

Coca-Cola and the Chain Bridge of Budapest

A Multi-Ethnographic Experiment

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This paper presents and analyzes the “encounter” of a multinational corporation, Coca-Cola, and the local environment as a typical example of contemporary cultural processes. It does not directly concern itself with advertising and marketing methods or with the various contemporary strategies of increasing market shares although the case to be analyzed is of interest largely due to these strategies. Advertising, or more precisely the debate that took place in Hungary around a 1996 advertising initiative put forth by Coca-Cola, is only of interest in as much as it provides the setting in which the “global” and the “local” encounter each other. The debate has unequivocally demonstrated that this terrain is full of land mines and approaching it is especially perilous if we imagine ourselves to be witnessing the clash of “good” and “evil”. The text presents the case through the analysis of three relationships based on the following nodal points: a) summary of the main components of the event and of the main views and passions that surfaced in the ensuing controversy; b) the question of the relationship of the urban landscape and identity; and c) the problematic of exerting control over meanings and taste.

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A Christmas Gift

Hungarian television viewers and newspaper readers were informed at the end of September 1996 that the Hungarian subsidiary of the Coca-Cola Company and the Municipal Government of Budapest had concluded an agreement about the festive Christmas decoration of the Chain Bridge, the oldest bridge of the Hungarian capital, built between 1842–49. The news item was immediately followed by a press debate as a result of which the idea came to naught, amidst incomprehension and protest the company abandoned the plan. What exactly took place is difficult to tell because – and this is the nature of the beast – those concerned saw and interpreted events very differently from each other. The story had three protagonists: the Coca-Cola Company, the General Assembly of the capital – more precisely one of its committees – and the public. As opposed to the uniform – though variously interpreted – point of view of Coca-

Cola, a tapestry of differing opinions constituted the points of view of the “capital” and “public opinion”. The fourth main character, the Chain Bridge, only serves as a backdrop, and as such is a passive participant of the story acted out by the three protagonists.

From the point of view of the history and the cityscape of Budapest the Chain Bridge is one of the most significant features of the Hungarian capital.

Historically it is the most important achievement and physical symbol of the liberal national reform movement which charged itself with the creation of modern Hungary. Its building was initiated by Count István Széchenyi (1791–1860), the thinker and politician – who had earned the label “the greatest Hungarian”. Connecting the at the time separate cities of Pest and Buda with a permanent stone bridge did not mean merely creating a link between the two banks of the Danube, but also the joining of Buda, the royal seat which symbolized the past,



Chain Bridge, built in 1842–49. Print by Alt-Sandman.

and Pest, the center of bourgeois transformation. The bridge, built according to the design of the Englishman William T. Clark, and supervised by Adam Clark, also an Englishman,¹ foreshadowed the unification of the two towns in 1872. The Chain Bridge connected the heart of the one time civic town to the Castle Hill of Buda, which had been the seat of Hungarian kings – and at the time of its construction of the Habsburgs who were occupying the Hungarian throne. Thus it is a historical symbol, but it is also a special part of the contemporary urban landscape. Today, when globalization reigns and transmits images of the still existing unique spots of the world a penetrating and typifying force which thus become self-consciously unique in the face of globalization. Thus the Chain Bridge and its environs is perhaps the most important such symbolic image of Budapest. The Buda side and the Castle Hill looming behind it and the building of the Royal Palace on top, as well as the spectacle of the bridge at night with its robust abutments in the flood-

lights, the slim arcs of the bridge reflected in the river constitute the unique visual symbols of the capital. From a purely functional point of view, in today's traffic the bridge is built in a rather inconvenient, if spectacular, spot: the flow of vehicles through the bridge is led into the Castle Hill of Buda. This is why at a later point a tunnel had to be constructed under the Castle Hill – according to the plans of Adam Clark. Thus it is not an exaggeration to state that the historical and visual significance of the Chain Bridge is greater than its practical function, although the bridge is an indispensable part of the traffic flow between Pest and Buda.

The Coca-Cola Company of Hungary summarized its ideas relating to the decoration of the Chain Bridge in a ten page document entitled “*Merry Christmas Budapest 1996*”, which contained three visual plans. This compilation came into being as a result of consultation with some members of the General Assembly of Budapest. In the course of the preliminary discussions the representatives of Cola primarily took

into consideration the views of the Chairman of the Committee on Urban Planning and the Protection of the Cityscape and some expert members of the Committee. In the course of preparing the detailed plan they also relied on the advice of experts on tourism and others, including – to a limited extent – some opinions from the public.²

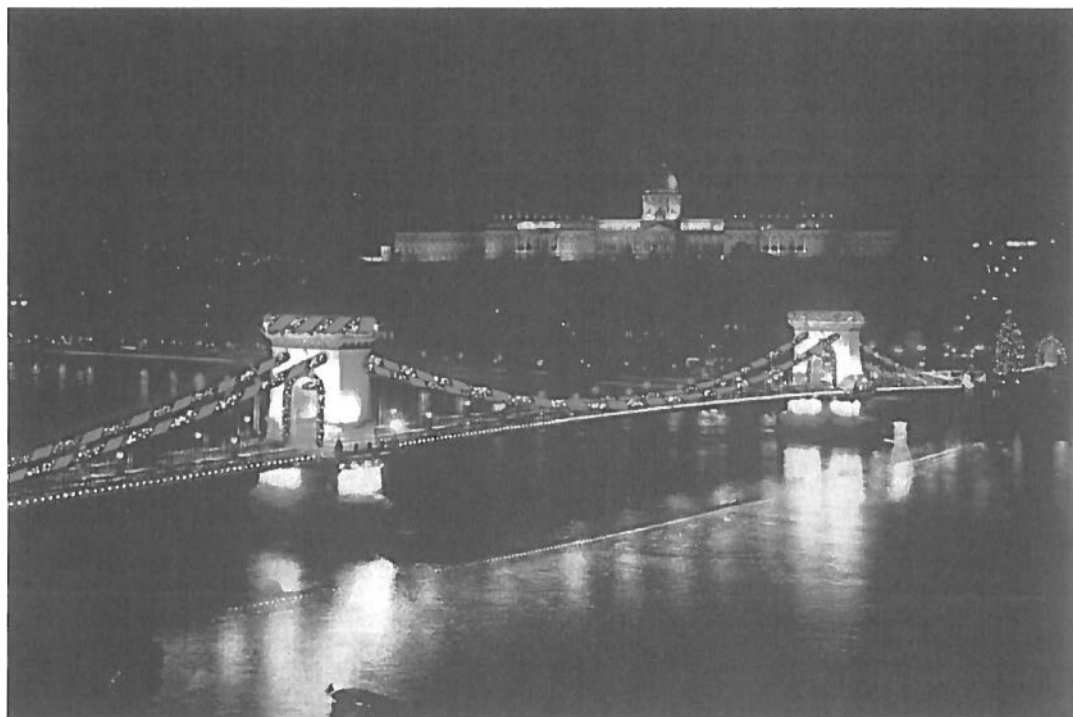
“To give a Christmas present to the town and people of Budapest” is the stated goal of the campaign in the plan submitted to the General Assembly of the capital. The “gift” would have meant the decoration and festive illumination of the Chain Bridge during the Christmas period (between November 15 and January 10), with accompanying events. The underlying considerations as stated by the Company were that “Hungary represents a market of outstanding importance for the Coca-Cola Company,” among others because as the plan explained “the per capita consumption outstrips the average for France or for California”. This then is the business motivation which is not independent of the war between Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola taking place in the background, especially in its Central and Eastern European form.³ Beside the business motive, which from the point of view of Coca-Cola was the primary motivation, the plan also detailed other arguments in favor of the initiative, which were related to the interests and tasks of the capital’s leading administrative body, thus for example enhancing the beauty and fame of Budapest and other tourism related considerations. Another point made called attention to the mobilizing potential of the initiative, that is to say it “would motivate other companies to join in the Christmas decoration of Budapest.” These supporting arguments appeared in the plan as if being of equivalent weight but were clearly not of the same order, as we shall see below they were interpreted differently by critics and supporters. Tourism experts who supported the initiative appreciated the proposition from the point of view of tourism. One of them, the leader of the tourism work-group of the American Chamber of Commerce, combining the first two arguments in a peculiar way, shifted the discourse to a different plane as it were, and thus instead of the “business” and advertising aspects he put the em-

