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Archaeologists from the Future: the *Billennium* in Budapest

Tamás Jászay

Uninvited Guests (UK): *Billennium*. Placcc Festival, Budapest, 2-4 June 2022.

Everything depends on the location: that is how to sum up the lessons learned from the Budapest-version of a theatrical guided tour entitled *Billennium*, created on the spot in June 2022 by Bristol-based company Uninvited Guests. The future-oriented tour, created by artists and audiences using AR technology, was memorable for those who participated actively in this collaborative game.

Let us begin with the location! Hungary, Budapest, District XV, Rákospalota, Pestújhely, and Újpalota. The location seems ideal for a project like this with a wide variety of landmarks and personal and common history. Tiny family houses reminiscent of the small settlements of the Hungarian countryside are within sight and reach, alongside the bleak four-storey apartment blocks of 1960s-1970s Soviet-style architecture. The neo-Romanesque Catholic church, built in 1909, is just a stone's throw away, as is the memorial and statue park dedicated in 2012 to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution against Soviet rule. In the background is the largest football stadium in District XV, with a capacity of 7,500 spectators.

Trams and buses regularly appear nearby, and car traffic is constant. It is a livable, basically friendly, yet somewhat characterless area. Getting there from the city centre is not impossible: a train leaves

every half hour from the Nyugati railway station, taking you to Istvántelek station in ten minutes, then another ten minutes walk through the well-kept villas and houses, and you are at an empty spot at Nr 1. Epres Row, which is the starting point for the project.

The playful, witty, participatory form of *Billennium* is to some extent deceptive to the naive viewer. The fact that, after sketching out scenarios that feed off local and global events and creative imagination, participants can share and discuss their own ideas is ideally more than just a game. Similar undertakings are now part of the urban planning process: it is quite different to sit behind a desk and plan the future of a place than to probe its inhabitants with gaming tools and let them tell you what they need. Local people can talk about what institutions and services are missing, or what could be improved. Areas under development are ideal places for this sort of reflection, and the game also strengthens the bond between locals and their neighbourhoods.

A direct precursor to the Budapest version of *Billennium* in June 2022 was the organisation of a participatory theatre workshop in April 2022 at the future site, entitled '*Possible Futures*', inviting local residents. Uninvited Guests' directors Paul Clarke and Jessica Hoffmann said during

the workshop that the genre of ‘speculative fiction’ elevates us out of the everyday and forces us to reflect on the present. In their experience, the futures that emerge from similar workshops take two extreme directions: collective thinking moves towards utopia or dystopia.

At the Budapest workshop, we were sent on a twenty-minute walk with our mobile phones in hand. We could go anywhere, pick any close landmark, building, street, or group of houses. During the time alone with the mobile phone, we had to think and write down our vision for the future of a well-defined part of District XV in a year we had chosen.

All the participants stayed close in time: we were thinking ahead to the next two or three decades. Which is not too rosy: climate change and wars are having a devastating effect on the imagined micro-community. However, human ingenuity can be relied upon: in the second half of the 2040s, our team expects to see the spread of underground construction, as there will be little to live on above ground. Sadly, humans as social beings will cease to exist: small communities will struggle to survive. According to the participants, around 2050, the great war will end, temperatures will be pleasant, around 21 degrees Celsius, and people will realise what they forgot around 2020: the power of nature must be used, not exploited. The locally-born scenario ended with a happy ending, with spectacular results from the ‘rewilding’ of the urban environment.

The workshop was a brainstorming and pre-study for the *Billennium*. In Hungary, if dealing with history, performing artists are fascinated by the traumatic events of the past that can be used as dramatic material, and the anomalies of the narrowly

understood present. I can hardly recall a performance in which the stakes are the future imagined by the participants. Talking about the future is always a strong reflection on the present, thinking about what we need to do now to make the future as we imagine it. Many artists are concerned with the future, such as visual artists, designers, game designers, musicians, writers, etc. Somehow, theatre moves slower.

