Guerrilla hospitality
Urban decay, entrepreneurship and the 'ruin' bars of Budapest

Peter Lugosi and **Krisztina Lugosi** report on the offbeat drinking and eating venues – called *rom* bars – in dilapidated urban buildings in Budapest. How does their evolution relate to urban regeneration, who has developed and how have they sustained the *rom* phenomenon and what's the role of art and culture in these venues?

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES the development and evolution of *rom* bars and focuses on three themes:

1 the relationship between urban regeneration and *rom* venues
2 the entrepreneurial forces that have perpetuated the *rom* phenomenon
3 the role of art and culture in these venues.

It is argued that the key characteristics of the *rom* phenomenon are best captured by the notion of 'guerrilla hospitality', which is discussed in the final part of the article.

Entrance to the elusive Pótkulcs (Authors)

The history of the romkert and romkocsma

Romkert means 'ruin garden' while *romkocsma* means 'ruin bar' or 'pub' in Hungarian. Writers and cultural commentators claim the *rom* phenomenon started in 1999 with the opening of a bar/restaurant venue called the Pótkulcs (meaning spare or latch key) in a crumbling street in the VI district of Budapest.[1]

The Pótkulcs is located in a gap between two buildings. In the beginning the bar had no sign or any indication of its existence; and even now the sign consists of a piece of paper attached with sticking tape to an inconspicuous rusty door. This door opens into a courtyard, which leads through to the bar. The venue is relatively small and the majority of the dimly-lit bar space is in the basement of the residential building. The bare walls are painted and it is furnished with an eclectic collection of beaten-up tables, chairs and sofas. The venue regularly hosts photo and other art exhibitions as well as musical performances and DJ-selected music.

The real shift in the evolution of *rom* venues came in 2002 with the opening of the Szimpla *kert* in an abandoned residential building in the VII district of the city. This is the characteristic but crumbling Jewish

district, which is undergoing a massive rehabilitation or regeneration process.[2] The building on Király Utca was already famous because residents and officials had fought a long battle over eviction and the vacation of the building.[3]

Attila Kiss, one of the Szimpla's operators, claimed the local council could not find an appropriate status for the rental agreement and it was originally rented as a storage building. The rest of the building, like many of those in Budapest, was made up of several floors of flats which were located around an inner courtyard. The flats were barricaded off and the inner courtyard was furnished with a make-shift bar, lampions and an assortment of chairs and tables. Customers entered the crumbling building's courtyard through a car park of an adjacent building. Interestingly, Kiss claimed one of the most significant operating costs was not the lease of the actual building but the rental of the parking spaces, which had to be kept empty so customers could move through the car park unhindered.

Szimpla was forced to move in 2003 and reopened in nearby Kazinczy Utca. In the same year two more venues opened: the Gozsdu and Szoda Udvar (Soda court) which was an outdoor venue and brand extension of an indoor bar, Szoda, operating in the VII district. Following the Szimpla *kert* model the Gozsdu and Szoda Udvar both opened in abandoned courtyards of residential buildings.

In 2004 further groups of young entrepreneurs began looking for abandoned buildings and a new generation of *rom* venues opened in the VII as well as other neighbouring districts.[4] The Szoda Udvar and Szimpla *kert* were joined by several other venues including the Szimpla *kiskert* (small garden), Mumus, Tetthely, Kuplung and West Balkan. The 2004 summer season represents the most significant growth stage in the *rom* phenomenon and is frequently referred to as the 'golden age' of the scene.

In 2005 the mayoral office of the VII district refused to lease the premises or grant licenses to the third generation of venues that opened in the previous year, despite appeals by operators that they were actually providing cultural resources or institutions rather than bars.[5] The noise generated by the bars in previous years had attracted protests from local residents. The venues opening in 2003 and 2004 were soundproofed using improvised, low-tech solutions—eg. padding

even now the sign consists of a piece of paper attached with sticking tape to an inconspicuous rusty door

the doors leading to the inner courtyard—but noise remained a problem. Patrons walking to and leaving the venues in inebriated states during the early hours of the morning also attracted a lot of negative attention. The operators collaborated to introduce the *bagoly* (owl) initiative: signs were displayed, which asked people in several languages to respect the surrounding residents and to keep the noise down and security staff stood outside the bars quietening people as they approached and as they left.

