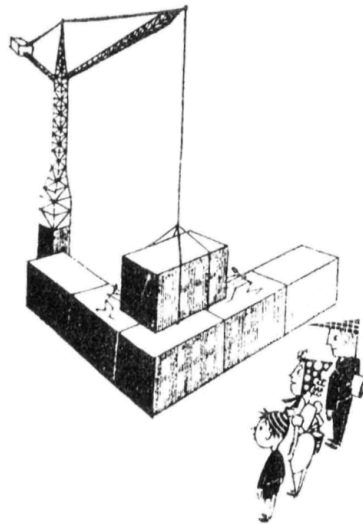


# Scripted Space, Lived Reality

Architecture and Ideology in the József Attila Housing Estate

by

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## Abstract

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This thesis examines the relationship between architecture, ideology, and lived experience through the case study of the József Attila Housing Estate in Budapest, Hungary. The research focuses on whether architecture can truly shape thought and behaviour, or lived experience ultimately redefines the space. Built just after the Second World War, the estate is an excellent case study as it represents core socialist values. Equality, collectivism, and uniformity were the new driving forces of everyday life. This estate features prefabricated panel buildings surrounded by communal outdoor spaces, all made to foster an ideal socialist community. However, reality was far more different. An analysis of three different building scales —building, urban, and social —reveals the gaps between planned design and everyday reality. This research relies on archival materials, site visits, photographs, and oral interviews to make its case. There is a consistent misalignment between the designer's intention and the actual use of spaces by their inhabitants, as the analysis reveals. Designated communal spaces often remained underused, while informal, intimate spaces like the stairwell or the front of the house became spaces of interaction. These contradictions reveal that architecture is not fully capable of controlling its users; it can only set the scene. Residents adapted and reimagined their spaces. Rather than seeing the estate only as a failed utopia, this thesis argues for a more complex and deeper point of view. This paper challenges the architectural canon's neglect of ordinary housing by recognising both the limitations of planning and the different ways in which people have shaped daily life. It argues that spaces like the József Attila Estate are essential to understanding how architecture is truly lived, not just designed.

## Built to Think

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“matter determines consciousness”

Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

A short yet powerful statement that encapsulates the fundamental idea of Karl Marx, that the material conditions of life shape human behaviour, consciousness and values - not the other way around. But what does this mean for us humans? Perhaps we are doomed. Do we truly dictate our own lives, or do buildings dictate them for us? The environment that surrounds us, the streets we walk on every day and the spaces we occupy are not just mere products of time. They influence our habits, views and the way we see the world.

Growing up in Hungary, I was always surrounded by the architecture of past eras. The long rows of uniform apartments intrigued me from a young age, familiar yet unknown buildings. An iconic housing typology, which still dominates the Hungarian cityscapes, is the panel buildings, also known as *panelházak*. Designed to solve the mass housing crisis after the Second World War, these prefabricated concrete apartment blocks became the symbol of uniformity, equality and socialism.<sup>2</sup> To many Hungarians and people from this part of Europe, such buildings carry a sense of nostalgia, a fading image of a time. They are an essential part of the urban fabric, with nearly 20% of the population living in panel buildings.<sup>3</sup> The presence of these buildings calls the power of architecture to influence ideology into question by highlighting the gap between the intended political control and the realities of daily life.



Fig 1. Aerial view  
Budapest, Hungary  
Jozsef Attila Housing Estate from an aerial view, the uniform row of buildings is very typical of this type of architecture. (Ferencvárosi Helytörténeti Gyűjtemény, 1968)

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, Karl. 1859. A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.

<sup>2</sup> Kamilla Czvikovszky. 2021. "A szocialista realizmus és iparosított előregyártás korszaka az építészetben." BPhirek.hu. December 11, 2021. <https://bphirek.hu/retro/a-szocialista-realizmus-es-iparosított-eloregyartás-korszaka-az-epiteszetben/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Központi Statisztikai Hivatal." 2011. 2011. [https://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/tablak\\_lakas](https://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/tablak_lakas).

Certain architectural and urban designs were not only made to house people but also to influence how they live and think.<sup>4</sup> Large-scale residential planning following World War II proved this idea. Entire housing estates were built to control their residents by enforcing certain ideologies.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet-era residential project, the József Attila Housing Estate, was designed with clear intentions: to shape the minds of its inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> If Marx was right, and matter does determine consciousness, then the question arises of whether architecture can truly shape thought and behaviour, or lived experience ultimately redefines the space.

This thesis examines the gap between intended and lived architecture through the case of the József Attila Housing Estate in Budapest, Hungary. It argues that the Soviet regime's attempt to shape collective consciousness through residential architecture ultimately failed. Residents' lived experiences frequently contradicted their expectations, revealing the limitations of architecture as a tool for ideological control. To investigate the tension between ideology and lived experience and whether architecture can truly be used as a tool to mould society, multiple methods are used, from historical research with firsthand observations to testimonies. Extensive archival research, including maps and architectural plans, provides insight into the era's political and societal context. Site visits and personal observations help to gain a better understanding of the spatial layout of the estate and reveal the extent to which residents adapted their environments. Books, journals and various media sources contextualise the specific historical period and the architectural practices of that time. Quotes from authors that engage with the content of previous knowledge on this topic further support the analysis. Moreover, oral interviews provide deep insight into the residents' everyday routines and how they use their living spaces.