phasis on the idea of giving, the sharing of profit. “It’s a great idea – he is quoted by the proposition – *to give back some of the profits to the community*” (sic – emphasis in the original).

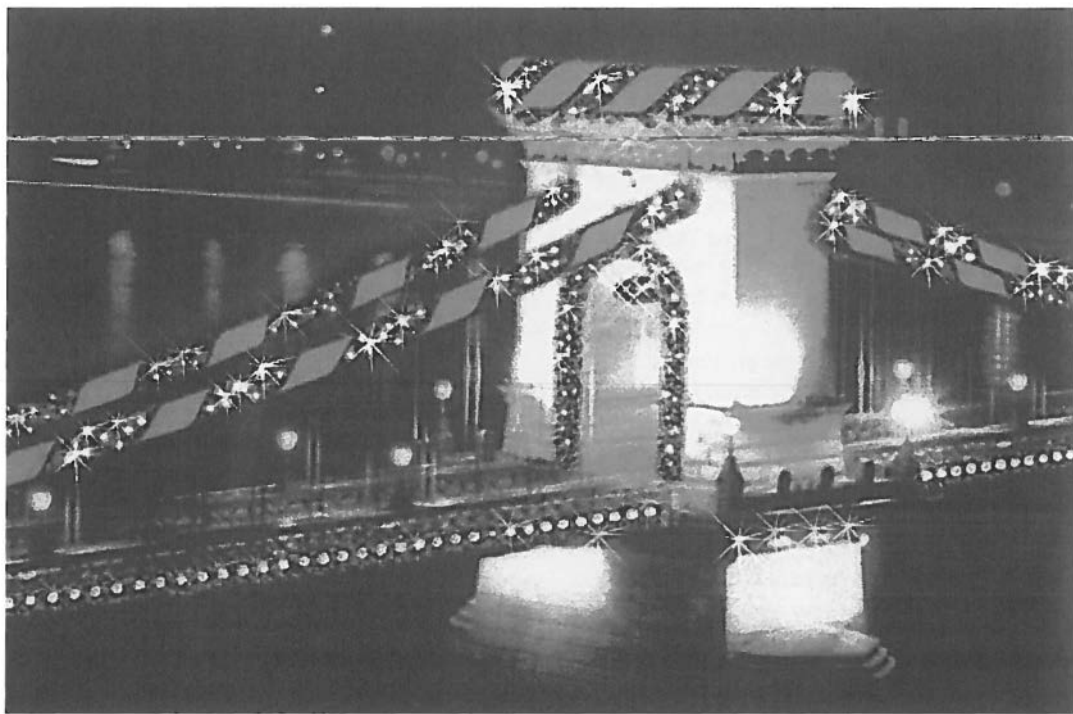
In addition to the openly stated reasons and goals there was one other. In decorating the Chain Bridge and its environs the Coca-Cola Company did not want to display its well-known logo, that is to say – increasing as it were the value of the “gift” – it would have sacrificed the advertising opportunity in people being able to immediately associate their joy and gratitude with the multinational company. This example of bashful “unselfishness” which is in seeming contradiction to business interests, is not independent of the holiday in question (Christmas) and its main, and supposedly essential characteristic, gift-giving, which shows a deeper connection to the context. Secrecy was a key feature of the plan, and when it became public knowledge that it was Coca-Cola who wished to decorate the Chain Bridge, it was not only this element of the plan that came to nothing, but the entire initiative, as rejection became much more pronounced precisely because of the identity of the giver.

