



Fleeting encounters: digital labour mobility and the loss of public sociality in Blaha Lujza Square, Budapest

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Received: 9 December 2025 – Revised: 22 May 2026 – Accepted: 22 June 2026 – Published: 14 July 2026

Abstract. Blaha Lujza tér, one of Budapest's central public squares, has undergone repeated transformations, from socialist modernisation to its renewal in 2022. This paper explores urban loss not as disappearance, but as a process that reorganises material space, social rhythms, and everyday relations. Using archival photographs, contemporary fieldwork, oral histories, and analysis of online sentiment, the study traces how the square's dense and improvised sociability has thinned into more fleeting forms of public life. The redesign introduced open paving, reduced shade, and automated infrastructures, producing what urban scholars describe as aesthetic and moral ordering. These material configurations intersect with platform-based mobility, as delivery riders and transient users increasingly shape the square's social life. Sociability persists, but as fleeting encounters, regulated by circulation rather than lingering. This paper argues that loss in Blaha is processual and relational and felt through changes in how people wait, gather, and recognise one another. Rather than a nostalgic account, the study shows how publicness is being redefined through design, visibility, and algorithmic governance, revealing the everyday textures of loss in a contemporary post-socialist city.

1 Introduction

We used to wait by the clock. Everyone met there.
Now it's gone. Everything feels unfamiliar and
only the homeless stay there now.

This recollection from a long-time Budapest resident reflects not only a personal memory but a broader sense of disorientation surrounding Blaha Lujza tér. Named after Blaha Lujza, the nineteenth-century actress known as the “nightingale of the nation”, the square has long functioned as a major urban node shaped by successive waves of redevelopment. During the socialist period, particularly from the 1960s to the late 1980s, it operated as a dense transport and cultural hub that enabled prolonged waiting, informal encounters, and habitual meeting practices organised around tram stops, cafés, kiosks, and shaded seating. Following the political transition of 1989, the square underwent infrastructural fragmentation and commercial restructuring, with large areas dominated by surface parking and heavy traffic by the 2000s and 2010s. Despite these changes, everyday sociability persisted through informal interactions and waiting practices embedded within

this fragmented environment. These layered transformations culminated in the square's reopening in 2022, framed as a comprehensive renewal aimed at improving mobility, accessibility, and visual order.

However, the renovation failed to restore the social rhythms that characterised the square during the late socialist period (1960s–1980s) and, in more fragmented form, persisted into the early post-socialist decades of the 1990s and 2000s. More than a story of aesthetic change, this transformation reflects a deeper shift in how the square functions within the city: from a site of lingering and informal sociability to a space increasingly organised around circulation, efficiency, and digitally mediated mobility. Recent discussions on platform urbanism and urban logistics highlight how digital infrastructures reorganise urban space around circulation, efficiency, and on-demand mobility (Leszczynski, 2020; Sadowski, 2020). This paper builds on these insights by examining how such processes reshape not only movement and labour, but also the lived experience of public space and everyday sociability.

What was once structured by waiting – by shared pauses, chance encounters, and habitual meeting points – has been reconfigured into patterns of movement shaped by platform-based services, navigation apps, and on-demand labour. Waiting has become roaming; lingering has become passing through. The square now operates less as a space of collective presence and more as a logistical node within wider networks of urban circulation. This shift points to a form of socio-spatial erosion that unfolds not simply through physical redesign but through the thinning of encounters and shared temporalities. In this sense, Blaha¹ exemplifies a broader contradiction in post-socialist urbanism: the pursuit of modernisation, often aligned with efficiency and European integration, reconfigures public space in ways that prioritise flow over presence. The concentration of platform-based delivery work in Blaha reflects broader post-socialist urban dynamics, where cities such as Budapest have been rapidly integrated into global market economies through processes of liberalisation and restructuring (Sýkora and Bouzarovski, 2012). Within this context, platform companies expand by leveraging flexible labour arrangements and dense urban demand, with European evidence pointing to the growing importance of digital platforms in organising work and consumption (Fabo et al., 2017). Central nodes such as Blaha maximise these dynamics, functioning as efficient points of circulation within app-mediated urban economies.