What follows is an investigation of how the Jozsef Attila Housing Estate was designed as an ideological tool and how its reality differed from this initial intent. The political and historical background of Hungary during the Soviet era, as well as how these factors influenced architectural and urban practices, are the main topics of the first chapter. The second chapter goes further into the architectural and urban strategies of the regime and how they were intended to influence the daily life of the estate's residents. Archival materials, journals and books help in revealing the original intentions and messages embedded within the built form. As will become clear in Chapter 3, the attempt to shape collective consciousness ultimately failed, revealing the contradictions and paradoxes that followed after the buildings of the estate were finished. Oral interviews and personal observations explore how residents actually interacted with these spaces, in cases, adapted, resisted, or redefined their environment, challenging the idea that architecture alone could dictate consciousness. Lastly, the conclusion reflects on the findings, reconsiders the thesis statement and highlights the relevance of these buildings in broader terms.

Ultimately, this paper examines the extent to which the built environment can influence ideas and identity by evaluating the success or failure of architecture as an ideological instrument. In addition to offering a more thorough understanding of this specific era and its

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<sup>4</sup> Honcharyk, R. 2024. "SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT OF IVANO-FRANKIVSK UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF SOVIET ARCHITECTURE." *Municipal Economy of Cities* 6 (187): 75–80. <https://doi.org/10.33042/2522-1809-2024-6-187-75-80>.

<sup>5</sup>Naaz, Shaila, and Loyangamba Tgongamcha. 2024. "IMPACT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE MODERN WORLD AND ITS SURROUNDINGS." *ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts* 5 (2). <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.1468>.

<sup>6</sup> Ábel Mészáros. 2017. "Útkeresés a 70-es Évek Lakásépítésében I." *Lechner Tudásközpont*. March 22, 2017. <https://lechnerkozpont.hu/cikk/utkereses-a-70-es-evек-lakasepiteseben-i>.

architectural principles, this study hopes to contribute to larger conversations about how architecture shapes cultures and people. Like many Soviet-era estates, the Jozsef Attila Housing Estate exists in paradox. Originally intended as an ideological tool, the panel buildings challenge the canon of architecture itself. They are not the representation of the extraordinary but the reality of millions of people.

## Concrete Ideals: The Political Forces Shaping Socialist Housing in Hungary

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This chapter examines the political and historical context of Soviet-era Hungary, focusing on mass housing and urban planning. After the Second World War ended, Hungary was liberated, but this certainly did not mean freedom. During the siege of Budapest, which lasted almost two months, the city suffered great destruction and loss, including the demolition of all Danube bridges. The country was in a state of chaos, even worse compared to the First World War. Hungary was a mere memory of what it once was.<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 2, Chain Bridge 1944

Budapest, Hungary,

The siege of Budapest destroyed all the bridges connecting Buda to Pest.

The battle that lasted almost two months caused great destruction and an additional loss of 38.000 soldiers.

(Fortepan, 1944)

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<sup>7</sup> Barany, G., Várdy, S.B., Macartney, C.A., Vardy, N.A. (2025, March 18). history of Hungary. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Hungary>

Hungary fell under Soviet influence and joined the Soviet-bloc - a new coalition government was formed. This brought about many new changes: the elimination of private property, the control of media and economy, and the suppression of opposition parties.<sup>8</sup> Forced collectivisation of agriculture, rapid industrialisation, and mass housing and urbanisation plans started to take place, all modelled after the Soviet Union's system.<sup>9</sup> The three and five-year plans began to repair the immediate damages, which put all the control and power into the hands of the communist party. Gradually, the regime was in full political and economic control, meaning that banks, internal and foreign trade and most industries all became nationalised. Following this standard, the new government believed that housing was a tool to shape society.<sup>10</sup> Collectivism replaced individualism to fit socialist ideas, and as a result, private property was discouraged by the government. Standardised apartment blocks and communal spaces were designed to enforce equality and eliminate class distinctions. Slowly, mass-produced housing replaced private ownership and traditional diverse neighbourhoods. The new urban plans were designed with socialist values in mind, reflecting broader political agendas.<sup>11</sup> Henri Lefebvre, in his publication *The Production of Space*, encapsulates the idea of a god and its power, which in this case describes the Soviet regime's influence in Hungary perfectly:

*“The adoption of another people's gods always entails the adoption of their space and system of measurement. Thus the erection of the Pantheon in Rome pointed not only to a comprehension of conquered gods but also to a comprehension of spaces now subordinate to the master space, as it were, of the Empire and the world.”<sup>12</sup>*

In the context of Hungary, this meant adapting to this new socialist ideology and spaces through standardised housing and centralised planning.

Mass housing soon became a key instrument in moulding society under the instructions of the regime. Between 1961 and 1975, close to 1 million dwellings were built under the housing programmes.<sup>13</sup> This type of prefabricated concrete building had many benefits; it was cheap and time-effective, yet still managed to improve living conditions to prior ones. Due to these factors, it is not surprising that panel buildings became the dominant housing solution due to their efficiency and affordability.<sup>14</sup> Designed for large populations, these estates embodied the regime's objective to regulate daily life through architecture. Nevertheless, ambitious goals come with great risk, and this one did not pay off. Unfortunately, because of strict regulations, construction companies frequently overruled the design decisions of architects. Everything was regulated down to the last detail. This quickly led to the use of low-quality materials, standardised layouts, and minimal aesthetic considerations.<sup>15</sup> Despite the ambitious plans, these estates often failed to create spaces of quality and unity. Residents were initially excited about their new homes, as it was a huge improvement at the time, both socially and economically speaking. Insulated apartments and a hot water connection were considered a

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia. 2025. “Communism.” April 10, 2025.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism#:~:text=These%20were%20characterized%20by%20one,religion%2C%20and%20suppression%20of%20opposition>.

<sup>9</sup> Barany, history of Hungary.

<sup>10</sup> Ábel, *Útkeresés a 70-es Évek Lakásépítésében I.*

<sup>11</sup> Kamilla, “A szocialista realizmus és iparosított előregyártás korszaka az építészetben.”