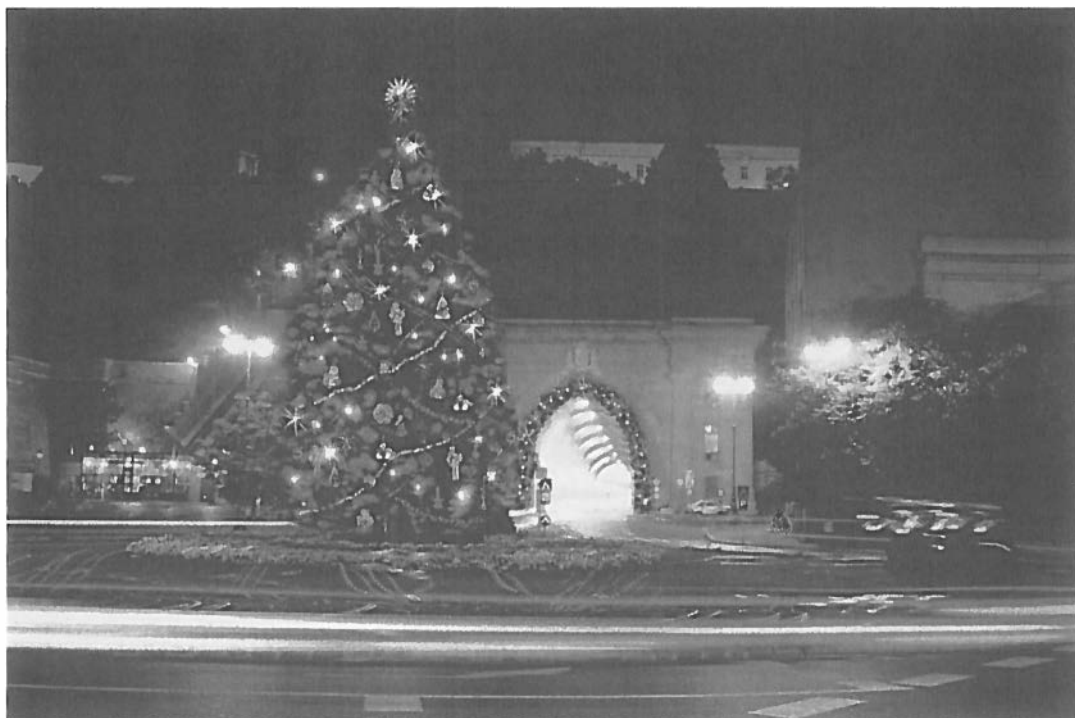
The visual plan attached to the document primarily gave an atmospheric picture of Coca-Cola’s idea, as the size, quality, material etc. of the decoration much debated later on could not really be shown on it.⁴ The mood was set by the illumination and the use of red and green colors. This color combination is unequivocally linked to Christmas colors, but at the same time also to Hungarian national symbolism, although it can also be said that indirectly it also refers to the red of the trademark of Coca-Cola. According to the visual plan, the decoration would have been comprised of lit-up garlands. Coupled with the planned decoration, in keeping with the advice of those inhabitants of Budapest who have been consulted, an enormous Christmas tree at the Buda end of the bridge on Clark Ádám Square, was to be erected for the children, added to this would have been the decoration of the entrance to the Tunnel which also faces the square, in a style consistent with the decoration of the bridge.

It was this visual plan and initiative which was debated by the Committee for Urban Planning and the Protection of the Cityscape of the



Decoration plans of the Chain Bridge made by Coca-Cola Company, 1996. Printed color computer animation.
Source: Press release.





Christmas tree planned to be put at Clark Square. Printed color computer animation. Source: Press release.

General Assembly of the capital on September 13, 1996. From the point of view of the capital the fate of the initiative depended on the decision of this committee. The plan discussed – as I mentioned above – was formulated after a certain amount of preliminary consultation thus its makers were attempting to take into account the considerations of preservationists. The Committee debated the plan in the presence of the local Director of the Coca-Cola Company. After debate the Committee accepted the plan with a 5 to 1 vote and 1 abstention, but instituting a few minor technical changes and a time limitation. From a technical point of view the Representatives wished to decrease the width of the decoration in order to make it fit better with the proportions of the bridge, and so that the decoration should not conceal the Hungarian coat of arms which can be found on the bridge. The Committee also modified the Company's proposal in that it granted permission to decorate the bridge for only three years, instead of the requested 10 years, and limited the time period to one month from December 5 to January 6.⁵

This was a matter of policy, because at the time – based on the regulation applying to the use of public areas according to which – no other decoration than the national flag was to be placed on bridges. The regulation was subsequently modified – precisely because of this affair. It is worth examining the kinds of additional arguments made at the official meeting of the Committee between the Company and the owner of the edifice to be decorated – the capital which had jurisdiction over the public areas.

When the director of the company was personally present in addition to what was stated in the documentation primarily tried to convince the members of the Committee of the charitable aspect of the initiative and its meaning as a way to forge a new kind of relationship with consumers. He promised that shortly they were going to remove the enormous billboards which were ruining the cityscape and that the Company would be changing its advertising tactics. He argued that since Coca-Cola was one of the largest advertisers it was to be surmised

that if they change others will follow suit. He stated that the Company wished to move its advertising activities in the direction of PR in the Central and Eastern European region, and Budapest would be the first place where this new policy would be introduced. An important element of this would be that the presence of the company should be primarily an artistic one rather than straight advertising; in order to achieve this goal they had called for proposals from the students of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts. These plans coincided with the ideas of the new director of the company, who two years earlier had himself found the Coca-Cola billboards and umbrellas to be horrifying in the context of Budapest. This would be the first instance of attempting to change the old methods. The essence of the latter had so far been to ensure that when the director of Coca-Cola would go to a country he should see as many Coca-Cola logos as possible. The company's director mentioned that he was familiar with the saying that in Hungary if two people know about something then everybody knows about it. Therefore "if we do it and don't put our name on it – said the director – people will know that we were the ones behind the initiative". It is here then that we find an answer to the question of how Coca-Cola imagined the "secrecy" aspect of the gift. They were arguing that if nothing remained secret then they could easily forego the employment of the usual symbols, and thereby be more effective, at the same time fine-tuning their advertising activity too. Thus the new strategy instead of crude direct visual advertising wished to exert its influence indirectly subtler, even psychological methods, the effectiveness of which would have been ensured by the mechanisms of the spread of rumors. However, instead of the planned delay in the broadcasting of the news its fate on the contrary was decided by its premature coming to light. As a complement to the plan the Coca-Cola Company undertook to remove the graffiti from the Chain Bridge and its environs. This was not part of the original proposal, but was adopted upon the demand of the Chairman of the Committee. City Hall wished to find the means for a clean-up with this, while Coca-Cola agreed to foot the bill – it may be surmised judging by

what happened – for tactical reasons, because this gesture would have underlined the gift aspect of the initiative and would have demonstrated the generosity of the company. The director of the Hungarian branch of the Company summarized the essence of the initiative saying that it was "Not only decoration but a clean-up as well". The plan then – thus the arguments for it – served to improve on the bridge not to "attack" it. It seems that the proponents were anticipating some opposing views.

On the part of the members of the Committee arguments in favor primarily stressed increasing the festive mood of the city. Many referred to the fact that cities in Western Europe change at Christmas time to such a degree that by comparison Budapest looks humble. The carrying out of the plan would thus bring positive changes which would not only increase the city's fame, but also give joy to the people and children of Budapest. The head architect of the capital also found the basic idea to be acceptable, but he indicated that he would demand restraint in the decoration and that the illuminated decorations should be less prominent lest the bridge become "Disneyland-ish".

