at a cross-roads again around 1930, and required a new general conceptual framework just like in the 1870s.

The Municipal Assembly charged a special committee, headed by Ferenc Harrer, with the elaboration of a City Development Programme (CDP) in 1932. The committee accomplished this task by 1940, when the CDP was adopted by the Municipal Assembly as the basis of the future General Master Plan (GMP).

A very important challange which made the necessity of a new CDP apparent, was the change in the nature of city growth after World War I. The building of multi-storey tenements was not a lucrative investment for big business any more. Neither did the political and social conditions of mass housing by public investment or public subsidy come into being in interwar Hungary – as it did in a number of countries in Western and Central Europe.[2] The most frequent form of building of new flats in Budapest during the 1920s was to construct cheap family houses or two- or three-storey houses with a few flats on cheap plots in the outskirts. This didn't mean the creation of planned and regulated garden suburbs, but led to scattered and uncoordinated low-quality developments. The building and planning authorithies just allowed the process without any effective guidance.

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FIGURE 1 The built area of Budapest in 1932. (The neighbouring municipalities are indicated in blue).

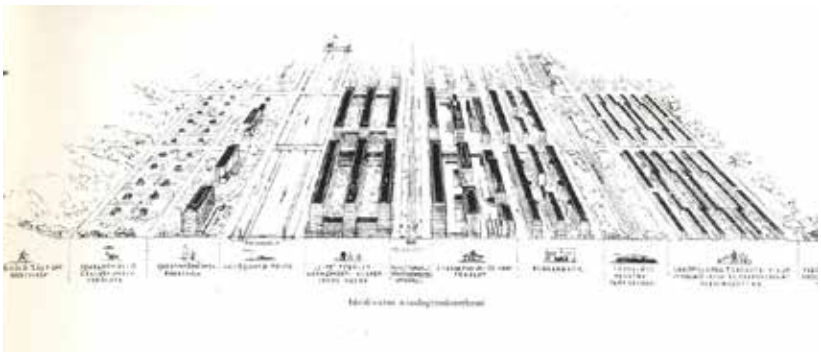

FIGURE 2 A vision about "Ribbon-Budapest", 1946

At the same time a decline in the population of the densely built inner parts of the city began, while there was no renewal of these parts. The interpretation of these phenomena was a contentious issue: do they foreshadow the main future tendencies in city development or just reflect the transitional circumstances of the hard times after the World War and the two revolutions and counter-revolution of the post-war years? May one regard these phenomena as parallels to the processes described in Western cities: the functional transition of city centres and suburbanization?

The ideas of the modernist planning movement penetrated the country. The Hungarian section of CIAM (Congrés Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) was active from the end of the 1920s. In the political and intellectual environment of the conservative-authoritarian Horthy-regime this could only be an opposiontist position with no chance of influencing official planning and without having the chance to carry out large-scale projects until the second half of the 1930s. However even mainstream planning thought was unable to ignore completely the basic ideas of modernist planning and the experience of the first German modern housing estates.

The most basic question which had to be answered in the course of elaborating the CDP was, to what extent the horizontal sprawl of the city might be allowed or encouraged? Or instead of that should the more intensive exploitation of the already built area – even with high building – be encouraged? The basic situtation was that approximately two-thirds of the population (1 million people altogether) occupied approximately one-sixth of the municipal territory, situated around the centres of Buda and Pest and meeting at the Danube, while the other one-third lived sparsely in the other five-sixths, and half a million people lived beyond the borders in the neighbouring municipalities.[3]

The CDP adopted in 1940 did not contain any radical proposals for restructuring, and regarded the existing city structure as something which basically couldn't be changed. It took the position that the built area had already expanded too much in relation to the expected growth of the population. This being so, neither further compression, nor further expansion would be desirable. The CDP restricted the area available for future building vigorously (excluding 42% of the municipal territory), and strictly allotted the area dedicated for multi-storey compact building within that – mostly adjusted to the existing situtation. It proposed arranging the housing area in concentric zones with different levels of building intensity decreasing outwards, and opposing any peripheral centres or radial extensions of the compact city along the main roads. Building height in the city centre was limited to six storeys (ground floor + 5) and the circum-building of the individual plots firmly opposed. Outside the existing multi-storey tenement zones proposed, the Programme allowed four storeys maximum in perimeter blocks. The zones for garden suburbs and family houses were intended to be restricted to the areas which had been already connected to the system of public utilities. Considering it as a whole, the CDP envisaged

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a monocentric compact city, but proposed less dense types of building even for the inner belt, instead of more intensive exploitation and rising upwards. As a concession to political exigencies, it avoided dealing with the problem of the agglomeration.