<sup>12</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Basil Blackwell Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420989220081001>, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Yvette Krihtin. 2020. “Egymillió lakás.” *BPhirek.hu*. June 1, 2020. <https://bphirek.hu/retro/egymillio-lakas/>.

<sup>14</sup> Kamilla, “A szocialista realizmus és iparosított előregyártás korszaka az építészetben.”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

luxury. In spite of that, the rigid design and poor living conditions led to dissatisfaction.<sup>16</sup> The reality of the everyday experience of the resident did not align with the ideological goals of the estate.

Designed by Mester Árpád, the József Attila Housing Estate began building in 1957, aiming to house just over 15,000 people.<sup>17</sup> This project was the first among many to be built, starting a new era in Budapest. As one of the most ambitious socialist housing projects of the time, this housing estate was meant to embody core socialist ideas, such as uniformity, accessibility and control. The state followed the Soviet principles, meaning uniform apartment blocks surrounded by greenery and communal spaces. Urban planning integrated shared green spaces, schools, and communal facilities to foster social interaction and minimise class distinctions. These features were intended to promote a sense of collective identity, solidarity and social justice and are visible on every scale from floor plans and facades to urban plans.<sup>18</sup>



Fig.3. József Attila Estate Pöttyös street, Hungary  
The first stage of the mass housing plan began. The prefabricated panels are visible in the picture.  
(Ferencvárosi Helytörténeti Gyűjtemény, 1959)

<sup>16</sup> Keresztély, Krisztina, and James W. Scott. 2012. "Urban Regeneration in the Post-Socialist context: Budapest and the search for a social dimension." *European Planning Studies* 20 (7): 1111–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2012.674346>.

<sup>17</sup> Wikimedia. 2008. "József Attila-lakótelep (Budapest)." March 23, 2008. [https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%B3zsef\\_Attila-lak%C3%B3telep\\_\(Budapest\)](https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%B3zsef_Attila-lak%C3%B3telep_(Budapest)).

<sup>18</sup> Csaba. 2021. "The First Panel Building in Budapest Was Completed Sixty Years Ago – a New Era Began Next to Üllői Road." PestBuda.Hu, February 18, 2021.

[https://pestbuda.hu/en/cikk/20210218\\_the\\_first\\_panel\\_building\\_in\\_budapest\\_was\\_completed\\_sixty\\_years\\_ago\\_a\\_new\\_era\\_began\\_next\\_to\\_ulloi\\_road](https://pestbuda.hu/en/cikk/20210218_the_first_panel_building_in_budapest_was_completed_sixty_years_ago_a_new_era_began_next_to_ulloi_road).

Political messages and ideas are inseparable from architecture; they are integral parts of the design. In the case of the Jozsef Attila Estate, this became a reality by creating city-like, contained neighbourhoods with integrated facilities, such as schools, shops, and green spaces. The goal was to create a functional urban environment where all the necessities are available within the estate to encourage interaction within the community.<sup>19</sup> As one of the biggest and first panel constructions of Hungary, the estate serves as a great case study for this research since it embodies the core contradictions of socialist urban planning. The next chapter will examine the architectural and urban strategies of the regime and how they were intended to shape user behaviour. This analysis will examine the architectural tactics used in these housing complexes and their function in upholding socialist principles using archival material, photos, oral interviews and site visits.

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<sup>19</sup> Szívós, Erika. "The Historic City and the East–West Exchange: Architecture, Urban Renewal and International Knowledge Transfers under State Socialism in Hungary." *Urban History* 49, no. 3 (2022): 523–48. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926821000468>.

## Building Ideals, Living Realities: Contradictions, Paradoxes, and the Intentions of Socialist Housing

As Caroline Humphrey asserts, ‘...the base determines the superstructure, and the task of Soviet construction was to build material foundations that would mould nothing less than a new society. This reminds us that ideology is found not only in texts and speeches; it is a political practice that is also manifest in constructing material objects.’<sup>20</sup> This chapter will investigate how these ideologies got translated into the estate’s architectural and urban plans, focusing on the first phase of planning from 1957 to 1961, as it is the most representative of Soviet ideals.<sup>21</sup> Primary sources like archival papers, plans and notes offer the best understanding of this topic. In addition to this, personally conducted oral and online testimonies offer a profound understanding of the residents’ experience, shedding light on their everyday life.



Fig. 4. Empty land Budapest IX district, Hungary, This photo was taken in 1944, April 14, by a military aircraft. The plot of land in the middle is where the estate was going to be built. (Magyar Királyi Honvéd Légierő, 1944)

<sup>20</sup> Humphrey, Caroline. 2005. “Ideology in Infrastructure: Architecture and Soviet Imagination.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11 (1): 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2005.00225.x>.

<sup>21</sup> Ambrus Gönczi. 2022. “A Mélyszegénység Világából Virágos Lakótelep – 65 Éve Kezdték Bontani Az Egykori Mária Valéria-szükséglakótelepet.” March 17, 2022. [https://pestbuda.hu/cikk/20220317\\_a\\_melyszegenyseg\\_vilagabol\\_viragos\\_lakotelep\\_65\\_eve\\_kezdték\\_bontani\\_az\\_egykori\\_maria\\_valeria\\_szukseglakotelepet](https://pestbuda.hu/cikk/20220317_a_melyszegenyseg_vilagabol_viragos_lakotelep_65_eve_kezdték_bontani_az_egykori_maria_valeria_szukseglakotelepet).