Back to *Billennium*: its first version was created in 2013: the project *Give Me Back My Broken Night* allowed participants to imagine the future of abandoned buildings together. Walking together, using mobile devices, and soundscapes were all part of the undertaking even then. Back then, portable projectors were presenting the possible future: AR technology has since emerged. Augmented Reality technology overlays digital content onto the real world, enhancing the user’s perception of their surroundings. By utilising cameras, sensors, and advanced algorithms, AR devices detect and track physical objects, allowing virtual elements to interact seamlessly with the environment. Users can experience AR through smartphones, smart glasses, or headsets, creating immersive and interactive experiences that blend the physical and digital realms.

In *Billennium* everyone uses their own device, opening up more space for individual ideas.

General patterns can be identified in the ideas that emerge. Some people want more green space and more nature, while others come up with imaginative, futuristic, often crazy ideas. As we move into the 2020s, the artists say, people are envisioning more environmentally conscious systems than ever before: according to the

new spectators, wind turbines, solar power, electric vehicles, etc. will define the urban landscape of the near future.

The Budapest edition of the *Billennium* was characterised by a nostalgic future: people here seemed to want the future to be like the past (or at least how they imagined it). Ideally, the project audience should be made up of local residents and decision-makers (e.g. the mayor, city council members, heads of departments at the mayor's office, etc.), as well as experts who work on the development of the area.

The performance is a good mix of personal testimonies and the history of the area. The creators met with urban planners, architects, historians and museologists to gather material, but from the beginning it was important to them that the 'approved' history archived in museums and libraries should be accompanied by private history. This is how we, together, become the archaeologists of the future: the creators confess that the present is just a point in time, and they reconstruct a version of history by means of certain clues.

At the end of May 2022, I was a one-man test audience, and I was part of the audience for two of the nine Budapest performances of *Billennium's* Budapest edition, which took place between 2-4 June 2022. The technique was not yet fully operational at my first test performance, but the outlines of the project were clearly visible. In the fictional framework, tour guides played by actors Lili Bajor and Vince Zrínyi Gál, archaeologists from the future, accompany us on a virtual and real journey of almost an hour.

The opening is strong: informative, detailed, yet entertaining, the introductory text recalls Rákospalota's past from

prehistoric times to the twentieth century and beyond. But it is more than that: what at first glance seems to be a standard tourist brochure is at times twisted, bringing into sharp focus the moments that bound the artists to the site. This is how markets began to operate in what was originally a farmstead, and how the site became an important agricultural centre alongside Pest as it grew into a metropolis. The proximity and/or distance to the capital is a constant theme: the area has retained its (supposed) original atmosphere while merging with the metropolis over the centuries.

The next stage of the walk takes us to 2040: it is a magical experience to see the images of our immediate surroundings, scanned through the screens of the mobile devices we are given, suddenly flicker, becoming transparent and giving way to a meticulously drawn fictional world. Importantly, in eighteen years' time, everything will be fine in Rákospalota; we will see a maglev train, a market selling local products, vertical gardens and a hillside amphitheatre. We walk past the 1956 memorial, of which only the water-covered ruins remain. It is a little further into the future: the remains of the city stand on marshland, the buildings ruined and abandoned. Of course, there are always those who take advantage of the uncertain conditions: profiteers fly overhead in loudly buzzing helicopters to massage salons offering illegal services. (Duncan Speakman's soundscape of locally recorded and produced sounds is an integral part of the show.) Robot dogs of the defunct police force roam wild, gangs of robbers pillage.

Better than that is our present, to which we will return to decide together:

what does the area deserve? What is said is immediately drawn live by animator Sam Steer, so that everything is instantly displayed on our mobile device screens. At first, I was disappointed to see images of much lower quality than the pre-drawn animations he also prepared, which appeared on mobile devices, resembling children's drawings. But then I could accept this: it is part of the playfulness of the project, because it allows us to imagine the future in the same way that children might imagine what will

happen to them and their families in 20 or 30 years' time.

In the brainstorming part of the performances I have seen, past and present are closely intertwined. The local residents would like to see factories that used to be here brought back to life, using environmentally friendly methods of course. But many would also like to reform the building industry by imagining semi-underground housing close to nature. Lots of green spaces, parks and even a lake will colour the future of Rákospalota. So be it.

The original, extended version of this text was prepared as a working document at the request of the Placc Festival and Perform Europe.



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