Drawing on archival research, oral histories, and visual methodologies, the study situates this transformation within larger post-socialist trajectories. The emotional texture of loss in Blaha is felt but has remained largely unexamined in scholarly work. Although Blaha has been extensively documented in histories, architectural accounts, and policy reports tracking its physical renewal, existing scholarship rarely investigates how these transformations have reconfigured everyday sociability, temporal rhythms, and embodied presence in the square. While studies on platform labour and urban logistics have examined questions of work, infrastructure, and circulation, they have paid less attention to how these processes reshape the lived experience of public space and everyday sociability. This paper addresses that gap by examining Blaha not only as an architectural transformation but as a site where the social and temporal textures of public life have been quietly eroded. The square that once gathered people now disperses them through individualised circuits of navigation and labour.

To ground this claim, the next section develops a conceptual framework linking theories of urban loss, sociability, and post-socialist modernity. It outlines how spatial, temporal, and affective changes intersect to produce urban loss as both material transformation and lived condition and why Blaha offers a telling site through which to rethink what late-

modern cities do with loss. This is followed by a description of the study's methodological approach, detailing how archival images, oral histories, and field observations were used to analyse change across different temporal layers. The analysis then unfolds in three parts, examining how material redesign, shifting rhythms of use, and emerging digital infrastructures reshape sociability in the square. The conclusion reflects on what Blaha reveals about contemporary urban loss and the changing conditions of public life in post-socialist cities.

2 Urbanity and sociability as late-modern conditions

Urban sociability has long been regarded as a defining aspect of city life. In this paper, sociability is understood as the everyday practices of co-presence through which strangers and acquaintances recognise one another, interact, and share time in public space. This includes informal encounters, habitual meeting practices, and forms of waiting that enable repeated yet often fleeting interactions among urban dwellers. Rather than referring to stable social ties, sociability is approached here as a relational and processual condition that emerges through rhythms of use and shared spatio-temporal practices.

This emphasis on shared temporal practices foregrounds the role of urban rhythms in shaping sociability. The temporal dimension of sociability is conceptualised here through the organisation of waiting, movement, and duration in public space. Temporal change in Blaha is therefore understood as a shift from prolonged and collectively experienced rhythms of waiting and lingering toward more accelerated, individualised, and platform-mediated forms of time. This reconfiguration does not eliminate sociability but reshapes it into shorter, more fragmented, and circulation-oriented encounters.

Classical theorists such as Simmel (1950) and Wirth (1938) viewed the metropolis as a space where proximity substitutes intimacy and encounters multiply yet remain distant. Their insights remain relevant, but the technological and temporal conditions that once supported everyday forms of connection have shifted under the social and economic transformations of late modernity. Lefebvre (2013) depicts the city as a polyrhythmic composition where economic, bodily, and environmental times intersect. Building on this, scholars of late-modern urbanism emphasise how these rhythms are increasingly shaped by broader political-economic transformations. Harvey (1989) argues that processes of time-space compression reorganise urban life through acceleration and capital circulation, while more recent work highlights how governance, security, and affect are embedded in everyday spatial arrangements, often producing uneven experiences across different urban contexts (Tulumello, 2015; Kern, 2021). Other urban scholars extend this perspective by showing how urban life is structured through rhythms of repetition, anticipation, and interruption, shaping how people

¹ Locals commonly refer to Blaha Lujza tér simply as “Blaha” – a shorthand that conveys both geographical familiarity and its role as a recognizable urban landmark.

wait, move, and encounter one another in everyday space, and how these patterns can be disrupted through urban transformation (Crang, 2001; Lehtovuori and Koskela, 2013).

Under contemporary urbanisation, linear rhythms of mobility and productivity accelerate, while cyclical rhythms of rest and encounter diminish (Freund, 2010). As Rosa (2013) and Wajcman (2015) note, this acceleration defines the accelerated logic of late capitalism, shaping infrastructures as well as emotional dispositions. The affective consequence is temporal fragmentation, a sense that time is scarce and must constantly be optimised (Sharma, 2014).