Since the early phase of the estate was the most directly influenced by Soviet ideologies, architects and planners followed their principles, focusing their designs on collectivism, equality and efficiency. The abolishment of private ownership and the shift towards collective living further promoted socialist values. Almost all interviewed residents expressed that the apartments were not for sale initially and that they received them from the government.<sup>22</sup> However, according to other residents, citizens who supported the party received special benefits:

*'My mother was a communist party member, and we received this flat for her good work'<sup>23</sup>. 'In our building, only devoted communists were given apartments in the 1960s. I don't know how typical this was in other buildings.'*<sup>24</sup>

Buildings were prefabricated, standardised, and designed for rapid mass housing construction. Functionalism over aesthetics resulted in repetitive layouts, little to no ornamentation and uniform facades.<sup>25</sup> Early sketches picturing the finished buildings and streets show a modern, utopia-like atmosphere, reminiscent of Las Vegas. The goal is the same: for people to socialise, though one does it with casinos and neon lights while the other relies on communal outdoor spaces.<sup>26</sup> Urban planning was no different. Original notes reveal that planners were obliged to not give space to political mass organisations within the estate. Moreover, the government gave clear instructions about how green and public spaces should be designed. Specifying each function, its size, and placement within the estate, ensuring that residents had everything available at a hand's reach.<sup>27</sup>

Fig. 5. Atmosphere sketch, 1956  
Sketch picturing how the atmosphere of the finished estate would look like.  
(Üllői úti lakótelep módosított részletes rendezési terve, 1956)



<sup>22</sup> Pankotai, Dora. 2025. "Questionnaire: Life on the estate then and now."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. interviewee number 012

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, Interviewee number 006

<sup>25</sup> Development plans of the estate, containing information about the buildings methods used, floorplans, sections, facade drawings and technical drawings.. All elements of the buildig were prefabricated. The drawings do not show much variations, elements were copy pasted over and over again. Lakótelep - Építési engedélyezési tervdokumentáció, 1960, 38236/248, Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

<sup>26</sup> Üllői úti lakótelep módosított részletes rendezési terve, 1956, 88. tétel, Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

<sup>27</sup> IX-X. Üllői úti lakótelep beépítési vázlatterve, 1955, 1192. tétel, Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

Strict regulations set by the government and rushed construction resulted in the cheap use of materials, and quantity became more important than quality.<sup>28</sup> As a result, factories only produced a limited variety of prefabricated elements, leaving little to no room for further modifications.. Moreover, many service facilities and community centres were overlooked by the state, resulting in outdated storefronts and retail spaces. Despite the original commitments made, the estate encountered significant challenges. These shortcomings not only prompted residents to take action by modifying their own spaces but also contributed to so-called homogeneous ‘dormitory towns’.<sup>29,30</sup> Though addressing pressing housing requirements, discontent grew as a result of its pragmatic flaws. This piece of architecture exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of socialist housing projects. While the government sought to use architecture to control society, economic constraints and residents’ adaptation often indicated otherwise. The next chapter will analyse these contradictions in greater detail to examine how the estate’s design shaped—and was shaped by—its residents.

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<sup>28</sup> Kamilla, “A szocialista realizmus és iparosított előregyártás korszaka az építészetben.”.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> ‘a small community that has no major industries and that is lived in by people who go to another town or city to work’ “Dormitory Town.” n.d. In Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dormitory%20town#:~:text=noun,town%20or%20city%20to%20work>.

## From Blueprint to Everyday Life: Architecture and Reality in the Housing Estate

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What follows is an investigation into how the József Attila Housing Estate translated ideological visions into lived experiences by examining three scales: the building, the urban, and the social. Primary sources like archival blueprints, photographs, architects' notes, magazine interviews with early residents, and oral histories are the basis of this analysis. This chapter traces the gaps and overlaps between planned design and everyday reality. It questions the extent to which architecture could shape or constrain communal life and the way residents behaved in these environments.



Fig. 6, Facade drawing, 1963  
Original hand-drawn facade drawing  
by architect Szőke Károly. The facade  
is uniform and repetitious, showing  
the building within its context.  
(Lakóterv Kft., József Attila-lakótelep,  
1963.)

## I. Building Scale: In the Shadow of the Plan

Being one of the earliest streets to be completed on the estate, Dési Huber Street is a good example of the estate's smallest habitable scale.<sup>31</sup> Early facade drawings (Fig. 6) portray homogeneous, uniform buildings with little to no variation, which is also visible in the archival photographs (Fig. 7). However, the atmosphere and tone of these two media are entirely different. Both are trying to foster equality and collectivism, the drawing pictures a friendly, lively atmosphere, whilst the photograph shows an empty, cold neighbourhood.<sup>32</sup> The contrast between what was imagined and built suggests something deeper, not just similar houses but a uniform society. Thousands of people living in similar buildings eliminate class distinction as it makes it difficult to tell the financial background of other residents, another key aspect of socialism.<sup>33</sup>



Fig. 7, First buildings  
Budapest, Hungary,  
József Attila Housing Estate just  
after completion, Dési Huber Street  
on the left. Unfinished landscape and  
infrastructure are visible, the roads  
are still covered with dirt, grass is not  
yet grown. (Gábor Viktor, 1961)

The archival blueprints of these units show compact, mirrored layouts, best characterised as uniform and orderly.<sup>34</sup> Compared to earlier, more preliminary housing options, these apartments meant a significant improvement, as the units were somewhat insulated and had a hot water connection. The majority of the new apartments were studios and two-bedroom apartments meant for couples and smaller households. These shared facilities, like a boiler and a laundry room, showing a clear emphasis on communal living.<sup>35</sup> Oddly, no

<sup>31</sup> Lakótelep, 248, Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

<sup>32</sup> Database of archival photographs containing pictures estate. A lot of these show uniform, impersonal rows of buildings, creating a very homogeneous atmosphere. "Fotók: József Attila lakótelep." n.d. Fortepan. <https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BA%2BAttila%2Bak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

<sup>33</sup> Üllői úti lakótelep beépítési vázlatterve, 1192., Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

