

# Chapter 15

## Governing the Transformation of the Built Environment in Post-socialist Bratislava

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**Abstract** The paper focuses on the fate of a former industrial area in Bratislava, the former Kablo plant, where a new central business district (CBD) will be built. Particular attention is paid to the conflict over the preservation of some historic structures on the site, and the role the local government played in efforts to preserve them. First, however, structural forces responsible for the creation of particular patterns of rational landscapes are analysed. These were transformed dramatically during the last century as was the relative location and the functional significance of the location of the Kablo factory within the city and beyond. In the case of Kablo, the local government played a threefold role. First, it was the co-creator of a discourse where the locality was given a new identity and steps to redevelop the site legitimised. Second, its (non)action in both town planning and in listing the heritage buildings allowed the investor to demolish the buildings on the site, despite a lack of permission and a belated attempt on the part of the city to preserve some of the most historic structure, and to excuse its later actions. Thirdly, higher institutions at the regional level did not effectively apply sanctions for the demolition. One can argue that the redevelopment of the site was due to the obsolescence of the buildings on it, and the rise in value of the underlying property – in effect, the penetration of global capitalism into the local economy. However, the failure of local government to protect the site also reflects its relative inexperience with developers, divided public opinion on the value of preserving the fabric of the plant, and unequal relations between relatively sophisticated developers and a relatively young city government.

**Keywords** Urban redevelopment • Management of redevelopment • Public-private projects • Historic preservation

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## Introduction

This paper briefly discusses the failed attempt by the city of Bratislava to preserve a fragment of a former industrial concern, Kablo, located on the edge of the central part of the city of Bratislava. Developed in the nineteenth century, the factory was finally closed after the collapse of the communist rule in 1990. The territory of the factory was purchased by developers who planned to construct new offices on the site, taking advantage of its proximity to the city centre, as well as the increased demand for offices after Slovakia regained its independence in 1993.

With under 500,000 inhabitants and just over 600,000 in the metropolitan area, Bratislava is a relatively small city by European standards. However, it encapsulates a variety of problems which face all cities in Europe and elsewhere. The first is one of governance. Democracy and self-government are relatively recent innovations in Bratislava, as they are throughout Central Europe. The failure of the city to list historic buildings and monuments in a timely manner reflects the relative inexperience of those in the government, contrasted with the relatively sophisticated background of many investors. In addition, like many other cities in Central-Eastern Europe, Bratislava faced a perfect storm after the collapse of the communist rule. Industry, which was favoured under communism, was revealed to be outdated and uncompetitive. Industrial infrastructure was worn out and obsolete, and the capital needed to modernise factories was not available. Western Europe was going through a process of deindustrialisation, and Slovakia followed a similar path, but with much greater speed. The rise of the capitalist economy revealed that many industrial firms were unprofitable, quickening change. Alongside this, new sectors of the economy came into being, particularly those related to finance, insurance, and real estate. The rise of this sector, alongside with Bratislava's transformation into a national capital, generated numerous demands for renewal and redevelopment. And, as has been noted by Bertaud and Reynaud (1995), under these new conditions, locations, particularly central locations, acquired value as the bid rent curve, invisible under socialism, reasserted itself. Many would argue that one of the roles of the government is to stand up for the "public" against the private sector and to defend the public well-being against market forces – stepping in if there is a market failure, to ensure that the benefits of investment are evenly distributed and to put the general good above individual benefits. Local government draws up the local plan and enforces it and, more broadly, sets rules which it then defends. At the same time, local governments face a conflicting alternative: the need to attract investment, jobs, tax revenues, and economic development for their residents. It is difficult to balance these two imperatives, particularly in relatively young democracies, where government decision makers and administrators have relatively little experience. In addition, Bratislava and Slovakia were (and still are) relatively less well off when compared with neighbouring Vienna and Austria. There was a very real fear that foreign investors would remake the city to suit themselves, regardless of the needs, demands, or tastes of local residents. At one point, it was even suggested that Bratislava could become a suburb of Vienna, the location of inexpensive homes on