Within this accelerated tempo, sociability no longer unfolds primarily in the physical co-presence of public spaces but within hybrid digital–material environments. Willis and Aurigi (2011) conceptualises such spaces as rhythmic hybrids where embodied and mediated actions overlap. Degen (2018) similarly emphasises that urban renewal projects choreograph movement and anticipation, subtly directing how people dwell and move through the city. Everyday mobility shapes how social connections are configured and constrained. Within this context, Middleton (2016) and Cresswell (2006) show that walking – once a simple and social rhythm of movement – has become a negotiated practice shaped by competing temporal demands and sensory distractions.

The proliferation of mobile and locative media further recalibrates how urban dwellers encounter one another. Studies of digital mediation and ambient sociality reveal that contact increasingly takes the form of short, repeated, and algorithmically organised interactions (Licoppe, 2016; Molnár, 2013; Koch and Miles, 2020). While Straughan and Bissell (2022) and Rafalow (2017) show how digital infrastructures expand transient encounters into networks of permanently weak relations, Sun et al. (2013) characterise this as a structure of co-presence composed of “familiar strangers”. According to Rose (2020), smart-city technologies are increasingly controlling these socialities through algorithmic modulation and data collecting, transforming public space into a controlled ecology of mobility. These insights allude that urban sociability in late modernity is not fading but being reorganised. The rhythms of the city now hinge on infrastructures that privilege mobility, speed, and mediated connection. Sociability becomes thin yet continuous, affective yet ephemeral – a condition that Amin (2008) describes as ambient public life. This reorganisation entails its own form of urban loss: the attenuation of shared rhythms and the displacement of lingering by transit. Yet, as Laurier and Philo (2006) and Straughan and Bissell (2022) note, fleeting encounters can still produce empathy, recognition, and curiosity. In this paper, such encounters are read not as residues of a bygone sociability but as expressions of how late-modern cities sustain connection amid acceleration.

2.1 Post-socialist cities as laboratories of late modernity

The shift from state socialism to market capitalism generated one of the most rapid and uneven urban transformations in modern history. In central and eastern Europe, the introduc-

tion of market forces and the deconstruction of centralised planning altered the social imaginaries and material fabric of cities. This development has been characterised by academics as a “compressed modernisation” which condensed decades of capitalist restructuring into a few decades of rapid change (Sýkora and Bouzarovski, 2012; Tsenkova, 2008; Berki, 2014). The outcome is a heterogeneous landscape in which socialist infrastructures coexist with neoliberal redevelopment and global aesthetics of consumption. These shifts brought new geographies of power and exclusion. Swyngedouw et al. (2002) argued that European urban policy in the neoliberal era privileges entrepreneurial governance, producing socially discriminatory spaces under the banner of revitalisation. In post-socialist contexts, similar logics surfaced through projects of *Europeanisation* and *revitalisation* that re-coded modernity as a visual and moral order. Fleming (2012) shows how Łódź mobilised the discourse of “revitalisation” to legitimise privatisation and aesthetic control, while Lawton and Punch (2014) demonstrate that the “European city ideal” functions as a normative script aligning design with market competitiveness. These studies illustrate how modernisation is not only an economic process but also a moral geography in which cleanliness, order, and visibility are tantamount to progress.

Against this backdrop, the post-socialist city became a site of temporal and affective realignment. Sugarman and Thrift (2020) links neoliberalism to the internalisation of accelerated time, showing how the compression of temporal experience creates anxiety and a constant sense of delay. In a similar vein, Szpakowska-Loranc (2016) views the storytelling of modern cities as a spectacular, fast-paced show that undermines collective memory. In this sense, the loss experienced in post-socialist modernisation is not only material but temporal: a disjuncture between the lingering past and the hurried present. The Europeanisation of urban space also operates through design practices that aestheticise governance. In Ljubljana, Svirčić Gotovac and Kerbler (2019) show that sustainability narratives mask processes of gentrification and social filtering. Their findings resonate with those of Fleming (2012) and Lawton and Punch (2014) arguing that even when framed as ecological or cultural renewal, urban policy breeds neoliberal hierarchies of access. Such projects illustrate what Swyngedouw et al. (2002) term *the post-political city*, a mode of urbanism where consensus around growth suppresses contestation and difference. Within these restructured landscapes, public spaces become arenas where belonging and exclusion are negotiated daily. Newman (2013) conceptualises municipal authorities and private managers as “gatekeepers of the urban commons”, determining who may occupy, linger, or perform visibility. Yaghi et al. (2019) describe how artists and residents deploy *performative interventions* to reclaim such controlled environments, noting that even within neoliberal urbanism, alternative publics continue through creative and ephemeral acts. These performances operate as what Edensor (2010) describes as practices of con-

solation, the embodied gestures through which people cope with and respond to the experience of urban loss.

