

The Future of a Shrinking Hungarian City, Salgótarján

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Abstract

It is well known that the world's population is growing and more and more people want to live in cities. However, some towns, cities or urban areas are in the period of declining. Although it has been analysed quite a lot in western countries, in Hungary the decision-makers and planners still think of urban shrinkage as a stage in the history of the town's ups and downs. Using the example of a Hungarian industrial town, Salgótarján, we are trying to show why it is really important to consider shrinkage as a 'must' to solve worldwide phenomenon, in its complex way.

Salgótarján is situated in the north part of Hungary and it is the seat of Nógrád County. But the town has been declining since the transition in 1990. It has led to suffering from population loss, abandoned buildings, social problems, low level of human innovation, lack of entrepreneurship and economic downturn. In the course of our student's research, we tried to analyse the history and the structure of the town, the social disorders, and the possibilities that can help Salgótarján to re-develop.

Keywords: shrinking cities; Hungary; Salgótarján

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I. Introduction

Thanks to the development of logistics and to the technology revolution (AUDIRAC, I. 2005) some cities all around the globe are losing out. This phenomenon occurs in Hungary too, but to find an article, a research project or an initiative coordinated by the municipalities or state government about declining cities, is really hard, although it is

a well-studied subject throughout the western world (OSWALT, P. ed. 2006; PALLAGST, K. et al. eds. 2009; MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ, C. et al. 2012; RINK, D. coordinator 2012; MURGANTE, B. – ROTONDO, F. 2013; WEAVER, R. et al. 2017). If we define shrinkage by the terminology of population loss, economic downturn, economic decline and social problems it is clear that some cities and areas are experiencing

the outflow of human resources and have problems, because of the lack of entrepreneurship, low levels of innovations and intellectual engagements (MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ, C. – WU, T. 2007). If we compare these trends to the fact that more and more people want to live in cities (in 2015 more than 54 percent of the world's population and 70 percent of Hungary have already lived in cities), declining of the number of residents is sometimes more shocking. To define shrinkage phenomenon in Hungary we held a lecture during 2016–2017 in a middle-sized town, called Salgótarján where architecture student, teachers, from the Budapest University of Technology and some experts from the municipality were working together to resolve the town's most urgent problems. In this paper we would like to shortly highlight our findings.

First of all, our starting point was the assumption that, when a town's population is decreasing, planners, decision makers and the municipality should consider other strategies to stop these processes, even if these attempts can be a little bit different from the well-known projects. Through analysing Salgótarján we focused on the historical change of the town and its urban surroundings. We collected

data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), worked together with local initiatives and stakeholders and processed existing plans and documents about the town. Our goals were to give some suggestions for the municipality to initiate some changes in the society and rethink the existing built environment.

II. Introducing Salgótarján

Salgótarján is situated in the north side of Hungary and the centre of the Salgótarján District. The town is the county seat of Nógrád County, the town's administration provides a wide range of services for the territory. In terms of population and density, it comes third after Eger and Miskolc so it has a major role in north part of Hungary's economy. From its considerable strong industrial and mining past the inhabitants of Salgótarján have a really strong link from the past when the town was one of the most important mining area in Hungary based on the brown coal basin comes from the Karancs and Medves Hills that encircled the town (WIRTH, P. et al. eds. 2012). To understand better the town's historical commitment during our examination we looked through the town's history.

II.1. The mining city

The surrounding hills were inhabited from the 13th century but the village remained relatively small until the 1850s when brown coal was discovered next to it. Based on this resource the first mining company was established in the name of Salgótarjáni Kőszénbánya Rt. (Coalmining Company of Salgótarján). By 1881 the company had become the second largest mining company in Hungary joining together with the iron ore factory. One of the driving forces of the Rimamurány–Salgótarjáni Vasmű Rt. (Rimamurány–Salgótarján Ironworks Ltd.) was the railway. At the end of the century the glass industry (sheet and hollow glass) joined to the iron and steel factories and a massive development stage began in the town's history. Salgótarján became a main industrial hub of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy before World War I (WIRTH, P. et al. eds. 2012). After the Great War Hungary lost most of its territory so the coal field surrounding the town became more important for the economy. In 1922 Salgótarján was granted town status and the first mayor, dr. Förster Kálmán, had a major role in developing the town.

The second golden age of Salgótarján came after the second world under the socialist regime when Hungary wanted to be the country of iron and steel. In 1950 Salgótarján became the county seat of Nógrád County and new factories were implemented in the town (textiles, stockings and radio technology factory), resulting that 95 percent of industrial workers in Nógrád County were employed in the plants of this territory and 40 percent of the inhabitant of Salgótarján were working in these factories (WIRTH, P. et al. eds. 2012). They set up new goals for the town: until the end of the 1990 decision-makers intended the town's population growth up to 70 thousand. To reach those goals the territory of the town had been expanded (with local villages for example with Baglyasalja, Somoskő and Somoskőújfalu) and in 1960 new spatial plan was designed for the town using the drawing of the country's best architects as a reference. But from 1970 coal mining had to be decreased because of the declining resources. Summarizing by 1990 Salgótarján was a very important industrial town for Hungary and played a major role of the country's industrialization.