What sorts of driving forces were assumed to facilitate desirable urban renewal? As it has already been mentioned, the political conditions for large-scale public investment in the housing sector were lacking. The authors of the CDP had reliance on private initiatives in view. They regarded regulation to be the role of the municipality in this process, but argued for tax releifs, preferential credits and in some cases active initiatives through plot-restructuring by the authorithies as complementary devices to facilitate the renewal of the inner city.[4]

THE GENERAL MASTER PLAN, 1948

During World War II Budapest lived through one of the most desperate and devastating sieges of big cities between December 1944 – February 1945. In the short-lived democracy after the war the adherents of socially committed modernist-functionalist planning got into key positions. The revision of the City Development Programme and the preparation of the General Master Plan for Budapest was directed by József Fischer, one of the leading figures of the Hungarian Section of CIAM, who was politically a social democrat. One of his closest co-workers in this task was Ferenc Harrer, the former president of the committee which had designed the first City Development Programme in the 1930s. A sort of balance of continuous and discontinuous elements was guaranteed even by the composition of the personnel in the planners' community.[5]

They felt that the catastrophe of the war had cleared away the obstacles which had prevented the "new architecture" from fulfilling its potential to shape the built environment and society. The obsolete and inhuman housing stock fell into ruins, and the social-political system, in which the rights of the property owners enjoyed priority over public interest, collapsed. They regarded the old CDP as the product of a period, „which had been void of the perspective of development, that's why the Programme relied on the given situation with much obligatory opportunism". The revised plan has to do justice to "the ideal requirements of modern city arhitecture as perfectly as possible".[6]

A basic idea of the modernist canon was the spatial separation of the main city functions – dwelling, work, relaxation, traffic – in dedicated linear zones. The vision of the "ribbon city" fascinated many modernist planners. In the case of Budapest it seemed to be plausible because the River Danube offers itself as the main axis of a ribbon structure. The ideal ribbon city seemed to be achievable by stretching the existing functional zones alongside the river and giving them a clear profile. (In Pest: the city centre, the commercial and industrial zone, the zone with tenements, the zone of long-distance traffic, the outer dwelling belt; in Buda: the zone with health-resort and spa, the belt of villas and family houses, the belt for recreation.)[7]

The "ribbon development" alongside the Danube became an official standpoint after 1945 but the the revised CDP and the GMP didn't adopt it in such an idealised form. As the planning process dealt more and more with details, it became apparent that the complete neglecting of the existing structure was not a realistic approach. The GMP envisaged rather the elongation of the existing zones in a north–south direction.

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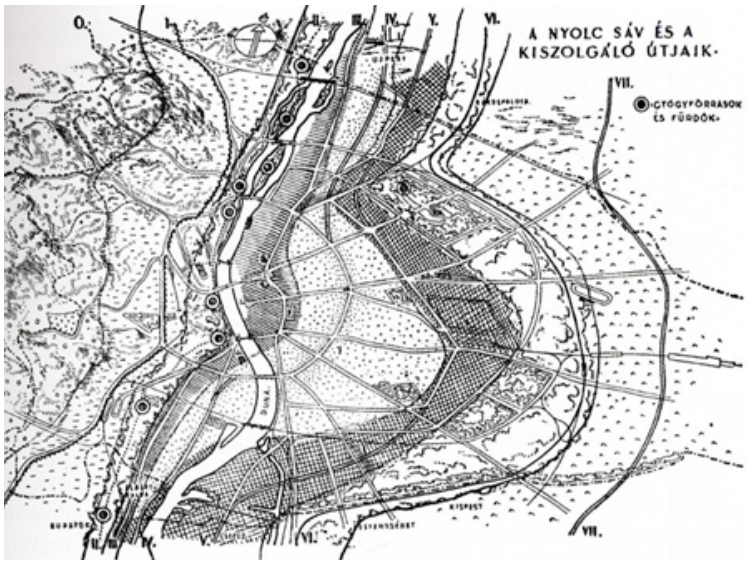