just across the Austrian border. This debate is not unique to Bratislava. In 2012, it was estimated that 60 % of dwelling purchases in central London were made by non-residents from overseas and that, as a result, London dwelling prices were increasing even as prices were falling elsewhere in the United Kingdom (Hammond 2011, 2012; Thomas 2011). The contexts in which decisions are made to favour or restrict development are also important. In 1989, Bratislava's environment was distressed, buildings in disrepair and industry outdated and badly located. The city needed money to repair and improve sewer and water systems; repair buildings, pavements, and street lighting; and rebuild the local transport system. However, central government was reducing, not increasing, grants, forcing the city, like other cities in the region, to fall back on its own limited resources. A pro-development policy encouraged investment from the private sector to make good local government shortfalls, and at the same time, new investment increased tax revenues to the city. The discussion about development was taking place against a drive to "modernise" – to rebuild damaged areas of the city and damaged buildings, to rebuild and replace old industry, and to make the city more "European". The argument was made that the city's image needed to change. It needed to be more modern and European to compete with neighbouring centres like Prague and Budapest and to attract international investors. This drive is reflected in the style of many of the new projects in Bratislava's city centre. Local government failed to protect the city's historic legacy, but this is no different from debates going on elsewhere, for example, at Kings Cross in London, where initial redevelopment proposals made in 1989 proposed demolishing historic industrial buildings on the site. Local public opinion opposed this and gained the support of the local government and also national institutions like English Heritage (e.g. English Heritage 2012), leading to new plans which preserved a significant amount of historic structures.

## **Kablo and Bratislava**

Between 18 November 2007 and 12 January 2008, the buildings and structures of a former industrial area near the centre of Bratislava known as Kablo were torn down. It was the moment when the industrial past retreated from the wider city centre of Bratislava (the capital of the Slovak Republic) and gave way to a truly post-industrial form of development represented by a 600 million euro investment in order to regenerate a part of the future central business district (see Fig. 15.1). However, two of the destroyed buildings, Feigler's heating plant and a brick chimney, were supposed to appear on the cultural heritage list and thus receive legal protection.

Like many other post-socialist cities, Bratislava has experienced a dramatic construction boom during the last decade. Redevelopment and the transformation of the built environment are not usually uncontested. Often, distinctive ideas, proposals, plans, and interests encounter and compete with each other. Thus, the way these building projects are actually realised can shed light on the composition of governance



**Fig. 15.1** The past and the future of the Kablo area

and on the actual power relations and positionality of the actors involved. This can help us evaluate the quality of local government and investigate the level of local democracy within the area.

The story of the place is framed by the concepts of the now classical theory of urban transformation under capitalism which, in general, can be applied in conditions of post-socialist transformations. Therefore, another level of contextualisation is provided by the transformations of post-socialist states which embraced both

governance and the transformation of the built environment. Post-socialist transformations can be seen as a radical change – “[a] revolution in temporal and spatial relations [that] often entails not only the destruction of ways of life and social practices built around preceding time-space systems, but the ‘creative destruction’ of a wide range of physical assets embedded in the landscape” (Harvey 1997, 266). The question is: how is the structural logic of creative destruction articulated in the political praxis of post-socialist Bratislava? Although only one case is presented here, it is by no means unique within the contemporary urban development of Bratislava. On the contrary, the buildings of Kablo share the fate of many other relicts of the area’s industrial revolution. Many parks, plazas, promenades, vineyards, etc., had to give way to new forms and functions which fit more properly into the “bright future of the city”.

## Capitalism and the Transformation of the Built Environment

Capitalism represents a form of economic and social organisation which, despite multiple manifestations or the coexistence of various forms, can be defined by the imperative of the accumulation of capital through its circulation. A characteristic of capitalism is its dynamic flexibility and capacity to transform itself. On the one hand, this is a consequence of its response to changing external conditions and, on the other, of a continuous search for profits and expansion. Concepts, such as post-Fordism (see, e.g. Amin 1994), flexible accumulation (Harvey 1989), or disorganised capitalism (Lash and Urry 1987), are among those used in connection with current transformations of capitalism on the global level.

The fundamental inevitability of capitalist transformations, along with the spatial reorganisation of production, directly impacts on a particular urban space. The built environment is subject to continuous change that places it in the centre of a contradiction inherent in the accumulation of capital, when its circulation produces a durable physical structure which simultaneously limits its subsequent circulation, effectively turning a mobile asset into a fixed one (Smith 2000).

