

Erik Lynch

Explorations of Urban Space

Eszter and Orsi

1 April 2020

Akácfa Útca

Akácfa Útca is one of the many small streets that perforate the VII district of Budapest, but one that holds special significance to my life in Budapest. Akácfa was one of the two streets that defined my block of Rákóczi út, and the club Instant was the most common evening destination for my flatmates and myself. As it exists today, Akácfa útca is perhaps the second most important artery of the pulsating heart of Budapest's nightlife- the party district. But Akácfa útca was not always this way. This tour is temporal, not spatial. One need not travel further than the intersection of Akácfa útca and Rákóczi út. One could even observe this intersection from afar from the Blaha Lujza Ter tram platform to embark upon it. The life of this avenue as told through photography can be divided into three broad phases- the street as a site of creation; a site of destruction; and a site of re-creation.

Creation

The earliest photos in the Fortepan collection relating the Akácfa útca date from the 1930s. The Akácfa of this first period, the time before the Second World War and the subsequent Soviet occupation, can be understood as a place of creation. Akácfa útca was home to a photography studio, operated by a woman named Margit Márkus. The Akácfa útca of this period appears as a quiet diversion from the bustle of Rákóczi út, a place where an artist could find the focus to frame to perfect shot.

Destruction

The largest share of photographs in the Fortepan collection on Akácfa útca relate to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. The facades of the buildings have crumbled, just as the revolutionaries had hoped the regime soon would. On this street, the masses in revolt tore down and desecrated a statue of Joseph Stalin in an expression of popular anger with the regime. However, the most striking images from this period are of a burnt-out armored car inscribed with revolutionary, anti-Soviet slogans. The quiet found before the war had been torn away, replaced by crackling flames, rubble-strewn streets, and defiant cries of "Russians go home!" This Akácfa was a place of destruction, first to the implements of Soviet control, then to the revolutionaries themselves.

Re-Creation

On the same corner where fifty years prior the people of Budapest had immolated a Soviet armored car and scrawled defiant slogans upon its charred chassis, there now stands a Burger King. While in a literal, physical sense Akácfa útca has likely gotten dirtier in the past half century, in a deeper sense it has been sanitized. Akácfa útca is a place to consume, and to do

so in excess. In 1956, the street was the site of a minor but meaningful action in the revolution, a fight against the political domination of the human person. But now, Akácfa útca serves as a vector for the financial domination of the human person. While not as glamorous or expensive as Andrássy út, Akácfa útca's current *mode de vie* is functionally identical. Either street serves as a sort of cultural marketplace, where one can- for a modest price- immerse themselves in a fictional version of an exotic, foreign culture, stripped of all of its flaws, shortcomings, and contradictions; sanitized and consumer-friendly. This Disney-version of Hungarian life, while not as egregious as it is in the major historical sites, is perhaps more pernicious here, because it is easier to not notice. As money-making institutions, the clubs and bars of Akácfa útca- and their more famous cousins on Kazinczy utca- serve a commodified version of Hungarian life to well-paying tourists and students. Akácfa útca is a place for recreation, the sort of place where the long-sightedness of revolutionaries finds no place. In its first life, the artists of Akácfa útca gave us a window into the past with their photography; in its second, the revolutionaries crowded into the street to fight for their future; in its third, it has been re-created into an ever-changing but ever-present mass of wallets with people around them focused only on the present, on the ways in which they might consume the products- cultural or commercial- that Akácfa útca has for sale. The doors of Instant are no more than a few hundred meters from the corner where the armored car smoldered, but the distance from one end of the street to the other cannot be measured in meters, but in years.

Creation



Margit Márkus (L) and model, 1938. Fortepan #1777349



On Akácfa útca, 1938. Fortepan #131801

Destruction



A smoldering armored car, Akácfa útca 1956. Fortepan #40138



The toppled statue of Stalin and the armored car, Akácfa útca 1956. Fortepan #40132

Recreation



Instant on Akácfa útca, 2020. Own photograph.