II.2. The shrinking city

Shortly after the regime collapsed in 1990 some of the big factories left the town and from the beginning of 1999 the steel factory's production had fallen until it was closed completely. Finally, in 2008 the glass wool factory also left the town.

Besides the economic downturns, in 1994 Salgótarján was granted the rank of town with county rights (due to the new law) that brought new rights and obligations for the town. The municipality tried to overcome the decreasing work opportunities with an industrial area that had been established to welcome new arriving companies in 2000.

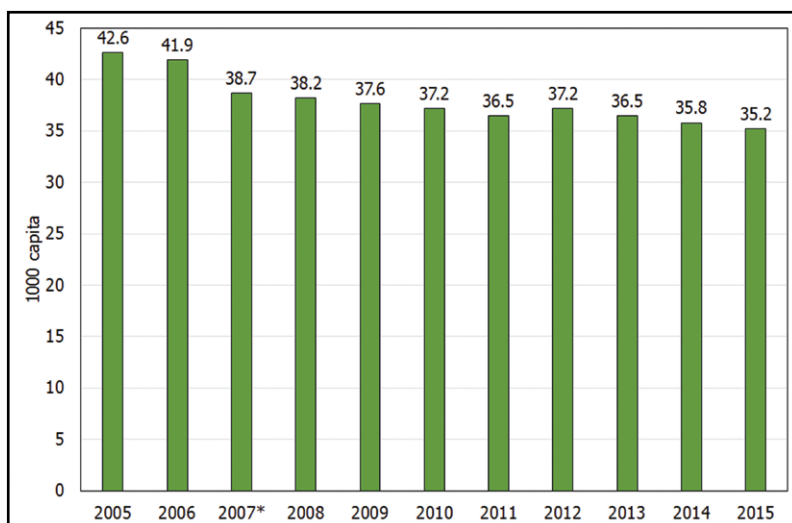


Figure 1: Population in Salgótarján, 2005–2015.

*in 2006 Somoskő district voted to leave Salgótarján

Source of data: HUNGARIAN CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE

From the early years of the 1990s, shrinkage could easily be measured in the town. We can observe population loss, especially young and well-trained people out-migrate from the town, but in deprived areas the proportion of children and young people are rising (Figure 1). The employment

rate of the town has been declining (Figure 2) and according to the Hungarian Central Statistic Office's data in 2014 there were 11 zones in deep segregation and 4 zones in high demand of segregation. The physical dimensions of the decrease are quite shocking, because of the extended brown fields, that has

led to fall in building stock and vacant buildings. Houses owned by the municipality were decreased

because of the demolitions and the lack of resources of the municipality.

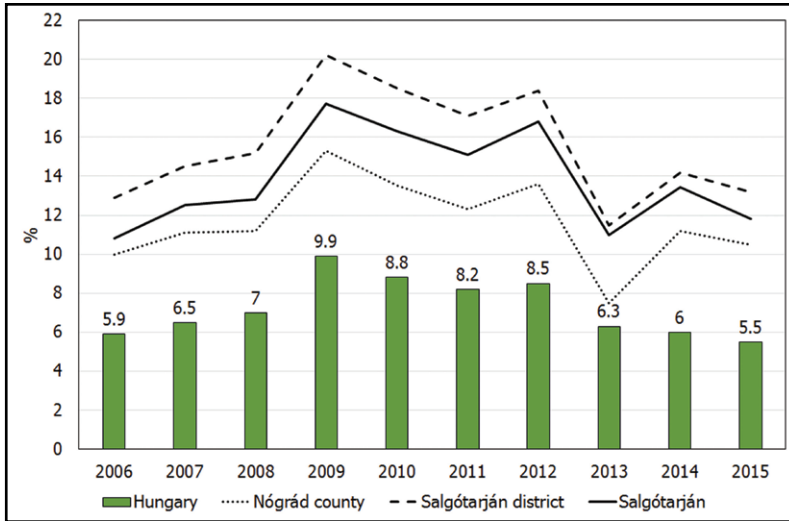


Figure 2: The proportion of unemployment rate in Hungary, in Nógrád County, in Salgótarján District and Salgótarján, 2006–2015.