FIGURE 3 László Acsay–György Masirevich: Plan of Budapest as a ribbon-city, 1945

FIGURE 4 Plan of the Board of Public Works for the structure of settlements and zones of dense and dispersed building in Great-Budapest and its city-region, 1945

Another leading idea in the rebuilding of European cities after World War II was the cessation of the expansion of the stone desert, making cities greener and more dispersed by distributing the population in wider parts of the city regions, building new towns and satellite settlements.[8] The Genereal Master Plan, which had been completed by 1948,[9] already covered also the neighbouring municipalities, which means most of the territory which became "Great-Budapest" in 1949. Instead of the former vision of a monocentric compact city, the GMP envisaged a policentric structure. The area which had already been built compactly, was handled as the closed "main centre" of a wide and dispersed urban region, which had to be demarcated by a deep ring of green belt stretching continuously from the Danube to the Danube, which had to be shaped by the extension of the big public parks and cemetery areas.

The exterior areas outside this green belt should have been characterized by a garden city landscape with the domination of ribbon- and point blocks according to the functionalist concept of architecture. These garden city areas would have been clustered around some external centres (to be shaped mainly from the existing town and village centres) where the most widespread building height would have been no more than 3-4 storeys. If the GMP of 1948 had been developed fully and ideally, the total population of Great-Budapest would have been 3 million people, one-third of whom would have lived in family-house districts, another one-third in row-houses and in houses with a few flats in green belts, while only one-fifth of the population would have lived in the compact city center.

In the wider region encircling Great-Budapest the plan envisaged a zone dominated by intensive agricultural production, which could satisfy the demands of the local population for employment and high-quality urban services on site. Mass commuting to Budapest from this zone should have been obviated.

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THE GENERAL MASTER PLAN 1950-1955

When the GMP was finished in 1948, it was already not in accordance with the developments of political transformation. The authors based the plan on the assumption that Hungary would be part of an open and prosperous Central Europe, and private property would remain dominant, though the intervention of the public sphere would broaden radically. The meltdown of the Social Democratic Party into the Communist Party in June 1948 was the opening of the emergence of a Stalinist dictatorship under the rule of Mátyás Rákosi. The administrative unification of Budapest and the neighbouring towns and villages – which had already been taken into account in the GMP as parts of Great-Budapest – was carried out in December of 1949. The GMP was definitely rejected in January of 1950 as an "apolitical, place- and time-independent plan" which had no motivating force for the masses. The creation of a new plan was prescribed following the Soviet planning doctrine. The institution responsible was the new Capital City Planning Institution, which was a chain-link in the new network of state planning offices, and it was subordinate to the City Council. Spatial planning became the servant of the voluntaristic development policy of the command economy. For the adoption of the plan the approval of the Politburo, the highest party organ, was necessary. The Politburo had discussions about it in 1951 and 1952 but the final version was finished in 1955 never having reached this high level.[10]

The elaboration of the new GMP was directed by Gábor Preisich, under whose lead the previous GMP had been finished in 1948. Ferenc Harrer also continued to play an important role as a member of the Executive Committee of the City Council. Ernő Heim, who had been the notary of the committee elaborating the CDP in the 1930s, was now one of the most important planners of the Capital City Planning Institution, responsible for the habitation and housing concept. A sort of balance between continuous and discontinuous elements was guaranteed on personal level, even this time. The adaptation of the Soviet planners' thinking was probably eased by the fact, that some elements of the well-known "new architecture" – e.g. the spatial division of basic urban functions, hierarchical street-networks, a comprehensive system of green areas – were built into the Soviet planning doctrine.[11]