<sup>34</sup> Lakótelep, 248, Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

<sup>35</sup> Kamilla, "A szocialista realizmus és iparosított előregyártás korszaka az építészetben."

interior pictures of these residential units were present in the archive. Perhaps private households were considered less important or at least not important enough to be documented. Interestingly enough, interior photographs of shops and schools were available, which is telling.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps comfort and personalisation were seen as distractions from the ideal socialist life. The facades and collective image remained in the focus of these designs, rather than the private spaces. This gap between private life and public representation proves that the regime's goals of controlling residents only worked on a surface level. Another interesting aspect of these plans is the stairways, an ordinary yet crucial element of the building and daily life. The archival floor plans show narrow staircases with short landings, suggesting they were not meant for much social interaction.<sup>37</sup> However, the results of the interviews indicated otherwise. The stairway has become an unexpected, vital meeting point for the residents. *'Great staircase community. Everyone knew each other and visited often,'* said one of the interviewees.<sup>38</sup> An intriguing fact is how an unintended small space became a success, whilst intended huge outdoor and communal spaces were unsuccessful.<sup>39</sup>

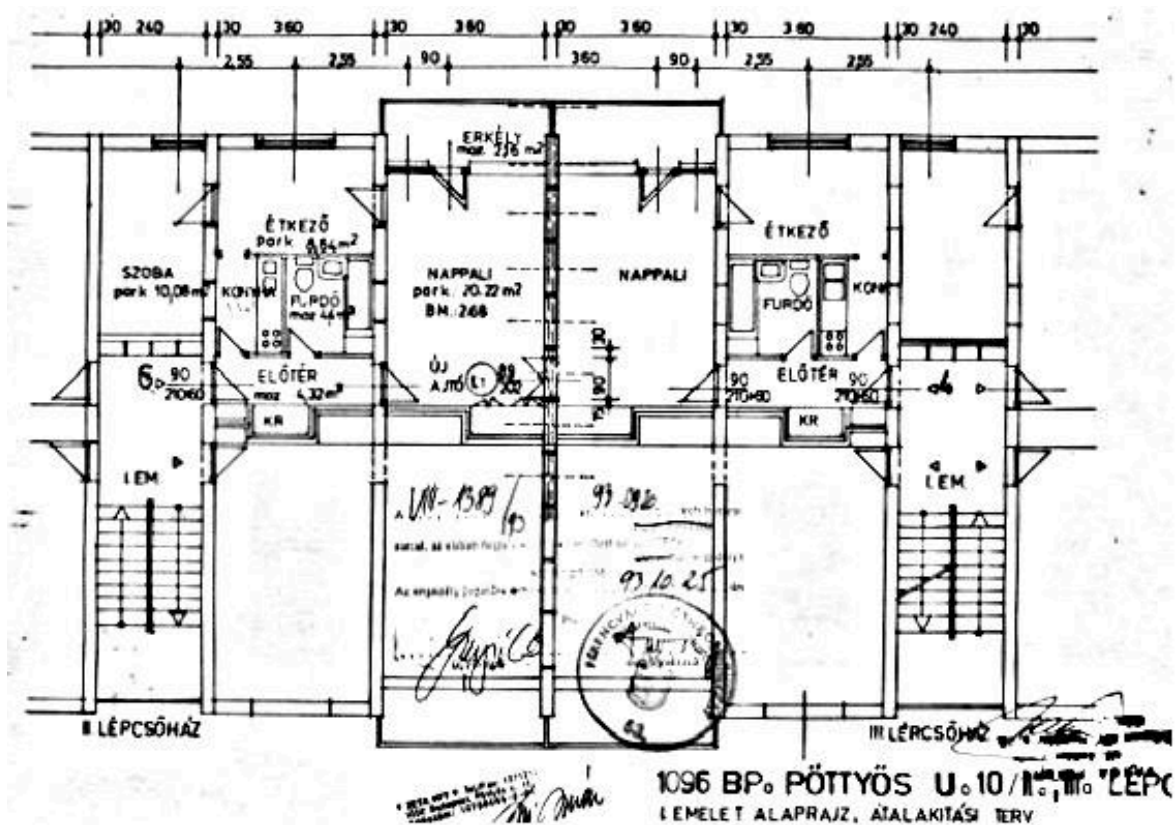


Fig. 8, Floorplan, 1960

Budapest, Hungary,

Floorplan of the Dési Huber street 22. Mirrored compact layout is visible with a small kitchen and bathroom

(étkező, furdó), spacious living room (nappali) and small bedroom (szoba) (Lakótelep - Építési Engedélyezési Tervdokumentáció, 1960)

<sup>36</sup> Database of archival photographs, where no interior pictures of household were present. The database did offer some interior photographs, but they were only of grocery shops and schools. "Fotók: József Attila lakótelep." n.d. Fortepan.

<sup>37</sup> Lakótelep, 248, Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

<sup>38</sup> 'We knew everyone in the stairwell, but not necessarily in the entire block.' says interviewee number 013

<sup>39</sup> RÖNK 10 éves évforduló, MB.205.362., 2006, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár.

Despite the rigid design and previously mentioned shortcomings, the early residents expressed deep appreciation for their new homes. An interview with the first resident of the estate describes unfinished, muddy streets, yet joy and enthusiasm for the apartments themselves. While these floor plans could not be personalised or modified much, the oral interviews show that most residents were happy and satisfied with these living spaces.<sup>40</sup> Although the originally designed spaces were not entirely used how architects envisioned them, residents actively adapted their spaces. Interviewees shared positive memories, remembering strong community ties and a safe environment. *'Incredibly cohesive. Everyone was helpful and caring. No visible vandalism, violence, bullying, exclusion, or crime.'* said one of the residents.<sup>41</sup> Socialising happened in unexpected ways, like the contradictory stairways, which in Lefebvre's terms, we might read as 'representational spaces', where lived experience overruled designed space. Eventually, residents embraced new ways of interacting with each other.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Interviewees shared overwhelmingly positive memories of the estate, almost all of them told about strong community bonds, safety, and a family-friendly environment. Many recalled a lively, social atmosphere, children playing together outdoors, and little to no crime or vandalism. Pankotai, "Questionnaire: Life on the estate then and now."