Source of data: HUNGARIAN CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE

III. Key Interventions in Salgótarján

With the aim for a better town, students from the Budapest University of Technology altogether with the teachers and some workers from the municipality have tried to give some suggestions that can help to renew the deprived zones and revitalize the underused field in Salgótarján. We set up two main intervention goals; soft tools to initiate discussions to unfold social and economic problems, to discuss the strengths and

weaknesses and finally to show for the decision makers some examples to knowledge-intensive economic investments. And as architects, we have tried to give some highlights to well-designed developments such as rethink the core architectural problems (e.g. vacant sites).

III.1. Rethink the core functions of the city

Salgótarján has two faces. The downtown of the settlement was completely renewed in the 1960s and 1970s and according to the

data and the municipality is doing great. But if we look at the map of the town and if we analyse all the existing development plans it is clear that the main social problems are in the valleys where most of the deprived areas are. Furthermore a good town plan should deal with the brownfield too.

In the near future due to the aging population, to the migration and to the disadvantages of the spatial distribution, we have to prepare for social and transport challenges (LODOVICI, M. – TORCHIO, N. 2015). Furthermore, to mobilise the most of people in need transportation should be implemented with social viewpoints.

Thus analysing the town's structure we suggested to install a city tram that can be a new opportunity for inhabitants to use the public transport shortening the time from the edges to the centre. City tram could also run by the underused infrastructures such as the still existing railway system.

III.2. Intervention in Salgótarján

We assigned three main areas to intervene (*Figure 3*):

a) *'innovation / education' development:* to resolve one of the biggest brown-field in Salgótarján, we

tried to implement an innovation district with the aim of knowledge-intensive development. The territory of the old glass factory should be reinvented with a design institute, with a function of a theatre, with a design centre and with a place that is reserved for workshops. The aim of these interventions is to bring back the once-existent cultural vitality in Salgótarján.

b) *'social economy' development:* There are a lot of underused fields in Salgótarján. To dense the town's structure we designed some residential development, a community canteen, a multifunctional public place and a school for the inhabitants.

c) *'dissolve the segregation' development:* According to the anti-segregation plan there are 15 deprived areas in Salgótarján. One of the main questions for rehabilitation is how to reattach these districts within the town's boundaries. The students designed a school for post-studies, a new form of housing unit, a cucumber farm to solve the unemployment situation, a market and a convenience store and a day care for young mothers.

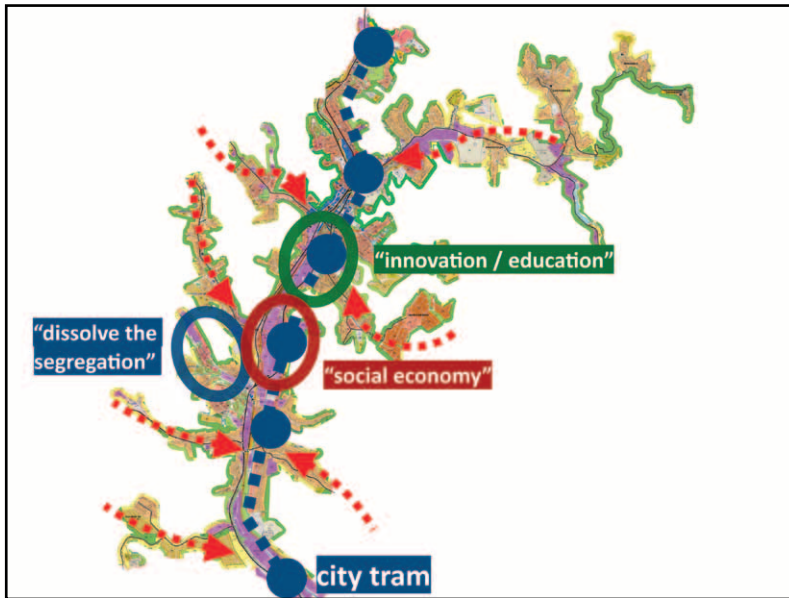


Figure 3: New spatial arrangement of Salgótarján, highlighting the use of the city tram
Source: edition of the authors based on highlights from design approach

IV. Conclusions

Planning has been long focused towards urban growth while some cities struggle to high rates of unemployment, out-migration and economic decline. Therefore all architects working with a declining town should consider other viewpoints besides construction and development. During our one-year observation in Salgótarján we tried to allocate as much knowledge as we could find to know the town and the shrinking phenomenon better. From our observation we gave some suggestions to the town leaders what kind of development they should use to rethink the

town. We found out that the root of the problem is not only the built environment: social programs, public transport should also be implemented for a better future. Finally, our struggle to design a better town brought some questions too:

- ⊕ How to find a common language between residents and the local municipality?
- ⊕ What kind of modelling approaches can be implemented in a shrinking city?
- ⊕ Where is the architecture's role in these very complex processes?

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