To understand the conflicts which stem from the transformation and regeneration of the built environment, the concept of the dual interpretation of value, namely, exchange value and use value, is indispensable. The briefest characterisation of exchange value is that it is the value for which a commodity can be exchanged for other commodities. According to Harvey (2006), there are several features, contradictions, and consequences in the context of the built environment as a spatially fixed commodity: circulation of capital dynamically fluctuates through the built environment. At particular moments of circulation, elements of the built landscape are devalued, abandoned, destroyed, and selectively reconstructed. Property is commodified: investments in real estate create commodities that become scarce in conjunction with a unique location; capital investments are immobilised in real estate, and the long period of turnover constitutes a barrier to further accumulation; real estate is characterised by poor liquidity and sensitivity to ageing.

The capacity of the built environment to bring returns (rent) depends on changes in the values of two different elements: improvements or buildings on the land (or the level of obsolescence) and the location in space. Locational rent is a contextually dependent variable. The value can rise or fall depending on externalities caused by the location of other elements. This means that proximity and/or the remoteness of other activities and amenities are important. The moment a building is completed, the loss of its value due to depreciation begins. The ageing process can be decelerated by intentional decisions to invest in restoration and upgrading, or on the contrary, ageing and decay can be accelerated (Harvey 2006; Weber 2002).

The general process in which waves of investment and devaluation destroy existing values and prepare opportunities for new rounds of investment has been described as a form of creative destruction. In the context of these processes, Harvey (1989, 2006) described the production of what he referred to as a “rational landscape” formed by a series of investments which answer the needs of circulation and accumulation of a particular time, which then remain “materialised” in a given place. The rational landscape of the past represents a barrier to future development. This contradiction is overcome by the process of creative destruction which destroys the old so that it can be replaced by the new. Yet as Weber (2002) asserts, this is not exclusively a process determined purely by market forces; extraction of a place’s value on different levels is determined by a wide range of governmental and other (nonmarket) actors.

The interpretation of value in terms of utility touches on the limitations of the market. This relational quality differs depending on the different actors in the transformation of the built environment and is an important attribute of use value. Real estate contains a use value defined in different ways for a developer, an owner, a governmental institution, or for the people of a place with no property relations to it. Logan and Molotch (1987) expand the definition of use value of a place for its inhabitants. They insist on the inseparability of the material use from the psychological use, where “the daily round that makes physical survival possible takes on emotional meanings through that very capacity to fulfil life’s crucial goals” (Logan and Molotch 1987, 20).

In practice, the cohesion of specific value systems within which particular social groups pursue their own interest is manifested along a spectrum ranging from unfettered development at one end, favouring unlimited growth, through efforts to regulate it in varying degrees in the middle, and to efforts at total preservation at the opposite end (Kong 2003). As McManus (2000, 107) wrote, “Decisions to conserve, how to conserve, what to conserve, when to conserve, and so on, are political decisions that represent value-judgments”. The outcome of those decisions constructs the identity of the place. The role of local policy here seems crucial.

Examining this process should be the subject of empirical research. Not all the transformations of the built environment taking place in Bratislava are perceived as positive or unproblematic (Ira 2003), and there is debate about the positive aspects of most developments and about the benefits and costs. This can be seen in an attempt to assess the role played by local politics in one particular case of “struggle”, to conserve the historic heritage represented by the buildings of the former

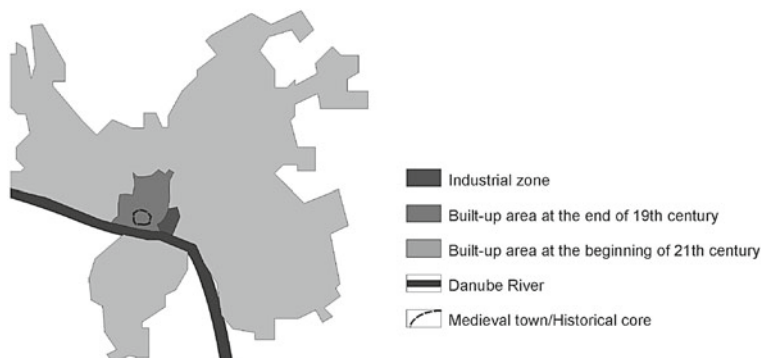


industrial compound Kablo (the Feigler heating plant and the chimney). During the course of this struggle, local policy was represented by a number of specialised institutions on different hierarchic levels with complicated mutual relations. Here, they are sketched in rough outlines in direct relation to the case presented. First, however, a brief outline of the main changes producing the condition for “creative destruction” is presented.