When viewed collectively, these studies position the post-socialist city as a laboratory of late modernity. They highlight the tensions of global trends including commodification, acceleration, and aesthetic governance. Urban renewal guarantees inclusion and modernity but often results in selective openness, spatial polarisation, and affective fatigue. Hirt (2014) describes this contradiction as the “post-public city”, a space that retains the appearance of collectivity while hollowing out its social substance. In Budapest, post-socialist urban transformation has been shaped by the reconfiguration of public space, housing, and social visibility, where privatisation, welfare retrenchment, and the regulation of marginalised groups have redefined urban life and intensified socio-spatial inequalities (Bodnár, 2001; Missetics, 2017; Ámon, 2019). These processes are further reflected in the everyday production of urban space, including shifting patterns of diversity, cultural inscription, and affective negotiations of belonging in central districts of the city (Balizs and Erőss, 2021; Boros et al., 2016). These tensions manifest vividly in the renewal of Blaha, where modernisation redefines the rhythms, emotions, and possibilities of collectiveness. Here, urban loss is not simply the loss of socialist material forms but the transformation of their social and temporal infrastructures.

2.2 Theorising loss in the post-socialist context

The concept of urban loss has gained renewed significance in critical urban geography as scholars seek to understand the affective and social consequences of transformation. Modernity, as Reckwitz (2021) argues, is characterised not only by its generative tendencies but also by its continuous production of disappearance. Loss materialises when social practices, ties, and spaces that once carried value are eroded, displaced, or made outdated. In urban contexts, this becomes evident in the vanishing of shared rhythms, everyday sociability, and all other forms of collective presence that previously structured urban life. This view resonates with recent theories that frame loss not merely as an endpoint but as an ongoing process embedded in everyday practices of moving, sensing, and adapting to the city. In this sense, loss becomes both structural and experiential: it shapes the material order of the city while being continuously re-enacted in its daily rhythms. In post-socialist cities, where rebuilding the urban fabric also entails reassembling forms of collective life, these dynamics take on distinct spatial and emotional intensities.

In post-socialist contexts, loss is experienced with intensity. Hirt (2014) describes the “post-public city” as a landscape where once collective spaces, crucial to the socialist ideal of sociability, have been disjointed by privatisation and consumerism. Public parks, squares, and boulevards that were once sites of collective leisure and ideological display have been reimagined as nodes of consumption and surveil-

lance. Kalyukin et al. (2015), analysing the reconstruction of Moscow's Gorky Park, identify a "second generation" of post-socialist change in which the very meaning of the *public* is recast through neoliberal aesthetics of order, safety, and spectacle. Although framed as efforts to design liveable, "European" cities, these projects often produce socially selective spaces that privilege consumption over interaction. Bugarič (2006) likewise traces how capitalist urbanism alters modernist ideals of public life into consumerist spectacles. The "Disneyfication" and "citisation" of the city reduce public space to a stage for scripted social performances, while the everyday spontaneity of encounter is superseded by visual and commercial simulation. The shift from *form follows function* to *form follows finance* signifies not only a change in urban aesthetics but also a more profound reconfiguration of how sociability itself is organised (Bugarič, 2006). Public spaces become privatised non-places where presence is regulated, encounters are fleeting, and the possibility of collective identification shrinks. This loss is not merely physical but relational.

Drawing from Lefebvre's understanding of space as socially produced, loss must be seen as a transformation of rhythms as the everyday patterns that sustain coexistence. When the temporal and spatial conditions that once enabled collective rhythms are disrupted, sociability becomes fragmented. The resulting interactions are characterised by mobility, short duration, and mediated connection.

