

Virág Bogyó

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Final Report

About my research

Rather than considering playgrounds as spaces isolated from society and the urban environment, I argue that their design is deeply influenced by current ideologies. Though perhaps not as clearly and explicitly as educational institutions or public monuments, they are spatial imprints of the current conception of the child and the pedagogical, architectural, and artistic discourse of the time. At the same time, because of their unique “in-between” nature, playgrounds can more easily become sites of experimentation. My focus is on the nearly 40 years following World War II, which can rightly be considered the heyday of playground design. The dilemmas of the post-war reconstruction, the construction, and the shattering of the Cold War consensus, can be traced through the changing concept of the child and the spaces built for them. My research at Blinken OSA – a part of my DLA research at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts – aims to compare the Western examples that have become widely known in the last decade with lesser-known outstanding examples from the other side of the Iron Curtain. This is done to counter the narrow mainstream narrative on the Socialist Bloc’s children’s spaces, and to illustrate the genuine functioning of the Iron Curtain through the examples presented, especially by mapping the international networks and knowledge flows between the experts involved.

Fellowship at the Open Society Archives, Budapest

I started my fellowship by looking at the Hungarian Home Movie Collection [HU OSA 320-1] and found 29 movies with playground scenes – most of them are from the period between 1945 and 1989, and are excellent visualizations of everyday life of children in the socialist Hungary. During my fellowship I was also able to locate some of the playgrounds and find their designers.

Then I focused on the presence of playgrounds in the architectural discourse. To do this, I examined the issues of the Czechoslovak magazine *Achitektura ČSR* [OSA Archivum Off-Site Storage, Box 172, 196, K/30/1/2/2], which was probably the most progressive architectural journal in the region at the time. It covered the World’s Fairs, the radical, experimental ideas of architecture, urbanism, and landscape design of the time. As I went through the 20 years of the magazine, the dominance of Western examples became striking. But this was not at all exceptional. Art historian Edit Lantos, for example, points to very similar trends in her study titled “A magyar építészek tájékozódási horizontja 1957 és 1965 közt” [The Orienteering

Horizon of Hungarian Architects between 1957 and 1965] by looking at the Hungarian architectural journal *Magyar Építőművészet*.¹

In *Architektura ČSR* the playground is a recurring theme and many contemporary and experimental designs are presented. For example, in his article “Příroda v soudobé architektuře” [Landscape and Contemporary Architecture, in *Architektura ČSR* 1960/5.], Czech architect, designer, and urban planner, Otakar Kuča presents a few Czech and Polish examples of playground architecture, but most of the materials are from the West: Kuča’s article refers mainly to Swiss, Danish, American, and Dutch designs. The article also gives us a picture of how the editorial process worked. Page 324 is an almost identical copy of a page from the article “Freizeitzentrum Buchegg in Zürich” [Buchegg Leisure Center in Zurich, 1959/7., page 240] in the Swiss magazine *Werk*. In addition to illustrating the editors’ approach to copyrights, this little exploration contains a more important message. We can say without a doubt that the editors owned a copy of this issue, but it is more likely that they even subscribed to the magazine.

The famous urban sociologist Jiří Musil – one of the founding fathers of CEU – in his article “Děti ve městě” [The Child and the City in *Architektura ČSR* 1963/1.] refers, among others, to the Dutch architect, Aldo van Eyck, one of the leading figures of modernist playground design, as a good example of how to consider the place and role of the child in the urban environment.

The magazine also contains numerous realizations of play sculptures from Czechoslovakia – functional sculptures, as they were called there.² In the former socialist bloc, play sculpture took on a new meaning. For a while, it was the only way to create abstract sculptures in public space, because they had a function – play. Given this, in Czechoslovakia functional sculptures became a huge trend from the beginning of the 1960s.

The other main issue I focused on was the construction of the image of the child. In her book *Innocent Weapons*,³ historian Margaret Peacock argues that the construction and breakdown of the Cold War consensus can be traced through the changing concept of the child and its representation. In the archives, I attempted to trace this process primarily through Soviet periodicals, materials from the Western Press Archives [HU OSA 300-120], the Soviet Propaganda Film Collection [HU OSA 424], and the Hungarian Propaganda Filmstrips [HU OSA LibSpColl_Dia].