## The Century of Transformations

The Staré Mesto urban district of Bratislava is located between Mlynské Nivy Street and the Danube River. This was an important industrial zone in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of extremely rapid industrialisation in the Hungarian part of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Bratislava of that time was one of the biggest industrial centres within the mostly agricultural kingdom. The area of Kablo located on the periphery of late nineteenth-century Bratislava and adjacent to crucial transport facilities such as a river port and the former main train station was a favourable location for the capital investment which fostered the industrial zone which emerged there.

Yet its original “peripheral” location “changed” its relative position as a result of the immense growth of the city in the course of the twentieth century (Fig. 15.2). In the end, the area found itself on the boundary of modern Bratislava’s city centre. The period of state socialism (1948–1989) affected the Kablo area in several ways. First of all (apart from the city growth that occurred mostly in this period), industrial development (especially of heavy industry) became one of the key goals of the economic and defence policy of socialist Czechoslovakia (Londák 1999). Centrally planned new industrialisation on such a scale could have hardly taken place within the industrial facilities of the early industrial revolution. Flows of industrial investments



**Fig. 15.2** Spatial growth of the city and the location change of the Kablo area within industrial zone during the twentieth century

thus flowed mostly to newly established and much bigger plants on the outskirts of the expanded city. On the other hand, production continued in many viable facilities within the city. Such maintenance of industrial production happened in the case of Kablo, which is why it was not included among listed buildings in the 1980s. In fact, it was in this period that the City Institute of Monument Preservation (MUOP) first attempted to do so. The weak position of institutions advocating a cultural heritage agenda in the wider context of central planning and decision making, however, resulted in an agreement between the Ministries of Economy and Culture not to hinder production in the case of such viable facilities (Obuchová 2009).

It is in the period after the collapse of communism that the contradiction between the then industrial use and the potential value of the area based on potential land use became big enough to enable creative destruction to take place. The material layers of former investments and values were about to be destroyed in order to recreate value in the location. On the other hand, to think of the last 20 years as an unproblematic and unilinear transition towards inevitable ends would be misleading. To the contrary, spatio-temporal variations in development trajectories across the spaces of post-socialism showed the processes of these transformations to be open ended and complicated, with contradictory processes of interplay among many different social actors, operating on different scales and pursuing distinct strategies with path-dependent and path-shaping aspects (Drahokoupil 2007; Smith and Pickles 1998).

Apart from the structural changes analysed below, one particular factor affected the city's development – the formation of the newly independent state of the Slovak Republic, with Bratislava as its capital. New conditions within the national hierarchy of cities and within a new spatial division of labour were set up and shaped (along with other transformations) the future development of Bratislava.

The complexity of the transformation period in Slovakia (and other states in the Visegrád region) is expressed in Drahokoupil's (2008) framework, which consists of three stages, each characterised by distinctive constellations or transformative state projects. The “neoliberal transformational state” was the first stage of post-socialist development in Slovakia. This played a crucial role in introducing the generic conditions of capitalism, represented by the most basic and narrow economic preconditions for a market economy. Emerging in the 1990s, which some might call the heyday of neoliberal hegemony, the transformatory agenda was straightforward. The introduction of market principles through shock therapy would inevitably lead to the development of a range of societal arrangements inherent to all developed societies. Along with this agenda, the processes of fundamental reorientation towards the Western countries and integration into the global political economy started.

This initial stage, however, was soon followed by several distinctive pathways across the Central-Eastern European region during the early and mid-1990s. In Slovakia, this period is often referred to as Mečiarism (after the Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, in office 1993–1998). It was characterised by several complementary policies. In the sphere of economic policy, it was “nationalism with economic means” which hindered full integration into the global economy (Drahokoupil 2008, 39). Accompanied by a strongly centralised national administration, this



meant anything but the creation of conditions for capital accumulation through local redevelopment. In fact, as Buček and Pitoňák (1997) observed, an initial invasion by the financial sector played an almost exclusive role in the transformation of the built environment in Bratislava's city centre at that time, as banking and financial services moved into the city centre. This was quite a different picture from that of Budapest in the early 1990s, painted by Smith (1996), depicting the vivid atmosphere of a place which was much more "mature" and well integrated into the global political economy.