The guiding motive of the new plan was the effort to achieve a socialist city as a monumental composition of art – which was regarded as the peak of architecture in the Soviet Union. The planning process can be divided into two phases: before and after Stalin's death and the following changes in politics in 1953. In the first phase a monumental main square around Stalin Square (today Erzsébet tér) was envisaged as the focal point of the comprehensive monumental city-composition. In sharp contrast with the GMP of 1948, a closed urban fabric was planned, the skeleton of which would have been the connection of the "main centrum" with industrial peripheral centres, which were regarded as the citadels of the working class, through monumental radial avenues. The characteristic building height of the main centre would have been 5-9 storeys, in the outer centres and radial avenues 3-4 storeys. The problem of the Moscow-style tower blocs was highly debated. The majority of planners couldn't imagine them in the city centre, even not within the Great Ring Boulevard, rather – if necessary – at some bridgeheads of the Danube or accentuated points of the radial avenues.[12]

The idea of "ribbon city" and the adjustment of the development in a north-to-south direction alongside the Danube was definitely refused by the Politburo in November 1951.[13] (The motive for the decision was most probably the the pattern of the Moscow Master Plan of 1935, which aimed at the grand-scale development of the historically evolved circular-radial structure.[14] Rákosi and his highest co-leaders spent important periods of their emigrant lives in Stalin's Moscow.) So it was a clear political decision by the dismissal of the suggestions of the planners. Even so, the conclusion can be drawn from the sources that the planners themselves didn't already feel the rejection of the "ribbon city concept" as a great disadvantage. As the planning process dealt more and more with the high-definition spatial details, it became increasingly clear, that the ribbon concept can be gracefully presented in drawings, but it contradicts sharply to the existing structure and traffic network of Budapest.[15]

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In the second phase of the preparation of GMP (1953–1955) the planners abandoned the idea of a monumental central main square and any basic restructuring of the inner city, but they still planned a closed urban landscape with the clear architectural accentuation of the core and peripheral centres and their connection through the network of radial and circular main roads. The vision of the GMP of 1948 of a dispersed city embedded in the city-region remained unadopted, furthermore it was declared that large zones of the recently unified Great-Budapest could not be developed into a real urban environment. In the first half of the 1950s financial resources were extremely scarce not only for the development but even for the basic functioning of the city. The housing conditions, the infrastructure and public services deteriorated, while the political requirement was to build a socialist city landscape as rapidly as possible, with new housing facilities and spectacular ensembles expressing the idea of socialism in the cityscape. All this induced a spatial concentration of the resources, which is why the municipal government tried to limit the territory destined for urban development. The GMP of 1948 had proposed to annexe extensive rural areas to Budapest, taking into account their function and development potentials within the vision of a dispersed city with spacious garden-city areas. The plans of the early 1950s, thinking of the city as a closed architectural composition, were unable to integrate most of the annexed villages.[16] According to the draft GMP of 1955[17] these settlements should have remained peripheral agricultural and recreation areas, clearly separated from the highly urbanized area and without the necessity of a well-developed urban infrastructure.

Although the plan broke with the earlier conceptions in fundamental aspects, it also maintained some basic intentions. One such a continuous element was that the expectable and desirable growth of population didn't make the extension of the built habitation area necessary and reasonable. The renewal of the inner city should aim at a lower density, while in the outer parts those areas which were already built up or at least connected to the network of traffic and public utilities should be placed in order and augmented.