## II. Urban Scale: Drawn from Above, Lived from Below

The original plans envisioned the urban scale as a catalyst for socialist community life. The large green areas, parks, boulevards, and carefully designed street network were designed to encourage social gathering among the residents.<sup>42</sup> However, archival photographs of the Dési Huber street made just upon completion do not resemble this sense of community in the outdoor spaces, as can be seen in Fig. 9.<sup>43</sup> These photographs show empty, underused spaces and unfinished infrastructure. The landscape and urban plans were simply not finished simultaneously with the apartment units, creating a sterile, utopian-like feeling.<sup>44</sup> It is almost ironic how a brand-new housing estate can resemble the atmosphere of a post-apocalyptic film set - only the actors are nowhere to be found. First residents testified that they often had difficulty getting from one place to another due to unfinished roads and the expanse of mud. *'In the beginning, the trees were all small, and the streets were not finished yet, there was mud everywhere.'*<sup>45</sup> With trees not yet matured and lacking vegetation, the urban space was far from the kind of outdoor social life envisioned in planning documents, and it was certainly not attractive for residents. An early resident remembered that the trees only started to grow in the 70s, leaving the first occupants without an enjoyable outdoor space.<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 9, 10, Finished streets

Budapest, Hungary,

The Toronyház street 14. street and its area shortly after completion. The space seems unoccupied and empty, feels almost like a post-apocalyptic town. (FŐMTERV, 1966)

<sup>42</sup> Engel, Barbara. 2022. "The Concept of the Socialist City: Plans and Patterns of Soviet Urbanism." In *International Planning History Society Proceedings*, 19th ed. Vol. 663–678. <https://doi.org/10.7480/iphs.2022.1.6516>.

<sup>43</sup> The archival database contained lots of photographs that were made in the early days of the estate, however all of these show empty, cold streets with barely any people, only cars. Fotók: József Attila lakótelep." n.d. Fortepan.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> RÖNK, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

These conditions ultimately pushed residents to meet in other, more intimate places like the stairwell and the building fronts. One resident described: *'The area in front of the house had two benches where older residents observed everything!'*<sup>47</sup> This misalignment between design intention and reality shows how unpredictable people are and how difficult it is to influence them.

This residential project was made for and to influence people, but this is not reflected in its plans. The archival materials include context plans, sections, and elevations, which is no surprise; however, strikingly, not many of them feature people.<sup>48</sup> Planners saw this neighbourhood from above and in two-dimensional ways, whereas residents experienced it from below in a three-dimensional world. Nevertheless, the community adapted and took matters into its own hands. Residents and the local municipality transformed the sterile environment by planting trees and greenery as a joint effort.<sup>49</sup> Over time, the empty streets seen in early images became green, filled with residents living their everyday lives. What an odd paradox: not including the human factor in the plans, but the idea of wanting to control them. These observations make it clear that while architecture was necessary, it was not enough on its own. Lefebvre's concept of 'lived space' becomes relevant here: the space of experience and emotion, as it ultimately redefines the 'conceived space' imagined by the planners and architects. Authentic urban spaces and communities emerged from small-scale routines and not from planned structures.



Fig. 11, Context plan  
Budapest, Hungary,  
Context plan of the first phase of  
the József Attila Housing Estate.  
(Lakóterv Kft., 1963.)

<sup>47</sup> Pankotai, "Questionnaire: Life on the estate then and now.", interviewee 007.

<sup>48</sup> After looking into several archival mediums, it was striking that these papers almost do not feature people. Even the atmosphere drawings felt cold and rather superficial than human centered. Lakóterv Kft., 1963.; Üllői, 88. tétel, Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

<sup>49</sup> RÖNK, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár.

### III. Social Scale: Informal Success

Ideological intentions regarding the Jozsef Attila housing estate were most explicit on the public and communal scale. Archival notes elaborate greatly on all the different kinds of facilities, shops, communal and cultural spaces to accommodate the residents' needs and further strengthen socialism. Notes also explicitly mention the architects being instructed to give space for political mass organisations, where occasionally delegates from other organisations would gather.<sup>50</sup> In reality, the level of engagement within these facilities was far more mixed. The Pest-Buda cinema, restaurants, pubs and cafes triumphed, and many residents remembered back dearly spending time at these places.<sup>51</sup> Playgrounds, shared benches, and previously mentioned stairwells became successful meeting points, especially for children and parents, according to many residents.<sup>52</sup> Though it is intriguing that early photographs of outdoor spaces only picture children playing, but not really adults. Additionally, designated communal rooms failed too, as they were not finished simultaneously with the apartments. The first resident of the estate, Szilágyi Lászlóné, said, *'It was difficult for early residents to make new friends since a lot of the communal spaces were not finished yet.'*<sup>53</sup> These observations indicate that while younger pupils socialised in these spaces, adults had very little to no opportunity of doing the same.

Fig. 12, Children playing Budapest, Hungary, Children are playing outside on the main playground. Some adults are visible, perhaps their parents. The space feels more atmospheric and lively than before (UVATERV, 1968).



<sup>50</sup> Detailed development plan of the estate, stating every facility that needs to be included in the plan, including how many people they would facilitate. The notes also state: *Space must be provided for mass organizations.* "Üllői úti lakótelep beépítési vázlatterve, 1192., Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

<sup>51</sup> 13/24 interviewees talked about how they enjoyed the Pest-Buda cinema, cafes and restaurant. Pankotai, "Questionnaire: Life on the estate then and now."

