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The Városliget reborn



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The Városliget as it looked in the 1840s

The Municipal Park or Városliget of Budapest will be inaugurated shortly, after undergoing extensive redevelopment work for several years. The rejuvenated, sprawling parkland area will be another car-free spot in the metropolis, under a recent resolution adopted by the Budapest Council.

For centuries, the Municipal Park has been a playground and excursion spot frequented by the citizens of Pest. Shortly after the Turks had been thrown out from Hungary after a 150-year occupation, King Leopold I gave the area as a grant to the municipality of Pest. In the 18th century, Queen Maria Theresa, during a visit to Pest, ordered that the marshland which occupied the site be drained and willow trees planted in the area. The afforestation scheme went on under Joseph II, who succeeded the queen in 1780. (A historic point of interest: according to a written record of Canon Rogerius of Nagyvárad, some of the Mongolians who invaded Hungary in 1240-41 pitched their camp in the Városliget area. According to the record, Bishop Ugrin of Kalocsa had lured a Mongolian horde to this marshland area and then had the several-hundred-strong force killed almost to a man by his archers.)

The spreading grove, which was commonly referred to as Municipal Woods, became an outing place much frequented by the common people, and a noted town magistrate, János Boráros, proposed that it be converted into a playground and place of recreation. A

Fine Arts Fund—were built in those years. The 20th century also has taken a toll of the trees of the park, and the International Fair series, which was held here from the thirties until a few years ago, took up nearly one-third of the area.

However, the public demand that the historic municipal park of recreation be restored to the citizenry in its entirety became more and more vociferous. Ultimately, the Budapest Council was moved to order that the Fair be transferred to an outlying district, and when it subsequently invited plans to a competition for a redevelopment project, it specified that opportunities of rest and recreation and

sports must be ensured here for every age group of the Budapest citizenry.

Redevelopment work, now in its fourth year, is nearing completion—the rejuvenated Municipal Park will be formally inaugurated at the end of May. Newly established facilities include a little botanic garden, a garden for blind people, several “log fortresses” for children, a traffic rules playground, sledding hillock, and sun terrace. A schoolchildren’s playground was completed this spring, as was the landscape gardening of the area as a whole. In these spring days the flower beds in the park are full of tulips giving welcome bright colours to the scenery. During the redevelopment work several hundred thousand cubic metres of earth was moved, to establish the sledding hillock, and other formations of the terrain. The flora of the place has become enriched through the planting of trees of 30 different kinds, 70 kinds of shrubs, and 20 kinds of pines and firs—a total of several thousand trees and tens of thousand of shrubbery.

The Municipal Park, as has been said, now follows Váci utca and Margaret Island in being declared areas from where motor traffic is banned. Only very few motor vehicles will be allowed to enter the Városliget area—those that will serve the various facilities founded there. The Municipal Park, lavishly ornamented with fountains and statuary, will bring the capital one little step closer to nature.



Log-and-boards structure imitating a train in the schoolchildren’s playground

French-born gardener named Henrik Nebbien sent in a plan to a 1813 competition which would have made the Városliget the world’s first People’s Park. However, for lack of funds, only a small portion of Nebbien’s plan was actually realized.

The area of the park as it is today began to take shape around the middle of the 19th century—the finest oldest trees of today were planted about that time. The Millenary festivities in 1896 had brought many changes to the park: unfortunately, numerous trees were cut down, but several facilities in the place—the Széchenyi baths, the Museum of Transport and Communications, and the one-time Municipal Pavilion which today is a sculpture studio run by the



Sun platform on the pond in the park

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