During the years of Stalinism, socialist children and youth appeared as builders of the new society, for whom peace should be kept, and as well-behaved, disciplined young comrades,

¹ Published in Edit Lantos, Gabriella Uhl (ed.): *Postera crescam laude recens. Student's tribute Keserü Katalin's birthday*. Budapest 2006. 82-110.

² See e.g. *Architektura ČSR* 1961/1, 1963/1, 1967/2-3, 7.

³ Peacock Margaret. 2014. *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

the children of Stalin.⁴ Starting with the Khrushchev Thaw, the emphasis on play, the idea of good toys, and the notion of “creativity” became increasingly important.⁵ As childhood itself turned into a battlefield, children themselves became active participants in the Cold War discourse. They became organizers of international youth meetings and appeared as little peace ambassadors.⁶ These images appear regularly in the youth magazines I studied: the journal of the World Federation of Democratic Youth, *Molodezh' mira* [OSA Archivum Library 8/10/1/5], and *Rovesnik* [OSA Archivum Library 7/30/3/4], which was launched by the Central Committee of the Komsomol. In contrast to the socialist children, young citizens of Western countries were portrayed as victims of capitalist society, threatened by hunger and poverty. Juvenile delinquency was exposed, as was the spread of nationalism, fascism, and racism. On the other hand, Western youth were often portrayed as participating in peace demonstrations with banners against nuclear testing, the war in Vietnam, NATO, and so on. Sometimes these images are so obviously manipulated that I have to think it was intentional. There are also many articles in *Rovesnik* that deal with Western pop culture. The framing was constantly changing – Bob Dylan, Joan Baez sang for peace, the Beatles encouraged youth to hooliganism – but what was certain was that *Rovesnik* corresponded about them.

Concerning the role of children in cultural diplomacy, it is worth taking a look at the U.S.-Soviet exhibition exchange, a highly symbolic event of the Cold War period, which became famous for the so-called *Kitchen Debate*. In the summer of 1959, the Soviet Union opened its exhibition in the New York Coliseum. A few months later, the United States National Exhibition traveled to Moscow's Sokolniki Park. In addition to typical themes such as industrial production, scientific and technological achievements, both sides placed great emphasis on presenting the well-being of their citizens, especially that of their children.⁷

While the Soviets exhibited models of schools and kindergartens,⁸ children's books⁹ and furniture, the Americans presented children's toys and built a large outdoor playground¹⁰ with the latest designs, mostly by the Creative Playthings Play Sculptures Division. Surprisingly, I could not find a single photo of the existing playground. But I think it's mere presence tells us how important children and their play were in the construction of national identity.

⁴ See e.g. “Képek a nagy Sztálin életéből” [Pictures from the life of the great Stalin], 1953. HU OSA LibSpColl_Dia_7301, “Novyi Minsk”, 1954. [HU OSA 424-0-1-096] or the cover of *Sovetskaia zhenshchina*, 1954/2. [OSA Archivum Library 7/31/3/6].

⁵ See e.g. “Technical Design and Art by Soviet Children”, 1964. [HU OSA 300-120-5-343].

⁶ See e.g. the covers of *Rovesnik*, 1968/4. and 1973/7. [OSA Archivum Library 7/30/3/4].

⁷ See e.g. “USSR Exhibition” catalogue, 1959. [HU OSA 300-120-5-342], “Facts About The American Exhibition in Moscow July 25-Sept. 4, 1959” [HU OSA 300-120-5-229] or “The Conference in the Kitchen” *New York Times*, 7-28-59. [HU OSA 300-120-5-229].

⁸ “Soviet Exhibition in New York”, 1959. [HU OSA 300-120-5-343]

⁹ “Soviet Books for Children”, 1959. [HU OSA 300-120-5-342]

¹⁰ See e.g. “Facts About The American Exhibition in Moscow July 25-Sept. 4, 1959” [HU OSA 300-120-5-229] or “American Exhibition Put Ideas Of U.S. Across, Analyst Finds” *New York Times*, 9-5-59. [HU OSA 300-120-5-229].

Overall, my fellowship at the Open Society Archive has been a great step forward in my research. I'm currently working on my dissertation, which will incorporate my research in other archives and digital databases, the interviews I've conducted over the past few years, and the knowledge I've gained here. I am also working on a public art project with my colleague Flóra Madácsi as part of *Budapest 150*. We are planning to reopen a former play street and organize an exhibition and a public talk on the site.