Contemporary platform economies extend this transformation by embedding urban life within digitally mediated systems that increasingly coordinate everyday activity. Rather than replacing earlier processes of privatisation and commercialisation, platformisation intensifies them through algorithmically organised infrastructures that shape how people encounter the city and one another. Research from Hungary and neighbouring countries suggests that platform-mediated work has expanded through labour markets already characterised by precarity and flexibilisation, reinforcing rather than replacing existing forms of socio-economic inequality (Kahancová et al., 2020; Piasna and Drahoušková, 2019). In Budapest, the renewal of public spaces has been associated with the emergence of what Boros et al. (2016) describe as "controlled diversity", where visibility replaces deeper forms of engagement and urban encounters become carefully choreographed. Related processes of post-socialist redevelopment and market-oriented urban transformation have reshaped patterns of inequality and access to central urban spaces in Budapest (Berki, 2014; Czifusz and Jelinek, 2022). At the same time, the regulation of presence in public space, particularly in relation to homelessness, has become a key dimension of urban governance in the city (Misétsics, 2017). Regulation, surveillance, and gentrification thus reshape urban public life into a choreography of selective co-presence. These dynamics also resonate with broader debates on the politics of public space, where access, visibil-

ity, and participation are actively shaped by regulatory and institutional forces (Mitchell, 2003).

Tsenkova (2008) situates these developments within broader processes of neoliberal restructuring and social differentiation in post-socialist cities. Privatisation and the emergence of new consumption spaces have redefined both urban form and everyday life, producing new hierarchies of access and belonging. These dynamics reveal that urban loss operates across scales: from the demolition of material structures to the attenuation of shared rhythms and the erosion of public sociability. Therefore, rather than focusing on simple disappearance, this paper approaches urban loss as a process of relational reconfiguration. It includes the replacement of embodied sociability with mediated interaction and the displacement of collective practices by commercialised forms of encounter. The experience of loss encompasses both the material disappearance and the affective transformation, marked by the gradual thinning of the social fabric of daily urban life. This conceptualisation provides the foundation for examining how, in places such as Blaha, renewal projects produce not absence but new modes of fleeting, transactional, and hyper-mobile interaction that embody the late-modern condition of sociability.

3 Tracing loss: a visual and affective methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in visual and affective methodologies. It examines how urban loss is lived, narrated, and mediated through everyday encounters in Blaha Lujza tér. Combining ethnographic fieldwork, oral history, and digital analysis, the research traces how residents and urban publics articulate the erosion and reconfiguration of sociability in a post-socialist square. Rather than reconstructing a fixed past, the study approaches loss as an ongoing process, enacted through movements, gestures, and mediated discourse. This multi-modal design follows the Pink (2015) notion of sensory ethnography, emphasising the interrelation of place, practice, and affect in everyday urban life.

The inquiry began with archival research using Fortépan, Hungary's open-access visual archive. A search for "Blaha Lujza tér" returned 718 images dating from the early 1900s to 1990. From this corpus, images specifically depicting the square were identified through visual inspection and cross-referencing of architectural landmarks. A subset was then selected to represent different historical moments and spatial configurations of the square, with particular attention to the period surrounding the demolition of the National Theatre in 1965 and the construction of the metro interchange. These transformations marked a significant shift in the square's function from a site of cultural gathering to a major transport node, reshaping both spatial use and everyday sociability. These photographs were not treated as neutral records but as memory infrastructures (Harper, 2002) that illuminate

how material arrangements enabled particular forms of sociability. The analysis focused on recurring spatial features, including the arrangement of benches, the presence of shaded areas, proximity to transport nodes, and patterns of crowd density. While the archival material provides a long temporal perspective, its uneven distribution across decades and seasonal variation are acknowledged as limitations.

Alongside these materials, I produced contemporary photographs during fieldwork between 2023 and 2025. These images functioned as visual field notes (Pink, 2015), capturing how the renewed square organises waiting, movement, and social encounters. Rather than employing systematic repeat photography, the images were used as interpretive traces of how transformation is materially registered in everyday rhythms of use.