The categorical rejection of the plan came from a well-known public personality who has become famous for his efforts in protecting the historical monuments of the capital. In addition to his membership of the Committee, he is also the Advisor⁶ of the Capital on questions of the protection of the urban landscape. This double role and especially his popularity among the public and his past activities lent weight to his opposition to the plan, especially in the days following the decision of the Committee when the matter became public knowledge. He led several spectacular campaigns to protect the historic monuments of the city both prior to and after the political changes of 1989 in a television program for the protection of monuments he had launched what practically amounted to a social movement, and it was this what made his opposition to the plan so potent. The crux of his argument was that the Chain Bridge was beautiful as it was, it needed no further embellishments. "The Chain Bridge" he said "whether the Coca-Cola logo appears on it or not ... will for years appear as the symbol of Coca-Cola in a

wide variety of advertising materials. The Chain Bridge is the symbol of the Budapest Art Festival, it is the symbol of the capital. I would like to see it in its beauty as the symbol of the capital and not as one of the logos of Coca-Cola.” Thus, he rejected the novel marketing policy of the plan, saying that the Company wished to use the Chain Bridge for “propaganda” purposes. He refused the idea that the monument serving as the symbol of the city should be illuminated for Christmas. Instead he suggested some other, more commercial, part of the city for example Andrassy Street, or the shopping street, Váci Street. Basically he stressed the *protection* of the urban landscape: “I think it would be good if the uniformity of the ideas of multinational companies did not spread in the country. I would like my city, my country to retain its character, or I would try to reconstitute it.”

The Chairman of the Committee considered the opinion that the Christmas decoration of the bridge would be an advertising for Coca-Cola to be a distortion. More precisely he interpreted it as indirect advertisement in a positive sense which would encourage multinational companies to change their crude, intrusive appearance, such as the aggressive ads of Pepsi-Cola which resulted in painting over the entire surface of some Budapest trams. By comparison – he said – this plan was a major step forward. Despite the worldwide spread of multinational capital, he opined, it is possible to “preserve our identity” – and to achieve this these are precisely the plans which should be supported instead of waging a quixotic war on them.

Following its favorable decision the Committee was to forward the plan to the National Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments which had the jurisdiction to approve it before the plan could be realized by the Tunggram Company.⁷ One week after the decision of the Committee the Board – based on the law on the Protection of Historic Monuments – refused to grant its permission for the festive decoration and “illumination” of the Chain Bridge. The explanation contained the following arguments: “The Monument is not a vehicle for decoration, the proposed decoration which would indirectly serve advertising purposes is not worthy of the

historical-national role of the edifice. The proposed decoration is an indirect form of advertising which wishes to press into service the monument and as such it is unacceptable, it is totally alien to European, or to Hungarian notions of taste. The decoration of the Chain Bridge and the Tunnel which is part of Hungary’s historic heritage is not worthy of either an area which has been listed as part of UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Cities nor of the area of the banks of the Danube or the skyline of Budapest, it would seriously distort the monuments.”⁸ In addition to aiming to protect the bridge and its environs the Board also rejected the plan in order to forestall the creation of a precedent which could result in the bridge “being partially hidden throughout the year”. The refusal did not object to erecting a Christmas tree on Clark Ádám Square which would have been part of the decoration.

Gift or Advertising Gimmick?

It would require serious detective work to find out how the “secret” plan of decorating the Chain Bridge for Christmas became public knowledge prematurely following the decision of the Board against the wishes and original plan of the Coca-Cola Company. It is not the question of the indiscretion that interests me here, and this is why I do not tackle the question of the real or imagined personal interests relating to the plan or the problem of positive or negative biases. Neither am I interested in finding out what personal factors and relationships influenced the position taken by the Board. However, it remains a fact that the plan came to naught quickly and spectacularly because suddenly a lively press debate began and the Company did not appeal the decision of the Board, but rather it abandoned the plan altogether. From the point of view of trying to interpret this exemplary case what is of interest here is the nature of the arguments publicly put forth in favor of and against the plan.

The debate was first launched in the evening news program of Hungarian Television, which disclosed the decision of the Board and the statement of the company’s representative commenting on the decision and the opposing views.

At this point the Coca-Cola Company committed an error even according to its own logic. In presenting the plan they showed an advertising clip in the form of a computer animation which showed the Chain Bridge in a Christmas mood with a Coca-Cola truck crossing the bridge. As the truck was making its progress across the bridge the lights decorating the bridge were gradually lit. In view of what followed it is clear that this weakened the company's position, because at the time the public was not at all familiar with the plan. Even before people could have imagined what the Chain Bridge would look like with Christmas decorations they saw a computerized advertising vision, one which not only did not conceal but rather highlighted the advertising aspect of the plan by showing the Coca-Cola truck. Although the truck carrying the soft drink and the lighting up of the lights synchronized with its movement were not part of the "goodwill offer" of the company, its broadcast negatively influenced the fate of the plan despite the fact that the advertising clip did not show the Chain Bridge itself, but a fantasy image of it.

The first newspaper articles treated the initiative of the soft drink company ironically and often cited the well-known preservationist's rejection of the plan. They mostly presented his arguments made in the Committee debate. The press attacked the plan and indirectly, and sometimes even directly, the leadership of the capital, on three main points. They blamed City Hall's decision-makers for allowing the Chain Bridge to be used for a purpose they deemed unworthy of a national relic, for allowing it to be used *free of charge for advertising purposes*, by means of "*bundling up*" the bridge. The fact that the plan came from Coca-Cola significantly contributed to the raging of passions. The conservative daily, *Új Magyarország*, for example entitled its commentary "Cola Cloak for the Chain Bridge," which in addition to its linguistic ambiguity primarily expressed hostility towards the company.⁹ On the same day *Magyar Hírlap*, a liberal daily, wrote its editorial about the "fall of the bridge" and attacked Coca-Cola's "bundling up" campaign in the name of "skeptical people of goodwill".¹⁰ At that time the news-

paper readers had not yet had a chance to know the plan, had not seen any picture of it - with the possible exception of the advertising clip shown on TV - because a photograph of the imagined festive illumination appeared only much later. It is characteristic that the weekly magazine *Heti Világgazdaság*, well known for its measured opinions, expressed its negative assessment of the plan by subtly not mentioning the name of the company even once in its commentary on the controversy. When analyzing the "goodwill plan" it only referred to the company by ironical circumlocutions such as the multinational "producing sweet carbonated brown water" (Vajna 1996).