<sup>52</sup> To the question: 'Where did you most often meet your neighbors?' multiple answers were possible. The stairwell scored 79.2%, and the playground 58.3%, meanwhile communal places only scored 20.8%. Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Interview in a local magazine with the first resident, Szilágyi Lászlóné, of the estate. RÖNK, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár.

A physiological study done on Soviet mass housing in 1988 detailed that excessive standardisation often led residents to feel lonely and isolated rather than connected. The study further states several effects resulting from planning that should be considered negative, some of which are: ‘a decline in meaningful social interactions’, ‘decrease in inhabitants’ preparedness for co-operation’, ‘decrease in positive social or environmental activity’ and ‘decrease of satisfaction’.<sup>54</sup> A shift in ideology was clearly happening; theory and reality finally started to merge. To state Lefebvre's words:

*‘Theory does not have to place lived experience in brackets in order to promote its concepts, however. On the contrary, lived experience partakes of the theoretical sphere, and this means that the division between conceptualisation and life is artificial.’*<sup>55,56</sup>

His point fits well here, as lived realities finally began to overrule the planned ones, and crucial innovations started to happen.



Fig. 13, 14, Community activities  
Budapest, Hungary,  
Photographs capturing activities that RÖNK was involved in.  
In the first picture, residents are gardening collectively, and  
the second picture shows an elderly club. (RÖNK, Országos  
Széchényi Könyvtár)

RÖNK (részönkormányzat) was established, an estate-level, partial municipality-like organisation that took matters into their own hands and answered local needs and the maintaining of areas. RÖNK was independent of politics, giving free hands to their workers in their decision making. Visiting elderly people, planting trees, collective gardening, hosting tea afternoons, and taking care of sick people were amongst the many activities workers were

<sup>54</sup> Kruusvall, Juri, David Canter, Martin Krampen, and David Stea. 1988. “Mass Housing and Psychological Research in the Soviet Union.” In *Environmental Policy, Assessment and Communication*. Vol. 171–179. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003500681>.

<sup>55</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 316 (see chap. I, footnote 8).

<sup>56</sup> “Effect resulting from planning of the living environment should be considered negative if it brings about the decrease in the results of activities, further formalisation of social relations or decrease in inhabitants preparedness for co-operation. The effect should be considered negative also when it causes decrease in positive social or environmental activity or when positive social activity changes into negative social activity, when it causes decrease in the level of concentration in spatial (urbanisation, large residential areas or large dwellings) or in organisational (too large enterprises, kindergartens, etc.) sense. The effect is negative when it causes decrease in duration of way of life and activity groups, increase of compensational expenditure, decrease of satisfaction and narrowing of the range of these activities and location towards which people were orientated.” Kruusvall, “Mass Housing and Psychological Research in the Soviet Union.

known to do.<sup>57</sup> *'Suddenly everything had an owner'*, said Lászlóné.<sup>58</sup> Over time, residents started to form stronger bonds, leading to a more cohesive community.

Still, not all areas were of equal success. When asking the question: *'Do you feel that the socialist housing estate truly fostered a sense of community or was it merely a place to live?'* the residents' response was intriguing, the answers were divided 50-50. In parts of the estate, namely the Ecserei, Epreserdő and Távíró street, people viewed their homes merely as living spaces, not interacting with one another.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly enough, these streets are all located on the very border of the estate; perhaps this was the reason for their disengagement.<sup>60</sup> Lefebvre's theoretical framework again comes into play in dissecting this complexity. Social life emerged from the trial and errors of residents, partial municipalities and spontaneous activities, even if the design itself reflected an entirely different utopian picture. In many cases, the more informal the space or initiative, the more successful it became.



Fig. 15, Dési H. Street 1964  
Budapest, Hungary,  
The Desi Huber street and its area in 1964 The  
atmosphere is rigid and cold; trees and  
vegetation are not yet part of the design.  
(Ferencvárosi Helytörténeti Gyűjtemény, 1964)

<sup>57</sup> RÖNK, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Google Inc. n.d. "József Attila-lakótelep · Budapest, Hungary." Google Maps. Accessed April 10, 2025.

[https://www.google.com/maps/place/Budapest,+J%C3%B3zsef+Attila-lak%C3%B3telep,+Hungary/@47.463275,19.1077892,2355m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m6!3m5!1s0x4741c2d492fec111:0xb0f23cf96daaff75!8m2!3d47.4635155!4d19.1175377!16s%2Fg%2F120rs1lg?enr=ttu&g\\_ep=EgoyMDI1MDQwNy4wIKXMDSoJLDEwMjExNDU1SAFQAww%3D%3D](https://www.google.com/maps/place/Budapest,+J%C3%B3zsef+Attila-lak%C3%B3telep,+Hungary/@47.463275,19.1077892,2355m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m6!3m5!1s0x4741c2d492fec111:0xb0f23cf96daaff75!8m2!3d47.4635155!4d19.1175377!16s%2Fg%2F120rs1lg?enr=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI1MDQwNy4wIKXMDSoJLDEwMjExNDU1SAFQAww%3D%3D)



Fig. 16, Dési H. Street 2021  
Budapest, Hungary,  
The Desi Huber street in 2021. The  
atmosphere feels lively and warm.  
The trees and greenery are an  
essential part of the design.  
(Zubreczki Dávid, 2021)

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Together, these three scales represent a theatre. Architecture is the stage, but the residents are the actors who bring the play to life. Meaningful and authentic interactions happened via daily routines within the settings established by the initial design.