Szimpla *kert* retained its license in 2005 and continued to open the *kiskert*, which was located (by a few hundred metres) in the VI district. The owners continued to operate in Kazinczy Utca and had begun to transform the venue for all-year opening. According to Kiss, unlike many of the other buildings in the VII district which were owned—and thus leased—by the local authorities, the Kazinczy Utca building was privately owned. Their case for the operation of a cultural institute rather than a bar was also stronger because they organised various cultural events and the venue had an outdoor cinema. The sign outside the Szimpla still states that it is a cinema rather than a bar, and Kiss had claimed in an earlier interview that the cinema placed it above the status of a *romkocsma*.[6] However, the Szimpla *kert*'s future remained insecure: the local authorities

Silence is sexy! (Authors)

imposed a midnight closing time and threatened to close the venue.[7] The Szimpla's owners subsequently

> Their case for the operation of a cultural institute …was also stronger because they organised cultural events and the venue had an outdoor cinema

mobilised their customers and local residents to sign a petition in support of the venue.[8] Other venues, such as the Sark *kert*, relocated to Margaret Island between Pest and Buda while retaining their *romkert* designation in the media.[9]

In 2005 the Tűzraktár (fire warehouse) opened in a disused medical-supplies building in the IX district. It has since changed its name twice, initially to Tűzraktér (fire storage) and then to Tűz-Tate. The Tűzraktár emulated the design features of the earlier *rom* venues, but it was an overt attempt to develop a cultural centre and to bring together the hospitality industry with art and culture. As well as having the usual features of *rom* venues such as the bar space and table football, the venue hosted fashion shows, literature evenings, concerts and theatre shows and exhibited work by artists in the empty rooms in the building. Szoda Udvar reopened in another venue during 2005–6, but the Szoda's owners did not reopen a courtyard in 2007.

Last year saw another evolutionary phase in the development of the *rom* scene. The Szoda's owners collaborated with the operator of another venue, Sark, to open the Corvintető (Corvin roof), which sits on the top two floors of a department store in Pest. In Buda, a terrace bar, Fecske (swallow), has opened on the roof of a swimming pool. The Corvintető and Fecske continue to incorporate the features of the *rom* bars: both occupy and reuse unusual and somewhat dishevelled spaces and both venues are decorated with graffiti and other art.

Urban regeneration and rom **hospitality**

Researchers have begun to examine the relationship between hospitality and urban regeneration and they recognise the role that hospitality can play in the regeneration process.[10] Bell and Binnie, for example, suggest that 'urban culinary culture can play a paramount role in producing the habitat for ongoing regeneration, and also provide a powerful symbolic statement about urban fortunes'.[11] This echoes earlier observations about the role of cafés, bars and restaurants in the gentrification process.[12] Hospitality venues become focal points for particular consumer segments and the symbolic value of individual outlets becomes synonymous with their surrounding milieu. Venues are thus part of the social and economic processes in which urban areas are transformed into gentrified playscapes for an affluent new middle class.

Fecske, with swimming pool below (left); Corvintető with the Budapest rooftops in the background (above).
(Authors)

The relationship between *rom* venues and urban regeneration is not so straightforward. Rather than being a catalyst for urban transformation or a symbolic statement of a district's rehabilitation, the *rom* venues shared a tense relationship with the broader forces of regeneration in the city. The initial generation of *rom* venues operated within a fracture in the regeneration process, when existing occupants had been dislocated but the totalising transformation processes of regeneration had yet to take effect. These venues became ephemeral entities that offered temporary rejuvenation for urban space without fundamentally altering its physical structure. They were

Artwork in Corvintető (Authors)

temporary appropriations of spaces, in which the visible signs of urban decay became an overt character feature of hospitality space.

Entrepreneurship and rom hospitality

Entrepreneurship means different things to different people; nevertheless, small entrepreneurial organisations have a number of recognisable characteristics.[13] The visions and values of the founders are usually central to shaping the organisation, and owner-managers are often at the centre of decision making—relying on intuition, improvisation, innovation, experimentation and personal relationships.[14]

The *rom* phenomenon reflects these themes in a number of ways. Firstly, the owners often invested considerable personal time and effort into the design and rebuilding of the physical space. Secondly, the owners were often directly involved in the management and operation of the venue. Thirdly, the owner-operators frequently mobilised their personal contacts in developing the venues and their associated activities. For example, friends and acquaintances provided

creative input into the design of websites, premises and decoration; on several occasions acquaintances designed and produced artwork both for the summer *rom*-venues, and—in the case of the Szoda bar—for the original indoor venue. Kiss, for example, noted that information dissemination about the Szimpla *kert* often utilised their own email lists of people who then spread word about the venue and brought other patrons. Several of the venues, and the Szoda in particular, organised events for cycle couriers who patronised the bars.

