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A PLACE FOR ALL WHO WANT TO KNOW WHAT 'NESIPARINK' MEANS

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2 Urban Renewal: On a Razor's Edge

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A social experiment in one of Budapest's most deprived areas is breaking new ground with its goals, its philosophy, and its methods.

A 15-year project is just getting under way in the neighborhood of Magdolna, part of the Jozsefvaros district of Budapest. If it works, this approach could change civic policy toward urban ghettos nationwide.

"No, I haven't heard of it yet, but come on in, let's look around together," says Margit, a woman I approached on Lujza Street. She invites me inside the two-floor, eight-apartment building where she lives. "So where would you start the renovation here?" asks the 40-ish mother of three, making a dramatic gesture. We're standing in the dilapidated entryway amid the stink of urine, the unusable gate behind us and the broken concrete of the courtyard in front of us. In the yard, half covered with trash and junk, children are playing with two dogs in the October sunshine. Most of the plaster has gone from the exterior and courtyard facade, revealing barren bricks; the staircase is crumbling. Margit and her family live on the ground floor, seven of them in a damp one-room flat with wet walls and no facilities [tenants use communal toilets and bathrooms in the corridor]. When she sees that her rhetorical question is taken seriously, the two of us start listing the needs. It takes just a moment for another six or eight people to join the discussion. We finally agree that dampness in the walls is the most urgent problem for the ground-floor tenants, while those on the first floor cite fixing the roof and the staircase as the most important tasks.

"What do you mean, we are supposed to help, too?" a stout man asks indignantly, leaning over the first-floor railing. "Isn't the local council going to do this renovation? Anyone who thinks we're paying the rent so that we can paint the walls should come here and tell it to my face!" He's clearly not in favor of the renewal project's experimental work-sharing methods. His door closes with a bang; the journalist, unfamiliar with social work, tries to explain the point of the project to the rest of the residents. He doesn't have much luck, and soon only Margit and another woman are left. The two women listen to me in silence, visibly doubtful when I explain that the project calls for residents to be involved in planning as well as reconstruction work. "You know," Margit concludes, "if the people from the local

authority really would come here and ask us what we'd like, just as you did, then maybe we would try to think about how we can help." The designers of this urban and social rehabilitation project, meant to run until 2020, know very well that success depends on choosing the right partners – the right groups of local residents – at the outset. The 820 million forints [\$4 million] allocated for the project (700 million forints from Budapest city hall, the remainder from the Jozsefvaros council) will cover only partial renovation jobs on a few buildings. What really matters now is not the number of renovated staircases, roofs, courtyards, or gates (or even the new community center in a disused glove factory on Matyas Square that is also covered under the budget allocation), but whether the new model proves viable, whether it can get local people and local authorities to cooperate, whether word of the project spreads, and whether others find it attractive.

Unlike the Corvin Promenade Project (an earlier renewal scheme in another poor part of Jozsefvaros), where the construction forced the relocation of many inhabitants, the aim of the current project in the area known as the Magdolna quarter is for the current 12,000 or so residents to remain as housing and infrastructure are improved around them. Until a few years ago, urban renewal in Jozsefvaros meant only repairs and renovations to those buildings the local council deemed worthy. These interventions frequently proved counterproductive. "Privatization pressure" was often at work, even in the selection of buildings to be renovated: those who could afford to bought their rented apartments in such buildings, and those who couldn't were gradually forced to move, leading to increased social and ethnic segregation in the area. Lighter repairs, on the other hand, proved a waste of money because residents had little sense of communal propriety, and the gates, entry phones, or staircases selected for renovation over the residents' heads were soon in disrepair again.

The solution could only be a change of heart: on the one hand, it had to be recognized that without consulting and involving the people living there, long-term results could not be achieved; on the other, it had to be acknowledged that it is pointless to renovate buildings when the problem is far more complex. After decades of deprivation that had only worsened in the past few years, Magdolna became the largest poor section of Jozsefvaros, itself a poverty-stricken section of Budapest. This past spring, 1,700 families living in the district received state housing support, one-quarter of them in Magdolna. The 13-block area did not grow organically: its boundaries were artificially drawn according to urbanistic criteria, turning it into one of the 11 "quarters" of Jozsefvaros a few years ago. Our experience, however, shows that local people are happy to have received a name, which – somewhat unexpectedly – has clearly helped nurture a sense of local identity, despite that the quarter embodies many of the problems a decayed inner city usually faces: deep poverty, high unemployment coupled with low education, poor living conditions, decaying public services, and poor public safety. Ethnic segregation has ensured that Roma make up a visibly high proportion of the population, though there has been no reliable study on the matter.