## Conclusion

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This thesis aimed to examine whether architecture, through the case of József Attila Housing Estate, could be used as a tool to shape collective consciousness and the life of its residents. It became clear that thought architecture can set the scene, ‘like a film set’, but it cannot fully direct it. Ultimately, it is people, ‘the actors’, who write the script and redefine the spaces. The three scales of the analysis, building, urban and social, constantly reveal the mismatch between planned and lived realities. Plans promoted the core socialist values such as collectivism, equality, and state-controlled community life.<sup>61</sup> Yet, what eventually happened was much more human. Social interaction took place in unexpected places and in ways that planners did not anticipate, which highlights the limitations of architecture. Ultimately, this study hopes to contribute to broader discussions about how these practices influence cultures and individuals, and we can learn from them to design better spaces.

Important to mention is that although the Soviet regime’s attempt to influence ideology failed, strong community bonds did emerge. Many residents recall fond memories of people greeting each other, engaging in conversations and looking out for one another. These social aspects are often described in the past tense as they are not present anymore. The loss of community happened as the world changed and the privatised life took over. *‘People barely know their neighbours, even within the same stairwell,’* said one of the residents.<sup>62</sup> Collective memory was moreover often tied to services like the Pest-Buda cinema, cafes and shops as they were anchors of social life. The disappearance of these was often mentioned in the testimonies, leaving a hole in the residents’ lives.<sup>63</sup> Eventually, these losses had a harsher effect on the residents than the shortcomings of architecture itself.

The panel buildings question the architectural canon itself. Much of the canon highlights exemplary praised buildings but fails to see the everyday spaces where most of the population actually lives. While it is important to recognise and celebrate the extraordinary, one must not forget that it is still the exception and not the majority. The József Attila Housing Estate represent the ordinary architecture of everyday life and represents a broader picture that many people can resonate with. Current trends of nostalgia often bring back memories through books, exhibitions, and films.<sup>64,65</sup> Furthermore, the relevance of the estate is still very much present. Various plans have been proposed over the last decade to renovate the estate and give it a more modern appearance.<sup>66,67</sup> Finally, this piece of architecture may not be celebrated in architecture books, but the József Attila Housing Estate reflects where architecture truly meets life - quietly, daily, and collectively.

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<sup>61</sup> Honcharyk, *Municipal Economy of Cities* 6 (187): 75–80.

<sup>62</sup> Pankotai, “Questionnaire: Life on the estate then and now.” interviewee 003.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> “Architecture: Tell Me a Panel Story | Mark Baker | Travel Writer in Prague.” n.d. <https://markbakerprague.com/tell-me-a-panel-story/>.

<sup>65</sup> “Panelki : Construct Your Socialist Prefab Panel Block - by Zupagrafika.” n.d. <https://www.zupagrafika.com/shop/panelki>.

<sup>66</sup> András, Gyökér, and Szabó Máté. 2017. “S, M, L, XL - Léptékre Szabott Átalakítási Terv a József Attila Lakótelepen.” *Építészfórum*. July 25, 2017. <https://epiteszforum.hu/s-m-l-xl-leptekre-szabott-atalakitasi-terv-a-jozsef-attila-lakotelepen>.

<sup>67</sup> János, Gyergyák. 2017. “Hogy Válhat Újra Mintává a József Attila-lakótelep?” *Építészfórum*. June 27, 2017. <https://epiteszforum.hu/hogy-valhat-ujra-mintava-a-jozsef-attila-lakotelep>.

## AI use

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### **Rephrasing and/or clarifying my own writing**

Prompt used: “Can you rephrase this paragraph to make it sound more academic, but keep the same meaning?”

### **Advice on structuring points/chapters**

Prompt used: “Do you have any suggestions on how I would structure these points so it is logical and has a good flow to it?”

### **Titles suggestions**

Prompt used: “Give me some title suggestions for xy chapter (I would write down what the chapter is about/paste the text in), think of something catchy, snappy, nothing boring or obvious.”

### **Translation from Hungarian to English**

### **Summarising oral interviews**

Prompt used: “Here are the answers to xy question, can you please summarise these for me in a couple of sentences?”

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<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

Figure 2: Chain Bridge 1944

“Fotók: József Attila lakótelep.” n.d. Fortepan.

<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

Figure 3: József Attila Estate

“Fotók: József Attila lakótelep.” n.d. Fortepan.

<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

Figure 4: Empty land

“Fotók: József Attila lakótelep.” n.d. Fortepan.

<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

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“Fotók: József Attila lakótelep.” n.d. Fortepan.

<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

Figure 8: Floorplan, 1960

Lakótelep - Építési engedélyezési tervdokumentáció, 1960, 38236/248, Budapest Főváros Levéltára.

Figure 9: Finished streets

“Fotók: József Attila lakótelep.” n.d. Fortepan.

<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

Figure 10: Finished streets

“Fotók: József Attila lakótelep.” n.d. Fortepan.

<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

Figure 11: Context plan

Lakóterv Kft., József Attila-lakótelep, 1963.

Figure 12, Children playing

“Fotók: József Attila lakótelep.” n.d. Fortepan.

<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

Figure 13: Community activities

RÖNK éves évforduló, 10 MB.205.362., 2006, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár.

Figure 14: Community activities

RÖNK éves évforduló, 10 MB.205.362., 2006, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár.

Figure 15: Desi H. Street 1964

“Fotók: József Attila lakótelep.” n.d. Fortepan.

<https://fortepan.hu/hu/photos/?q=J%C3%B3zsef%2BAttila%2Blak%C3%B3telep%2C>.

Figure 16: Dési H. Street 2021

Zubreczki Dávid, 2021

## Appendix

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The oral testimonies are attached in a separate zip file.

Pankotai, Dora. 2025. "Questionnaire: Life on the estate then and now."