Within these advocacy networks, loosely connected groups of individuals were called upon and mobilised to support the venue's operation and the consumer experience. This advocacy network also involved other cultural entrepreneurs, such as the producer of the Budapest City Spy map, who, for a fee, included the venues on small colour maps that are distributed freely in and around the city. This ability to mobilise networks and artists in particular was illustrated in the development of the Gozsdu: students from a local arts college contributed to the decoration of the venue through their labour and the display of their works in the venue. Finally, the Szimpla *kert*, Szoda Udvar and Fecske were all financed through private capital rather than investment from formal financial institutions such as banks, larger corporate investors or licensed venue operators.

Rom bars, art and culture

Seminal venues such as the Pótkulcs were historically associated with members of the creative sectors. The creative industries and art in particular frequently re-emerge in the design and operational policies of subsequent generations of bars. *Rom* venues have in the past hosted intellectual debates, book launches,

Art on the the exterior of Feske: this shot evokes the romantic atmosphere of dilapidated mid-20th century moderne exteriors. Note the tower crane on the horizon creating the 'new' Budapest. (Authors)

exhibitions, fashion shows with local art-college students and musical concerts—particularly jazz or blues-influenced and contemporary electronic music, which represents alternative discourses to mainstream, popular culture. Many of the venues have incorporated graffiti, poetry extracts, paintings and artistic collages into the decoration and projected artistic images onto the walls of the dilapidated venues.

Even in the latest manifestation of the *rom* venues, the rooftop terraces of Corvintető and Fecske, art and artistry re-emerge in the design and operation. The walls of the entrance-way leading to the Fecske are adorned with elaborate graffiti works and large prints. Even the toilet attendant—Ági Mama—has decorated the facilities with quotes and sells copies of her book of stories alongside other items such as chewing gum, contraceptives and spare clothing. Corvintető uses comic-inspired graphics throughout the venue—even in the toilet signposting and in the warnings for patrons to refrain from throwing material off the roof.

This is not to suggest that all the venues have the same musical policies or are equally keen to champion art. The Szimpla, for example, may be much more likely to play jazz or blues-influenced and alternative electronic genres of music than the Szoda venues, Corvintető and Fecske, which have (or had) much broader music policies. Nevertheless, all the

Art in Corvintető (left below) and wall projections in Tűz Tate – formerly Tűzraktár (right below) (Authors)
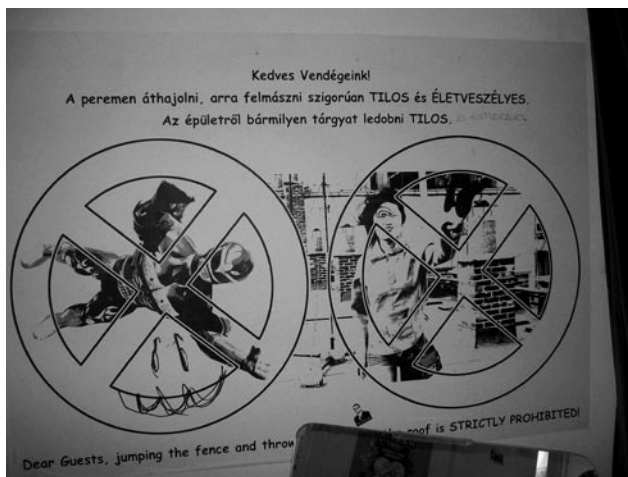
Entrance to the Szimpla kert mozi – a different kind of dilapidation – but just as richly evocative.
(Authors)

venues attempted to utilise some aspects of art or the creative industries—even when they are subversive or 'non-institutionalised' forms of art such as graffiti.