THE GENERAL MASTER PLAN OF 1960

The acute housing shortage was one of the city's most burning problems during the Rákosi-era and – despite the massive state investment from 1954, then from 1960 onwards – it remained a critical issue until the fall of state socialism. The new leadership after the 1956 revolution headed by János Kádár regarded the cessation of the housing shortage within a reasonable time as a political priority, conceiving this as a crucial tool to improve the acceptedness of the regime by the working class. They launched a house-building plan for 15 years in 1960. It became clear that the mass building of housing estates would be the most important factor in forming the city for a long period.[18] The new housing estates required traffic and public utilities, and the decision on their allocation had to be syncronized with the development plans of the economy. This ensured a new level of significance for the GMP for Budapest. While the senior political leadership of the Rákosi-era hadn't wanted to create restrictions for political-economic decisions through such a plan and it had always refused to accept it, now it seemed to be an imperative necessity for the Kádár-regime to create a solid framework for the economical and effective allocation of the enormous investments. The leadership headed by Kádár didn't want to see grandiose monuments and spectacular ensembles expressing the idea of socialism first of all, but a well-functioning city with enough flats and full of satisfied workers, and a well-arranged modern urban environment which demonstrated the competitiveness of the country with the West.

That was the background which made it possible for the revised GMP to be finally approved by the Politburo, and then made a legally binding document by a resolution of the Council of Ministers in 1960.[19] So Budapest had a valid General Master Plan for the first time after a 30 years struggle for the planners in the different political regimes. Ferenc Harrer proposed and hailed this acceptance at the joint session of the Executive Committees of the Budapest Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and the Executive Committee of the City Council, as the crowning of thirty years of work.[20]

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The major innovation of the final version, in comparison with the draft plan of 1955 was, that it also embraced agglomeration and reckoned with the role of the wider region. The planners revived the approach, that the old densely inhabited urban area, built mainly until World War I, would "become something like the inner city of the whole Budapest-region, similarly how the proper old Inner City had been the centre of the long-ago Budapest".[21] In this way the new plan abandoned the aspiration of the city as a closed architectural composition – so characteristic of planning at the beginning of the 1950s – and took up the line given up after the creation of administrative Great-Budapest. The title of the document was even modified to "The Genereal Master Plan of Budapest and its environs".[22] This change was partly motivated by the contradictory task of allocating massive new housing investment while maintaining the standpoint which rejected the large-scale expansion of the built area. The housing investment concept of the GMP was based on three pillars. The first idea was the exploitation of the still unbuilt sections within or adjoining the built area; the second was the renewal of the inner city; the third was the establishing of „dormitory towns" outside the municipal border.

The new towns which the plan proposed to build in the environs and the region of Budapest should have represented two basic types. To the first type belonged eight "dormitory towns" which were planned as investments on green field sites near the city border beside the main traffic roads through which the workplaces in Budapest would have been easily accessible. The optimal population number of these towns was thought to be 15,000 people. They were conceived clearly as transborder housing estates for commuting. They were regarded as necessary, because the plan included the wide zone between the already built-up area and the city border as a protective belt, where the green area for agricultural and recreational use should have been maintained. The transborder new towns should have been the embodiments of a vision of a new way of life, which would offer the combination of work in the big city with habitation in a picturesque green landscape on big, economic housing estates, as an alternative to urban sprawl.

The second type of new town should have been developed from existing settlements located 30–40 km distant from the city. The main function of these "satellite towns" would have been to hold up the immigration to Budapest and its nearby agglomeration. In order to succeed, these satellite towns needed their own economic basis to offer workplaces as alternatives to move into, or to commute to Budapest. This economic basis was planned to be established partly by the relocation of industrial factories from the city. The optimal population of a satellite town was thought to be 30,000.

The planners took into account the experiences of West-European, as well as Soviet satellite towns established after World War II in the course of working out this concept. Nothwithstanding all this remained just paper work; in vain had it been corroborated by the governmental resolution which approved the GMP. The Kádár-regime maintained a command economy even in the 1960s, but the voluntaristic decisions of the high political level already gave space to the bargaining of the different players for resources. The planned establishment of new towns around Budapest, and the relocation of industry, would have required such a level of concentration of the developmental resources to the agglomeration of Budapest, which lacked the support of strong pressure groups. The plan of "dormitory towns" was officially dismissed in the course of the revision of the GMP in 1970.[23]

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FIGURE 5 The planned new "dormitory towns" near the border of Budapest, 1960

CONCLUSION: SOME REMARKS ON THE POSITION OF CITY PLANNING IN HE SOCIALIST PLANNED ECONOMY

The fall of the vision of new towns was not the only reason why the city developed diverging sharply from the approved GMP. What's more, the real development contradicted some basic requirements which the planners maintained quite consistently in the course of planning over three decades, manouvering through radical changes in the social and political environment, the ideological and cultural climate from the interwar authoritarian regime throughout the short post-war democracy to the Stalinist dictatorship and early destalinization.