In short then those opposed to the idea of decorating the Chain Bridge for Christmas did not perceive the surprise, the aim of giving a gift and saw the entire initiative as an advertising gimmick. Sporadically it was stated in the press that one of the main trends in modern advertising is indirect advertising (Vajna 1996; Mong 1996). The idea of the expression of goodwill through such practices remained an unknown and inconceivable concept for the average newspaper reader and for the preservationists. According to the widespread opinion, the plan was synonymous with publicity for Coca-Cola and the question of "why are they doing it?" always implied mistrust of the company's intentions. The other two elements of the suspicions, the free use of the bridge and its "wrapping up" of the bridge were treated as givens even though - as we have seen - there was no factual basis for these suppositions.

The Opinion of the Wider Public

What did the ordinary citizens of Budapest think about the plan of decorating the Chain Bridge? This question interested the leaders of the Coca-Cola Company formulating the plan, the officials of City Hall, the protectionists, and the experts on historical monuments alike, or at least all the participants claimed that they were talking on behalf of the man-on-the-street.

To support the plan the Coca-Cola Company showed a compilation of video interviews with the people of Budapest who were in favor of the initiative. The film was not made as a repre-

sentative survey, but as a collection of supportive statements. It conveyed the message through the words of interviewees that the Christmas mood of the capital would be enhanced by the festive illumination of the bridge and its environs, since compared to Western European cities the festive decoration of Budapest is modest. "Why all this grayness?" asked one older Budapest man. According to him, a little ambience, a little decoration is absolutely necessary at Christmas. Especially, if it is not paid for with the taxpayers' money.¹¹

Two opinion surveys commissioned by Coca-Cola wished to provide a more balanced and substantiated picture, the first was carried out among the inhabitants of Budapest at the end of September 1996, immediately after the breaking of the story, the second may be ten days later, at the beginning of October, following the appearance of the visual plan of the decoration in the above mentioned dailies. The second survey also included the inhabitants of 43 towns in the countryside.¹² A significant majority (65%) liked the decoration in the September survey, and almost as many people thought (64%) that it did not look like advertising, publicity. These opinions were significantly influenced by whether those answering had already heard of the plan, or were aware of the debates and passions around the question. The approval rating was 10 percent lower among those who had prior information about the matter; almost half of those questioned (48%) thought that the decoration looked like advertising, and somewhat fewer people thought that that was not the case (45%). Among those, however, who had no prior acquaintance with the press coverage of the plan, only 19 percent thought the decor to be like advertising. The second survey commissioned by Coca-Cola in October, showed substantially the same results. In the polarization of opinions the most important dividing line was that of prior knowledge, that is to say the fact of having already heard about the matter from someone, somewhere. It hardly needs mentioning that hearing or reading about something is not the same as knowing what actually took place and what the actual opinions of the parties were. It could also be shown that the plan was mostly favored by the age group of 16-

20 (74% liked it in September, 79% in October). At the same time it is clear that the approval rating combined with being informed about the question is inversely related to the level of education. Thus for example 46 percent of those with a university degree rejected the plan, while only 13 percent of those with only a primary education were of the same opinion. It is clear that we are dealing with two significantly different sets of members of which have very different tastes and values, and those with a higher level of education listen to and watch news programs with greater intensity.

Both surveys attempted to find out whether, according to the respondents, the decoration and the illumination would have increased the Christmas mood of Budapest, or if it would have made the city look more cosmopolitan. The responses were unequivocally positive, especially with regard to increasing the Christmas mood. At the end of September three quarters of those asked, in October somewhat more people (80%) thought that the festive lighting would increase the Christmas mood of the capital. Somewhat fewer people (10–12% less) thought that the initiative would also make Budapest more cosmopolitan. According to the October results, the inhabitants of Budapest were much more doubtful about this than those of the countryside, three quarters of the latter thought that thanks to the decoration the cosmopolitan nature of Budapest would increase. Somewhat more of the Budapest respondents rejected this view than accepted it (48% as opposed to 45%). It is also noteworthy that with respect to these two questions even those who had prior knowledge of the plan had an unequivocally positive, accepting attitude to them. Some of these results also appeared in the press, to which the opposition – as expressed by the most vocal preservationist opponent – objected on the grounds that they were "not serious" because "there were no questions asking about the symbolic value of the bridge or about the making use of the bridge for the purposes of publicity".¹³

The authorities of the Capital also wished to take into consideration the opinions of the man on the street, and in order to get a sense of the support for the decision of the Committee they commissioned their own public opinion survey

at the end of September, i.e. between the two above-mentioned surveys.¹⁴ No doubt the goal of indirectly verifying the results of the other survey was also part of the motivation for commissioning the survey. The results hardly differed from the ones outlined above. Those who had already heard about the plan were the most opposed to it: 38% considered it to be outrageous, about one third was pleased with it (32%), and somewhat more than one quarter of the respondents did not care (26%). It is notable that less than half of those questioned (46%) had heard about the plan, but half of those who had heard were also aware that the company in question was Coca-Cola. Those carrying out the survey thought that this was connected to the fact that “most frequently the press presented the idea as tasteless advertising. There was hardly any discussion of the contents of the plan, or about its details”. Therefore the approval rating was the lowest among those who were aware that it was Coca-Cola that wanted to decorate the bridge. The plan mostly appealed to the younger and less educated sectors of society, or those who had not heard anything about the surrounding debates. The survey also asked the question whether the respondent would grant this permission to carry out the plan if he were in the place of the city given the fact that it was the Coca-Cola Company who wanted to do the decoration of the bridge, but that there would be no advertisements either on the bridge or around it. Naturally, for the most part those who were in favor of the plan in the first place were the ones who would have granted the permission (57% as opposed to 34% who would have forbidden it). “Among them the approval rating of the plan was 81 points whereas among those who would forbid the carrying out of the plan it was 24 points.”

The results of the public opinion survey show the relativity of the question. It is clear, that these opinions could not be used to support either of the extremes. Clearly, opinions were divided, although the plan was mostly approved of by the majority, primarily the younger generation, who thought that if it were carried out it would make the holiday more festive. It is also clear from the data that the man on the street was primarily influenced by the kind of infor-

mation he previously received. In this, however, there was very little factual information and much more emotional rhetoric with its motif of Coca-Cola as the bogey.