Oral histories formed the core of the empirical material. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with long-term residents and regular users of the square, most of whom were older adults with memories spanning multiple decades. Participants were selected to capture diverse experiences of the square's transformation. Interviews employed a photo-elicitation method (Harper, 2002; Pink, 2015) in which archival and contemporary images were used to prompt reflection and sensory recollection. The interviews were analysed thematically, focusing on recurring narratives related to waiting practices, meeting points, and changing patterns of interaction. While individual accounts are not treated as representative, they provide insight into how transformations in the spatial and temporal organisation of the square are experienced in everyday life.

To complement these embodied accounts, online discussions about the 2022 renewal of Blaha were analysed. Public comments were collected from Facebook groups, news portals, and online forums between 2022 and 2024. These posts were approached as affective publics (Kozinets, 2020), where sentiments of frustration, irony, nostalgia, and hope circulate. The analysis examined how users articulated loss and estrangement through humour, complaint, and longing, revealing how the square's transformation is collectively interpreted and negotiated in digital space. This dimension demonstrates how urban loss extends beyond the physical site, resonating through mediated environments of commentary and imagination.

4 Material infrastructures of sociability: from informal density to aesthetic loss

Before becoming a showcase of post-socialist renewal, Blaha had long been one of Budapest's most socially dense urban spaces. The National Theatre and the EMKE Café once anchored the square as cultural nodes for artists, workers, and intellectuals. During the socialist period, the square evolved into an intensively used everyday environment where trams and buses converged; kiosks and vendors occupied corners;

and the nearby Corvin department store structured routines of buying, queuing, and casual conversation. Each redesign – from the 1965 demolition of the theatre to the socialist-era introduction of fountains and planters and finally the recent renewal in 2022 – reshaped how publicness and sociability were materially expressed.

Two aerial perspectives illustrate this transformation. The 1973 Fortepan image (Fig. 1) shows Blaha textured and shaded with trees, benches, and the traces of daily movement embedded in its surfaces. People hover near tram stops, gather under vegetation, and occupy benches oriented toward one another. The square appears thick with what Lindner and Sandoval (2025) describes as improvised architectures of sociability, where material cues support proximity, lingering, and spontaneous encounters.

By the 2000s and 2010s, Blaha had already undergone significant transformation, characterised by heavy traffic circulation, fragmented pedestrian zones, and growing social stigma. Despite these conditions, practices of sociability persisted. Waiting at transport nodes, informal interactions among commuters, and temporary uses of space continued to structure everyday encounters, albeit in more fragmented and less spatially cohesive ways.

By contrast, the 2023 aerial view (Fig. 2) reveals a simplified spatial geometry defined by wide expanses of granite paving, restrained greenery, and carefully aligned furniture. Surfaces appear smooth and continuous, producing what Ghertner (2015) calls rule by aesthetics: governance through visual order. Where density once fostered contact, clarity now produces exposure. The informality once embedded in shaded corners, irregular surfaces, and flexible gathering points gives way to a visually disciplined environment oriented toward openness and legibility.

This transformation aligns with what Degen (2018) and Rose (2020) describe as “aesthetic infrastructures”: urban spaces designed primarily for optical coherence and representational clarity rather than embodied comfort. The renovated Blaha reads cleanly from above, where its rectilinear planters, polished stone surfaces, and evenly spaced benches form a coherent visual statement. Yet this legibility also reorganises the material conditions that support sociability. The reduction in shaded areas and the increased spacing of seating elements limit opportunities for prolonged co-presence, making sustained interaction less likely. In prioritising how the square looks over how it is lived, the design substitutes representational order for relational density.

These changes are visible in both visual and observational data. Contemporary images show individuals occupying the square in dispersed and often isolated positions, while field observations indicate that time spent in the space is typically brief and task-oriented. People pause momentarily – often to check their phones, wait for transport, or coordinate movement – before continuing on their way. Shared rhythms of waiting give way to more individualised and fragmented uses of time. Public discourse surrounding the project reinforces



Figure 1. View of Blaha Lujza Square from the top floor of the Népszabadság headquarters. (Source: Fortepan digital photo archive, 1973.)