The current stage of the post-socialist transformation, leading towards a "Porterian workfare regime", is comparable (to a certain extent) with the "competition state" in advanced capitalist countries (Jessop 2002). "The underlying aim of state intervention has become managing the insertion of the local/national economy into the flows of global capitalism. Other social and economic policies were (to different extents) subordinated or integrated into the competitiveness agenda" (Drahokoupil 2008, 46). The logic behind this is to enhance the economic base of a locality by attracting foreign (and domestic) capital with subsequent attempts to embed the investment into the local economy. Along with reforms and the encouragement of foreign direct investments (FDI), a rescaling of the functions of the nation state takes place. Despite the fact that formal decentralisation (downscaling) of the state started immediately after the change of 1989, it was not before the late 1990s that the rhetoric of local autonomy was accompanied with corresponding political and economic powers and responsibilities (Buček 2006; KPMG 2004).

The conditions essential for the process of creative destruction, represented by the introduction of market principles, the resurgence of private property, and the emergence of place-exchange value – that is, land values based on location – were established in the first stage of post-socialist transformation. However, it is the third stage of the "mature" and globally integrated capitalist political economy of both the Slovak state and the city of Bratislava that enabled the process to be realised. Advancing the political and economic transformation of the city, region, and country in conjunction with the growing importance of the city led to an increase in development and an increase in land value. This has resulted in increased pressure on the urban fabric and structures and an unprecedented interest in investment and income generation through urban redevelopment. For example, office floor space within the city doubled during the last decade. Although investors do not necessarily rely on foreign or global capital, the demand for space offered by the planned projects is, to a large extent, a result of integration at the global scale.

Another aspect of post-socialist politics is the actual fulfilment of promises of democracy, transparency, and participation – the emblems of the changes of 1989. Some consider the creation of basic conditions for capital accumulation a sufficient condition, inevitably leading to the development of a mature civil society. However, one of the results of such a one-sided emphasis on the economic aspects of transition is the continuing democratic deficit. Planning is one of the instruments regulating activities within the city and integrating different views and value systems. However, due to the absence of planning skills in the official public boards and a generally shared scepticism towards the planning process, which was entirely compromised

during state socialism, regulations regarding private investment have been weak, and the idea of the so-called invisible hand has become the best and only locational arbiter (Altrock et al. 2006). This can be documented, for example, by the long-term absence of a city master plan, and the only recently re-established position of the main city architect, who has only an advisory role, and the lack of legal norms and institutions to enforce adherence to agreed regulations (e.g. building inspectors).

Effective public participation in decision making and planning was very weak, as can be seen in the development of the city of Bratislava master plan, among many other policy and strategy documents (Huba and Trubíniová 2009; Huba 2007; Kvasnicová 2009). Conflicts in other situations in Bratislava (see, e.g. Buček 2006) were characterised by the unrecognised or the under-recognised role of non-statutory actors, to links between local politics, politicians, and businesses and to problems of civic participation in urban development in Slovakia generally (Strussová and Petříková 2009).

It is ironic that urban environmental issues which once played a significant part in civic society and public participation in Bratislava, even during the era of state socialism (see, e.g. Huba *et al.* 2008), have so quickly become regarded as unimportant. The enthusiasm related to expectations from a new “democratic” government (at all levels), its expected sensitivity towards environmental issues, and its acceptance of public nongovernmental voices were soon replaced by disappointment (Podoba 1998; Snajdr 2008).

## The End of Kablo

In spite of continuous efforts by the City Institute of Monument Preservation (MUOP) to gain legal protection for the Kablo buildings, a completely new image of the place’s future started to emerge. Comments by the then Mayor, Andrej Ďurkovský, emphasised the vision of a “white” Bratislava (as a commercial and administrative centre void of industry) with a new CBD, and industrial production crowded out. This was part of this process of change (for instance, Trend 2004, 20 July). The shape and scope of investment plans also helped to form a new identity for the location. A place once associated with names like Kablo, Gumon, Cvernovka, or BAZ (names referring to industrial production) was gradually been renamed Twin City, Apollo Business Center, City Business Center, Eurovea, or Bratislava Business Center. In the case of Twin City, investments of over one half billion euros “towering high above the present city” dramatically signalled the change. The area was a peripheral zone at the time of its initial development, but since then it has been swallowed up by the growing city and later by its expanding centre. These changes are reflected in the increasing value of the land. However, despite its relative centrality, access to adjacent areas in the city centre, and to the broader city region, is poor. Road access is particularly bad, which has made it less suitable for the kinds of heavy industry which were once located there. As long as the area was dominated by industry, its locational value was obscured. Now, with the collapse of traditional

industry and the rise of a capitalist economy, centrality has become more important, and land values have risen, encouraging sweeping land use changes and physical redevelopment of the area.