The Rhetorics of Rejection and Acceptance

One clearly delineated element of the press campaign which ensued after Coca-Cola's plan became public was the motif of war which demonstrates very well that the matter was seen by many from the perspective of a fight against an enemy. Many articles which appeared in the press talked about “the battle of the Chain Bridge” or in language evoking the same metaphor. The expression appeared in the title of six of the 34 newspaper articles analyzed here, but almost all of the texts used this phrase. “Battle” was the refrain of the evaluation of the initiative among the wider public as well. And where there is fight, logically, the metaphors of “attack” and “defense” also appear.

The motif of defensive fight explicitly expresses the rejection of something. In the course of the press debate those journalists and preservationists who saw the plan as an attack on the Chain Bridge in its capacity of a national monument, felt that they had to defend it against “foreign” cultural penetration. In the eyes of the Hungarian public the multinational company in question and some others like it (primarily Pepsi-Cola and McDonald's) appear as the embodiments of Americanization and “foreign” cultural influence, although the more lively public and press debates dealing with these themes primarily concentrate on the problems of the spread of English words, advertising and consumer mentality. However, not only Coca-Cola and its companions hail from the West but it seems that so does the conceptual-rhetorical tool-kit with the help of which we react to them. Thus the well-known topic of “Coca-colonization” (Hannerz 1987; Wagnleitner 1994) characterizes the perception which can be considered to be common in Hungary too, this identifies the trinity of colonization, capitalism and consumption with Coca-Cola from both an economic and a cultural point of view. The rhetorical war waged in defense of the Chain Bridge

was in fact waged against this symbolic construct – “colonization” symbolized by Coca-Cola – and for the protection of national values, which clearly indicates the decisive importance of symbols in social life. From the point of view of interpretation, however, we should not forget that these ready-made categories – thus “Cola-colonization” – often hinder actual analysis, because used as slogans they may hide the peculiarities of given circumstances (cf. Howes 1996). Thus for example the “popular” meaning of Coca-Cola in today’s Central and Eastern Europe is completely unknown. It is clear that during the communist era it served to embody people’s wish for the West. It should be evident without going into any deeper analysis that the man on the street does not relate uniformly to the consumer goods which have acquired a symbolic significance under the influence of globalization. Thus, among other things, such symbolic objects and values today serve to articulate generational differences in identity formation. Just as in the case of the formation of the self-image of Austrian youth during the cold war, certain layers, or groups of today’s Central and Eastern European youth rely on innumerable elements of American – mostly “globalized” – mass culture in creating their own identity. Views critical of this openness and receptivity and lashing out at Americanization are just as common today as three or four decades earlier in Austria (Wagnleitner 1994).

After the event one analyst saw the failed Christmas initiative of Coca-Cola as an example of the extent to which authoritative public figures do not comprehend the realities of the end of the millennium. However, along with a fair amount of factual errors he attributed the rejection of the plan to the incomprehension of “intellectuals grabbing on to romantic anti-capitalism and bureaucratic power” supposing that the initiative was blocked by the relevant body of the capital. The author saw the Coca-Cola advertising clip too – employing yet another version of the “war motif” as “the victory of the logic of capitalism over the intellectuals” because according to him the video clip – despite the protests – managed to use the bridge, and thus Coca-Cola achieved its goal: it became news (György 1997: 120–121). I already re-

ferred to the place and role of this film in the course of events. According to this interpretation, Coca-Cola without having carried out its plan (because those in charge prohibited it) nevertheless “seized” the Chain Bridge. One of the critics of this author rightly pointed out that the reality conveyed by the media and people’s direct experience and evaluation cannot be washed together (Babarczy 1997:28). The image of the Chain Bridge – more precisely its computer generated graphic image, and not its photograph or a film made about it – is easily distinguishable by everyone from the actual bridge, consequently its advertising value is also completely different.

Another motif in the rhetoric of rejection was that of “selling out”. This opinion is decidedly negative and addresses what it perceives to be an indifference to the values of national culture. Here – that is the say in Budapest, in Hungary – stressed many authors, everything is for sale, be it no matter which outstanding product of national culture. “We need not give away the symbol of the city to Coca-Cola for its global advertising” insisted the Committee member who was most opposed to the plan in the course of the above mentioned debate. A similar opinion was formulated by one of the journalists who challenged “those selling the Chain Bridge”: “Would they also give away the noble edifice which serves as the symbol of the city for some material gain? Or is it not even a question of money, but they are satisfied with ‘glory’: it is the same company that tries to touch our precious edifice which is almost 150 year-old that could even recruit Michael Jackson for its advertising purposes?”¹⁵ These and similar passionate views reflect traditional perceptions of advertising, and their proponents interpreted the initiative accordingly. A clear logic could also be observed behind this. Both of the above citations show elements of the categorical opposition between “sacred” and “profane” which is a strong organizing principle of the interpretation of the social environment. More concretely: at one end of the spectrum stand the “monuments” the sacred “untouchable” symbols of national culture, on the other advertising, the profane product of mass culture, the symbol of consumption and of a(n imagined) homoge-

nized world. The two are mutually exclusive categories, their opposition is unbridgeable.

Those arguing in favor of Coca-Cola's plan followed a different logic – compared to the opponents they remained in the background. Representing a more accepting attitude they were of the opinion that the unprecedented advertising activity of multinational and private companies in Hungary was an unavoidable part of the functioning of the market economy. With this they not only accepted the fact of advertising, but did much more. The motif of acceptance is tied to stressing the economic interests of the country where the supporters argue that multinationals inject large sums of money into the economy, create jobs and therefore it is not expedient to hinder their activities. Why are we resisting these companies when at the same time we do everything to encourage them to bring their money here? Especially if they are even willing to adapt to local conditions? Those who were of this opinion did not condemn the often blamed “colonialism” of international capital and of multinational companies, but indirectly accepted the implied subordination and stressed the gains for local society. It has been said by many that the former socialist countries not only do not object to Western colonization, but can hardly wait for it to happen quickly and on several different levels. However, it is doubtful whether in terms of cultural analysis the problematic of supra-national cultural trends or the question of economic interest can really be related to the explanations formulated by the jargon of political science or of political journalism.

Urban Landscape and Urban Identity

We can understand the matter better if we do not regard it as a clash of clear-cut entities but rather as the creation of a common “space” for values, cultural meanings and systems. This “space” was brought about by the combination of the Coca-Cola plan and the opinions it gave rise to among the people of Budapest. If we look at the problem from this vantage point, in addition to the directly manifest elements of acceptance or rejection of the initiative, other connections also come to light, thus for example

the problem which is becoming more and more important these days of how the collective identity of towns is created, and what is the role of the urban and visual environment in this.