Figure 2. The renovated square in 2022. (Source: MTI/Zoltán Balogh).

this aesthetic and moral shift. Social media discussions repeatedly characterised the old Blaha as “dirty”, “chaotic”, or “infested with the homeless”, making cleanliness and simplification appear to be necessary improvements. As Poleykett (2022) and Speer (2018) show, the politics of cleanliness functions as a mode of governance that spatially sorts populations by perceived respectability. In Blaha, this logic materialises through open sightlines, hard surfaces, and furniture that discourages prolonged presence. Stillness becomes subtly suspect, and lingering becomes a spatial infraction.

Across these transformations, sociability is not erased but reorganised. From the dense and materially supported co-presence of the socialist period, through the fragmented yet persistent interactions of the 2000s and 2010s, to the regulated and circulation-oriented patterns of the present, Blaha reflects a longer trajectory of socio-spatial change. What has been lost is not simply physical elements, but the spatial and temporal conditions that once enabled sustained, relational forms of public interaction.

4.1 Temporal rhythms of sociability: the disappearance of the pause

The transformation of Blaha is not only spatial but temporal. If the previous era was defined by the density of shared presence, the renewed square expresses what Lefebvre (2004) might call a reorganisation of rhythms or the loss of everyday duration that once made sociability tangible. Socialist-era photographs capture the square as an infrastructure of time: people sitting on benches, feeding pigeons, waiting for trams, or meeting under the clock (Fig. 3). In these images, time is not only represented but embodied. People remain in place, sitting in clusters, leaning against railings, or gathering around fixed points. Bodies are oriented toward one another rather than toward movement, suggesting a spatial arrangement that supports interaction and duration. Benches are occupied in proximity, enabling both conversation and silent co-presence, while overlapping activities unfold without urgency. Waiting, resting, and socialising occur simultaneously, producing a layered rhythm of shared time rather than a sequence of isolated movements.

These scenes are echoed in oral histories, where interviewees recall how “we would meet at the clock”; come to the square to “meet people and say hi”; or simply spend time together, including casual encounters and even dates. As one participant noted, it was a place “where you always ended up talking to someone while waiting”, highlighting how waiting functioned not as idle time but as a socially productive interval that enabled spontaneous encounters and familiar recognition. The repetition of such moments, what Jeffrey (2008) called the politics of waiting, constituted the square as temporal commons. Waiting was not wasted time but a shared rhythm of urban life, one that affirmed belonging through co-presence, where encounters emerged through pause, repetition, and the simple act of “hanging out” together in time.

In contrast, such practices have become difficult to sustain in the present-day square. The minimalist surface and scattered furniture create an environment that values visibility and flow over stillness. The benches are narrow, shade limited, and the surfaces uninviting. People pause briefly, often while looking at their phones or waiting for a ride before continuing (Fig. 4). What was once a square of circulation and rest has become a transit space governed by acceleration. As Crang (2001) notes, time–space compression not only alters mobility but also redefines how urban dwellers experience waiting and encounter. The renewed Blaha reflects this shift: the loss of waiting as a shared temporal practice and its replacement by shorter, individualised intervals of movement.

This reconfiguration of rhythm is visible in the rise in what Thulin et al. (2019) and Sutko and de Souza (2011) call mediated presence. People no longer linger for social reasons but remain connected elsewhere through mobile interfaces. The smartphone produces a new form of absent togetherness, where attention circulates across physical and digital realms. In Blaha, the fleeting gestures of those seated on red benches such as checking notifications, glancing at a screen, or answering a call replace the tactile rhythm of conversation with a mediated rhythm of connectivity. These are what Vanden Abeele et al. (2018) describes as mobile micro-interactions, short-lived acts of presence that are frequent but thin. Yet absent togetherness here is not created by digital technology alone. The renewed spatial design reinforces it. Benches are widely spaced, shade is scarce, and the openness of the square makes sustained conversation uncomfortable. Even groups who arrive together often sit facing outward or turn to their phones, as the environment offers few cues for shared presence. In this sense, the digital does not replace sociability on its own but fills the void left by a square that no longer supports lingering or collective tempo.