One of the most important aspects of the *rom* venues is the celebration of the urban decay that characterises them. The crumbling facades and interiors, exposed brick walls covered in stickers and scratched messages, the ramshackle collection of beaten-up chairs and tables, exposed cabling and lampions are central to the venues' appeal. Whereas other contemporary bars may communicate a sense of style through the use of strategically displayed cookware, slick spotlights, stained wood-and-leather furniture and stainless-steel work surfaces, the eclecticism and ruinous state of the fixtures and fittings in the *rom* venues are inversions that communicate and reinforce the bohemian credentials of the owners and operators. Moreover, the establishment of the *rom* venues in the crumbling buildings of the VI, VII and IX districts weave together the ruin of the urban fabric with the discourses of marginality and dissent of those artists and other members of the creative classes who originally patronised these venues. In other words, the hospitableness of the venue was inseparable from the

Eclectic furniture in Szimpla kert. 'Fancy a bath…?' No problems about smoking in bars in Hungary.
(Authors)

urban milieu in which it was located.

The rom phenomenon as guerrilla hospitality

The *rom* phenomenon can be described as 'guerrilla hospitality', which has a number of defining characteristics:

1 It is entrepreneurial in flavour and organisation. Its existence relies on the personal investment of the operators who are central to defining its character, and who are able to mobilise networks of advocates in developing the operation and the consumer experience.
2 Guerrilla hospitality requires less formal investment of economic capital than corporately branded and operated venues and is less reliant upon

> the eclecticism and ruinous state of the fixtures and fittings in the *rom* venues … reinforce the bohemian credentials of the owners and operators

formal institutions, such as banks, for financial support.
3 Guerrilla hospitality is often temporary in its manifestation in a particular space, but then may re-emerge elsewhere. In Budapest these venues found an ecological niche in which they could thrive, albeit temporarily. The relationship these venues had with the broader forces of regeneration in the VII district of Budapest meant that their existence in any one location was always going to be limited by the demolition or redevelopment of those buildings.
4 Guerrilla hospitality operations most often occupy buildings that were not hospitality venues previously, although this may not always be the case and it is not a prerequisite. The reuse of unusual premises adds to the novelty and appeal of the venues: it becomes a part of their unique selling point and distinguishes them from other operators on the market.
5 Finally, guerrilla hospitality draws on alternative forms of culture for its appeal and existence, in which inversions define the quality and value of the place. Guerrilla hospitality can, therefore, be

thought of as a cultural and entrepreneurial business model that may emerge, in various guises, in other urban contexts. Consequently, the challenge for future research is to examine how particular characteristics of guerrilla hospitality are evident or may be mobilised in other operations.

Conclusion

Some elements of the *rom* phenomenon may be unique to the context in which it emerged. The VII district of Budapest is going through an intensive period of rehabilitation, which has allowed these entrepreneurial operators to occupy these premises. Furthermore, the Hungarian licensing system may be unique in allowing dilapidated buildings to be occupied and reused for such commercial purposes. Nevertheless, cultural entrepreneurs and networks of creative individuals have established communities in numerous run-down city districts.[15]

Hospitality plays a significant role in the establishment of these networks—even if it is considered a set of ancillary activities or services that support these fragmented communities. However, the *rom* venues are more than supporting services: they have become cultural focal points and attractions in their own right.

It may therefore be useful to consider how hospitality venues in other contexts may act both as symbolic focal points for members of the creative industries and as centres of creative output. McCleary et al have pointed to the potential relationship between art and hospitality, but their analysis is limited to examining how support of the arts by restaurants will enhance their image among those 'high on the demographic scale.'[16] This article has suggested that it is equally important to think about the relationship between subversive forms of art among a more diverse group of consumers. There is no doubt that the role of art extends to the physical design, the operational policies and to the consumer experience.

This article has also highlighted the role of space and the physical design in creating the consumer experience. The role of the servicescape in creating the brand image and consumption experience is well recognised, and sensitivity towards the relationship between the physical environment and hospitality

operation is evident.[17] However, the *rom* venues and the notion of guerrilla hospitality connect the microspaces of the venues with the built environment or the urban fabric of the districts in which they are located. The consumer experience within these venues is intimately linked with the surrounding urban milieu. There is a need therefore to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the physical landscape, discourses of city living and the operational policies of hospitality venues that thrive in particular urban locations.

Finally, we need to extend the study of hospitality and hospitality management through a critical appraisal of how cultural, physical and social forces and agencies interact to produce hybrid forms of hospitality. This adds weight to the growing calls for hospitality management research to move beyond a narrow focus on such issues as service quality to consider how broader sets of factors interact to form hospitality spaces and hospitable experiences.[18]

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