The more or less loose or strong sense of belonging of the inhabitants of any given city may be imagined as something that is basically constituted through debate or negotiation. The debates take place on several levels, be they the everyday, i.e. interpersonal space of micro-communities or the wider community, couched in lofty language or in a purposely provocative one. Although the opinions are formulated with exclusivity in mind, it is their polyphony which provides the expressive texture (and text) of “urban culture”. One important aspect of this was fore-grounded in this particular debate, the question of the contemporary interpretation of the meaning of national monuments (may be more widely of national culture even). Coca-Cola's plan to realize a spectacular and memorable initiative in the Hungarian capital for Christmas 1996 (and for a number of years afterwards) in a symbolic sense touched upon one of the most sensitive points of the city. The fate of the plan depended precisely on the fact that the Chain Bridge is an outstanding element of the Hungarian past, of the history of the city, and also of the contemporary urban landscape, which could become the focus of the clash of opposing views for this very reason. The supporters of the plan were referring to enhancing the significance of the Chain Bridge, while the opponents tried to protect its symbolic nature.

The meanings of cityscape, historic monument, heritage – meanings which derive from the urban experience – are specific markers of city lore; they are the materialization of the collective memory necessary for urban life. According to Martine Segalen (Segalen 1993), who studied Nanterre, a suburb of Paris, in order for people once again to play a role in their cities social and spatial resources are necessary. In the French case kinship as a social resource is one of the factors which helps create a positive attitude to the urban environment – kinship provides a material and emotional resource for identity formation – the other factor is the creation and ownership of collective memory

and urban heritage. According to her, the necessary conditions of the creation of urbanity come from common social practices, spaces, the local use of memory and time, and jointly owned images. It seems that in today's (post)modern city the most important sources of urbanity and sense of belonging instead of common participation are to be found in publicly represented or available collective symbols which are rooted in collective memory. The role of the visual has increased in the shaping of identity, and thus the architectural structures which define the profile of a city, the images, dominant scenes which help the formation and maintaining of a consciousness of belonging to the city. Undoubtedly this relationship, in addition to creating "urban" identity, also carries the possibility of subjectively creating and experiencing national identity. The architectural, historical, material heritage over which the city disposes is a tool taken from the past and used to articulate and create contemporary urban identity and uniqueness. The discourse on traditions which grows out of this physical world or linguistically processes it is a tool of articulating and creating the collectivity. In other words, it ensures the uniqueness of urban society, and not simply as an external, material and visual framework, but as a linguistically and emotionally experienced and interpreted subjective world of meaning. The case study examined here exemplifies this statement because it is through the narratives interpreting the physical-historical environment that the imaginary world, which means the identity of the city dweller and of the institutions of the city (Bridger 1996). Naturally some of the narratives are stories of conflict. What is more it is the vulnerability of the verbally formulated imagery and its clashing with other universes that lead to conscious reflection, and the reinforcement of identity. The opinions expressing opposition to Coca-Cola's plan in the press were attempting to "protect" the cultural character of the city and one of the significant elements of the national symbolic system. With this they were arguing for maintaining national and cultural differences and against cultural homogenization, but they continued to think along traditional channels about the role of historic monuments

in the life of the contemporary city. In other words the "global" challenge did not bring to light significantly new cultural concepts; on the contrary the challenge gave rise to a reaction which reinforced the "relics" of national identity.

The urban landscape and modern man's relationship to historic monuments was expressed in a peculiar conflict narrative in the Chain Bridge debate, in the context of the relationship of "Europeanness" and "national" characteristics. The decision of the Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments deemed the decoration of the Chain Bridge to be alien to "European and Hungarian taste". The Chairman of the Committee for the Protection of the Cityscape also mentioned that the first designs "were quite American in style: an inflated Santa Claus, big lights. There was never any advertisement in it. Never. But its scale was American".¹⁶ I quoted above the chief architect of the city who, because of the thickness of the proposed decoration, its "padded nature" warned of the danger of the decoration becoming "too Disneylandish". It is doubtful, however, whether he would have thought of the same metaphor had he not known the identity of the company that conceived the plan. "Foreign taste" of course is a relative category, a construct that hardly expresses a definite aesthetic quality, but it is precisely because of this that it can fulfill certain social functions. Reference to "foreign taste" is an act of covert delineation of values and tastes and concomitantly implies a choice based on seeing Coca-Cola as an abstract entity (and an enemy) the representing the "global," the "non-local," the "not historically rooted" and the aesthetically "worthless". This linguistic mechanism of classification serves to reinforce one's own values.

Who Defines and Who Controls the Urban Landscape?

The question of the control over taste was not articulated in the debate, although the case of "Coca-Cola vs. Chain Bridge" is eminently about that as well. Primarily because the concept of historical monument is not a "folk" concept, but in Michael Herzfeld's words "a category of offi-

cial thinking” which naturally is related to the dissemination of ideas and ideals. There are innumerable examples for conflicts arising between the ideas of preservationists and those locals who actually “live with the monuments” (Fejős 1981; Herzfeld 1991). The symbolic significance of the Chain Bridge is of course greater than that of the average monument, and it is also true that most such disagreements regarding historical monuments occur in contexts where for example people are living in a building which is classified as a historic monument and therefore they cannot change it to fit their needs and ideas. Despite this the public discourse of specialists of architectural monuments often expresses an attitude of “enlightening the masses”, which is usually coupled with a condemnation of the taste of the masses. From this perspective it seems to be inevitable that the social acceptance of the historical monument embodying an abstract historic-aesthetic idea, in this case of the Chain Bridge as a symbol, is highly differentiated and it will be influenced by everyday experiences, personal history and by the individual’s degree of identification with the normative ideal of historic monuments. The debate mostly articulated the conceptual/intangible – ideological “protection” of the historic monument. Indirectly there was an awareness of the increased importance of the visual aspect but the debaters did not openly touch upon the dangers of a lack of visual consciousness – of visual illiteracy¹⁷ – and the possibility or necessity of controlling the visual. Thus the question of controlling artistic judgments of the masses was only articulated from the point of view of historical knowledge and not so much from the point of view of visual awareness.