The owner of the site, Twin City Shareholding Company, acquired the plot of the Kablo area by a purchase contract dated 18 June 2006. According to the architectural projections of the Twin City project (Chudík et al. 2007) produced by the investor HB Reavis, the project worth 570 million euro did not include conservation of the existing buildings. The exchange value of the buildings had dramatically decreased (unlike the land beneath them) and represented a threefold cost burden: their value was not only shrinking, but the developers would have to cope with the costs of conservation and be faced with lower returns because of this conservation. Conservation would be more expensive than new build, and lettable space in the restored buildings would be significantly lower than that in new construction. Hearings and negotiations at the office of construction of the urban district Bratislava – Staré Mesto – about allowing the removal of the buildings from the Kablo area took place from February 2007. By the beginning of June 2007, the investor acquired the permit needed to pull down all structures with the exception of plot No. 9095/7 (the site of the Feigler's heating plant and the chimney). In spite of the survey carried out in the area and in spite of its well-known historic value, the Regional Monuments Board approved the demolition of individual buildings. In such a situation, the municipal office of construction had no choice but to issue the permit. The exception included the brick chimney with adjacent buildings, as they were to be entered into the list of cultural heritage, and because that process had already started, a demolition permit was not given for them. The investor, however, pulled down the chimney and the halls between 18 November 2007 and 12 January 2008. Subsequently, the urban district of Bratislava, Staré Mesto, and its office of construction levied a fine on Twin City amounting to one million Sk (about 30,000 euro). The fine, however, was declared null and void in March 2008 by a resolution of the regional office of construction, based within the larger political region (kraj) within which Bratislava city is located.

## Conclusion

Any societal arrangement, not just capitalism, has to produce its own spaces, a rational landscape of its own, responding to the particular needs of that particular society. The inherent contradiction of the production of space based on societal dynamics is overcome by the geographically uneven processes of creative destruction. In the case presented here, during the era of state socialism, both the industrial use and the architectural forms of the Kablo area were preserved, although the latter occurred rather accidentally.

Post-socialist political and economic changes led to the formation of the conditions for creative (and destructive) transformations of the place (Sýkora 2009). Therefore, two intertwined levels of creative destruction affected the Kablo area.

First, the complex post-socialist transformations caused a dramatic restructuring of the economic base. After the collapse of state socialism, industrial production, once the leading sector of the economy, lost its importance generally. Gradually, integration into the global capitalist political economy, along with the changing positionality of both the new Slovak state and the city of Bratislava, favoured new and distinctive ways for the accumulation of capital and the creation of value – in both financial and nonfinancial terms – in places. Thus, various “physical assets embedded in the landscape” came under pressure for redevelopment. Moreover, as can be seen in the case of Kablo, despite high expectations, promises of more inclusive decision-making processes have not been fulfilled.

There were three issues related to the Kablo site. The first was the creation of a new image for the area, through an interactive discourse between developers, politicians, local government administrators, and the general public. The second was the failure of the local government to act quickly to list the historic buildings on the site and to monitor and control the development process. The third was the failure of higher levels of administration to support the local government in its efforts to preserve heritage and manage the built environment. Local politics played a role here because its official responsibilities include acting as an arbiter, representing the public interest and values not associated with direct economic profit. It should help to solve conflicts by creating legal and institutional frameworks.

Several manifestations of local politics and the involvement of government in the politics of built environment change were identified in this case. One was the creation of a genuine discourse between local government and developers, where the new identity of the Kablo site and the surrounding area was discussed and agreed on, and subsequent steps in the development process laid out to the satisfaction of both parties. The second was that the failure to act in both the planning realm and in listing the heritage buildings helped the investor to justify its later actions. A third was that responsible institutions also failed to act effectively in applying sanctions. Although the investigated case illustrates only the rough outlines of these issues, it can serve as a starting point for further investigation. The aim of such investigation should be the detailed detection of the relationships between individual institutions and hierarchies of local politics.

**Acknowledgements** The study was supported by the project VEGA, No. 2/0035/15 of the Slovak Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and Slovak Academy of Sciences.

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