The Magdolna experiment's goal is to improve living conditions for local people. Complete renovation is out of the question, so the specific jobs to be done will be decided upon in cooperation with tenants. The more the residents are willing to participate in the work, the

more support they can expect from the authorities. Potential conflicts will be mediated by social workers contracted to the project developer, a non-profit company administered by the Jozsefvaros and Budapest councils.

The company, Jozsefvaros Renewal and Urban Development, Inc., (known as Rev8), targets the quarter's single elementary school for special attention. The school in Erdelyi Street is attended almost exclusively by youngsters from Romani families. Partly for reasons of desegregation, the school is to be merged with another, mostly non-Roma school and, starting in the autumn of 2006, the children are set to begin a special teaching program at the Erdelyi Street school.

Many unknowns lie ahead for this complex undertaking. Its authors are well aware of this. One of its founding fathers and chief boosters worries that the experimental project is a double-edged sword. Jozsefvaros council member Gyorgy Molnar, a mathematical economist by profession, says that getting the broad support and financial backing of both the Budapest city hall and the local councils was a major success. But he fears that Magdolna's fall into ghetto status will be very hard to reverse, and says that the huge and immediate expectations of the project voiced by local people and politicians alike pose a special danger. It will be at least five years before the community sees the first signs of change, he thinks.

Rev8 also developed the Corvin Promenade project, and company managers say the Magdolna project is benefiting from the experience gained on the earlier urban-renewal scheme.

"One of the key issues" in the Corvin project "was to survey the real needs of residents and to provide them with apartments that are in accordance with these needs. We also learnt to talk to people and to accept them," says Rev8 director Gyorgy Alfoldi.

It's of course yet to be seen how much these experiences will help, and who's going to be the tenant leader in such buildings as that one-floor, extremely dilapidated, three-apartment building, where no matter how we tried we could not see eye to eye with any of the tenants. The Romani family with many children was mistrustful, and the elderly, prostrate lady and the two ill, physically and mentally unsteady people occupying the third apartment didn't understand anything. "There'll probably be buildings where we won't succeed," admits Csilla Sarkany, a sociologist who heads Rev8's public-services program.

Still, construction specialists say, simply breaking up the concrete in some building courtyards, thus increasing evaporation and helping dry out flats on the ground floor, could translate into a simple success story. Some of the more extravagant requests of the cooperating tenants, though, could prove a harder nut for Rev8 to crack. "We've been asking them for years to paint the staircase gold and the corridor that nice shade of pink," says Eva from the second floor of a building in Szerdahelyi Street, without the slightest sense of irony. "We went down to Matyas Square the other day for the ceremony," she said, laid on by Rev8 and the local council to kick off the project. "I didn't dare to bring this up there, but there are other people in this building who'd like that, too." She then earnestly describes how the facade would look if it were up to her: "A violet shade with some pattern, that would be

nice." If Rev8 director Alföldi meant it when he said the company would not force its ideas on anyone, some interesting sights might yet appear in Józsefváros' streets. Indeed, solving conflicts over residents' desires may prove the real test of the project leaders' abilities.

The head of the Józsefváros Family Help Center also appreciates the lessons learnt from the Corvin Promenade scheme. As Ildiko Darok told the weekly Magyar Narancs, family counselors have for some time been involved in passing local laws making it more difficult for unfortunate situations to arise, such as the incident a few years ago when the district saw a mass eviction of residents thanks to a poorly drafted decree. Darok says it is necessary, although very difficult, to accept the deviant behavior of locals: without acceptance, there is no way to do successful social work. In her experience, there is little point trying to change the behavior of adults, and she doesn't expect to see real change until the second or third generation after communism. Schools are crucial to the process, she says, noting that the stimulus-free life of district children is "staggering." "A ghetto doesn't just mean that nobody comes in here, but also that the residents don't go out," local councilman Molnár says, adding what he heard from the principal of the school on Erdélyi Street: many of the first-graders there have never seen the Danube.

Despite their bad reputation, the Magdolna quarter and central Józsefváros are well liked by many. People here are on more informal terms with one another, and despite the misery and decay, the public places in the area have retained some old Budapest charm. This atmosphere, however, vanishes as soon as you enter a building. "They can say anything, renovate this or renovate that, but the truth is that if you're not out of your mind, you want to leave," says a middle-aged man with a bag in his hand. "Come on, nobody is going anywhere, we're gonna rot in this building," his partner corrects him from the doorstep. "But put it in your paper, please," she adds, "that I wouldn't leave, even if I could. It'd just be nicer to see more color in the street, and happier people."

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Translated by Judit Szakacs.