The problem of regulating taste also arose directly in connection with municipal policies. The capital can exert direct control only over areas in public use, the Committee for the Protection of the Cityscape can enforce its ideas and norms – for which there is no written code in any case – only over these territories. At the same time, the general question of the extent to which the public has a right to decide about questions which have an impact on the overall cityscape arose already at the meeting of the relevant committee of the General Assembly of

the capital. Is it necessary to take into consideration the opinion of the man on the street, or should the policies regulating the urban environment and the “fate” of the historical architectural heritage, and thus the identity of the city as collectivity be determined independently of their opinions based on theoretical moral principles and aesthetic norms?

In this case study the question of the social environment and influencing of aesthetic values, and social meanings came to the fore from another vantage point too, namely with regard to the practical question of the political nature of sponsoring. Due to the political changes the cultural life of Central and Eastern Europe has recently been facing unprecedented trials and tribulations. Among other things, the difficulties of finding sponsors who are willing and able to make financial sacrifices has to be faced under the circumstances of decreasing state support and the anomalies of the new competitive system of financing. The goal of finding sources of support becomes all the more difficult to achieve as private capital is not strong enough and especially because the new capitalists do not yet have an ethos of giving for public causes. Thus the influence of multinational companies which are extremely rich and therefore willing to be generous is amplified and just as their not always concealed leading role is decisive. So far institutions “hungry” for these sources of financial support have not asked what kind of principles and ideas are behind the generosity of donors and sponsors, or in other words which sources can be or should be taken advantage of. Is it necessary to examine the principles behind the donations of multinational companies which symbolize the “global,” or is it sufficient to concentrate on obtaining the donations?

The Chain Bridge debate highlighted the dilemma of who and to what extent can use the material elements, historic monuments, the visually outstanding “hot spots” of urban space. Coca-Cola plan to decorate the Chain Bridge for Christmas targeted one of the symbolically most sensitive points of the Hungarian capital, which in the midst of heated passions led to the drawing up of boundaries: according to this it is good and salutary if the national relic is cleaned of

graffiti – this did take place –, but it is not good, and has to be militantly fought against if at the same time, according to a different logic, the sponsor “uses” the historical monument and thus “touches it” in any way and makes it profane. The goal of decorating, illuminating for Christmas can be a “worthy” cause and it is also clear that both acts have the same underlying motivation: the sponsor’s attempt to make itself acceptable to the locals. Put it more critically the sponsor wishes to be a “congenial colonist”. Goodwill marketing then is a gesture of making the “global become local”, a reaction to those negative attitudes on the basis of which the locals reject the direct interventions of international capital, which they consider to be culturally destructive. At the same time the multinational company’s attempt to make itself “palatable”, to “naturalize” itself, cannot hide the fact that “local” and “global” interpretations of national culture are not carved in stone, and rapprochement between them presupposes correspondences. In other words: there are no *sui generis* “donations”, their political significance stems from their constructed nature.

Translation: Bea Vidacs

Notes

1. In 1832 István Széchenyi toured England, where he viewed three of W. T. Clark’s bridges. One of these still stands today across the Thames at Marlow, it served as an example for the Chain Bridge, but is smaller than the Budapest bridge. See *The Chain Bridge and Adam Clark* 1999.
2. Interview with Zoltán Cselovszki, the Chairman of the Committee on Urban Planning and the Protection of the Cityscape, Budapest, 16th April, 1997. I would like to express my thanks to the Chairman of the Committee for supporting of my work and for having put at my disposal the relevant documents, including the tape-recording of the meeting of the Committee on the 13th September 1996 which I analyze below.
3. As part of the press debate surrounding the initiative *Figyelő*, an economic weekly, giving the background to the initiative provided an analysis of the position of the two companies in Hungary including their marketing and investment plans (Mong 1996). According to the supporting data, the two multinational companies dominate more than 90 % of the carbonated drink market in the country. Coca-Cola has not been able to

extend its otherwise clear international superiority over Pepsi in Hungary (47% of the international market share as opposed to Pepsi’s 22%) in Hungary the ratio is 50:43%, and the expansion of initiatives and advertising activity is explained by a wish to increase the Company’s market share.

4. At the beginning of the debate the company published a color photograph of the visual plan in two dailies in a full page paid advertisement. (*Magyar Hírlap, Blikk* – both in the issue of the 3rd October 1996).
5. The first point of the agenda of the meeting of the Committee, decision No. 1619/1996. (IX. 13.) (Copy).
6. The Advisor is an elected officer of the General Assembly of Budapest. His role is similar to that of the deputy mayor, it extends only to a narrower area and not to an overarching branch of the life of the city government.
7. The company – officially known as GE Lighting Tungsram Rt. – can also be regarded as a multinational company, since following 1989 the Hungarian Tungsram company which has a long history in Hungary was bought by General Electric, the American company.
8. Decision 37186/1996 of the National Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments dated 20th September, 1996 (Copy).
9. *Új Magyarország*, 23rd September 1996, p. 23.
10. *Magyar Hírlap*, 23rd September 1996, p. 7.
11. Untitled collection of 28 video-interviews. Letters opposing the plan appeared in a compilation of the 22nd October, 1996 issue of the newspaper *Népszabadság*, entitled “Is decorating the Chain Bridge a gift or advertisement?” According to the commentary of the editors the paper received only one supporting letter.
12. “Chain Bridge. Opinion survey among the inhabitants of Budapest.” Made by Szonda Ipsos, September 1996. The survey was a representative sample of the over 16 population of Budapest, the 400 interviewees were representative of the general population with regard to gender and age, as well as educational level. The October 1996 survey by Szonda Ipsos entitled “Chain Bridge 2. Opinion survey among town dwellers” used similar sampling methods, and its results represent the opinions of the over 15 population of Hungary, as the sample of 600 was divided evenly (300-300) between the inhabitants of Budapest and the towns of the countryside.
13. *Világgazdaság*, 4th October, 1996, p. 8.
14. “Opinion survey about the Christmas decoration of the Chain Bridge.” Made by Mimikri Bt., September 1996. The survey was conducted on the 26th September in the 23 districts of the capital, it consisted of a random sample of 400 inhabitants above the age of 18. The sample is approximately representative of the population in terms of gender, age, and educational level. Its

- results were also published by *Népszabadság*, on 4th October, 1996.
15. *Magyar Nemzet*, 28th September, 1996. Emphasis in the original.
 16. Interview, 16th April, 1997.
 17. The expression does not come from the Chain Bridge debate but from an essay which analyses the relationship of the post-communist cityscape and international consumer culture. (Dessewffy 1997: 32).

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