Some of the consistent standpoints were, that the massive expansion of the built-up area over the already evolved frontiers should be prohibited; the height and density of building have to decrease from the core towards the peripheries; even in the centres of the outer industrial districts were envisaged a characteristic height of not more than 4-5 storeys. In sharp contradiction to all this, large housing estates of 11-storey panel contstruction were established in the centres of numerous outer districts, and even on exterior green-field sites which should not have been used for mass habitation at all according to the GMP approved in 1960. As mentioned earlier, the original housing investment concept of the GMP was based on three pillars. The first was the exploitation of the still unbuilt sections within or adjoining the built-up area, but these possibilities were exhausted until the beginning of the 1970s. Neither the new towns came into being, nor the renewal of the inner city produced large-scale results. As the political priority laid for city development was the struggle against housing shortage and the quantity of flat construction, the investments followed the path of least resistence: peripheral green field sites and the "rehabilitation by bulldozer" of the outer district centres which had been declared "obsolete".

Another constant guideline for the planners' thinking was that the unplanned sprawl of the agglomeration settlements should be prohibited, and their compactness and separatedness should be maintained. They explored the possible solutions which could have obviated the uncoordinated evolution of a chaotic commuter belt offering a low quality of living. But the real development processes of the agglomeration were characterized precisely by these features.

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Taking into account these facts, we can't even conclude, that the GMP was just an ideal piece of paperwork as a whole, because the investments and developments followed its guidelines in some important aspects, e. g. regarding the network of sub-centres or elements of traffic and public utility networks.[24] Notwithstanding the fact that the GMP was endorsed by the highest decision-making organs of the one-party state, it couldn't become an effective regulation tool for the allocation of all new developments as the planners hoped, but the players involved in the developmental processes were able to select the elements of it which were appropriate for their intentions.

The GMP of 1960 and its antecedents were typical examples of "blueprint planning". They were the representations of the idealized urban fabric of Budapest in the imagined distant future, and the planners regarded the main function of the GMP to be the securing of the spatial framework for this envisaged objective. These plans didn't really reckon with the possibility of radical changes in conditions, demands and societal requirements. Altough the plans trended towards the adaptation of the most advanced technologies, the planners' thinking remained markedly attached to the horizon of the present. One highlighted aspect of that was the tenacious industry-centrism. Although the planners urged the containment of the growth of industry within Budapest and relocation of the factories, they built their plans on the assumption that industrial production and the world of factories would remain the most decisive component of life in the future city. The tendency of terciarization and its impacts on society were lacking from the horizon of planning during the preparation of the GMP.

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András Sipos graduated from Eötvös Lorand University, Budapest in history and archival studies. He got his PhD degree with a thesis "Municipal politics and city government is Budapest 1890–1914" in 1997 at the same university. He has worked for Budapest City Archives since 1988. His field of research embraces the urban history of 19–20th centuries, municipal politics, planning and social conflicts. His monograph "Várospolitika és városigazgatás Budapesten [Municipal politics and city government is Budapest] 1890–1914" was published in 1996; "A jövő Budapestje 1930–1960. Városfejlesztési programok és rendezési tervek [The futute Budapest 1930–1960, City development programms and master plans]" was published in 2011.

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Figure 2: Morvay, Endre, "A jövő Budapestje," Budapest 2. (1946) 1-2: 23.
Figure 3: Ferkai, András: "Budapest szalagváros," Budapesti Negyed, 18–19. (1997–1998): 148.
Figure 4: Tér és Forma 18. (1944–1945) 11: 172.
Figure 5: Perényi, Imre: "Budapest és környékének általános rendezési terve a nagyvárosok fejlesztési problémáinak tükrében," Településtudományi Közlemények, 13. (May 1961): 12.

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