This sense of temporal dispersion extends to mobility infrastructures. The delivery riders waiting by the corner of Rákóczi Road (Fig. 5) embody a rhythm governed by algorithmic time rather than human tempo. Their sociability is mediated through platforms such as Wolt and Foodpanda,² whose notifications dictate movement. Koch and Miles (2020) interpret these new geographies of encounter as networked proximities, forms of co-presence organised by data and labour rather than spontaneity. In Blaha, this algorithmic coordination merges with public infrastructure: the MOL Bubi bike dock and the tram stop coexist with riders’ phones, forming a hybrid landscape of automation and mobility.³ As the square becomes increasingly animated by gig workers and transient commuters, its rhythms accelerate and flatten. Encounters once grounded in routine exchange are replaced by algorithmically timed transactions. A 62-year-

²Wolt and Foodpanda are popular app-based food delivery platforms operating in Budapest.

³MOL Bubi is Budapest’s official public bike-sharing programme.



Figure 3. Waiting, leisure, and everyday sociability in Blaha Lujza tér during the 1960s–1980s. (Source: author’s compilation from the Fortepan digital photo archive.)

old woman who has lived near Blaha since her childhood recalled the following:

Everything has changed now. We used to see street vendors here. My mom used to come here and buy from these vendors. But now you can just do it on your phone and these Wolt workers will deliver it to you.

This account captures how everyday practices once structured by embodied interaction such as waiting, choosing, and casual conversation have been compressed into platform-mediated transactions, reducing both the duration and social depth of encounter. The loss here is not only economic or spatial but deeply rhythmic, an erosion of shared temporalities that once sustained sociability.

These changing temporalities reshape the emotional landscape of public life. The sense of ambient sociality that Amin (2008) once associated with the city, the quiet awareness of others through gestures, smells, and overlapping rhythms,

gives way to infrastructural thinness. Encounters persist, but they are increasingly ambient, asynchronous, and transactional. People occupy the same space but inhabit different temporalities. A delivery rider waits for an order, a commuter checks a timetable, a couple eats in silence before dispersing. Together, they form a choreography of disconnection: social density without social depth. This thinning is not limited to functional encounters such as those between riders and customers. It also affects relational encounters, including friends meeting, acquaintances chatting, and strangers sharing brief pauses. Interviewees noted that “there’s nowhere to comfortably talk anymore”, pointing to how the spatial and temporal conditions for sustained interaction have been diminished. In the past, the square’s rhythms encouraged spontaneous conversations, but the renewed Blaha now fragments attention and shortens time spent in the space. Residents express this loss indirectly. Online discussions about the renewal often describe the square as “too clean” or “soulless” and as a



Figure 4. Everyday use of the renovated Blaha Lujza tér, showing waiting passengers, seated visitors, and passersby. (Author's photograph, 2025.)

place one simply “passes through” rather than stays, reflecting a broader reluctance to linger. Such sentiments, though framed as aesthetic critique, are also temporal. Shade provides comfort for duration, kiosks invite lingering, and trees create shelter from visibility. Their absence enforces movement. The design’s openness, presented as inclusivity, instead disciplines how long bodies can remain in public. The result is what Ye (2015) terms the ambivalence of familiarity, a feeling of recognition without belonging.

Delivery work further illustrates how new forms of interaction are replacing older modes of public exchange. Delivery riders now coordinate through algorithms instead of social ties, occupying public space only for as long as efficiency permits. The square functions as a staging point for mobility, a brief pause between data-driven movements. Digital infrastructures such as Wolt or Foodpanda extend the logic of urban flow, effectively turning the square into a component of a wider logistical system. These workers are hyper-visible yet socially invisible. Their presence captures what Latham and Layton (2019) describe as infrastructural socia-

bility, in which social contact becomes functional rather than relational. Even moments of rest reveal layers of digital mediation. Conversations unfold alongside constant checking of devices, and gestures of attention are split with unseen audiences online. As Thulin et al. (2019) and Sutko and de Souza (2011) argue, the smartphone reshapes the urban sensorium by folding physical space into networks of mobility and information. In Blaha, this creates a form of public intimacy that feels both proximate and privatised. Individuals coexist in only partial relation to one another, linked by platforms yet separated by interfaces. The atmosphere of the square feels populated but uninhabited.

These observations show why sociability in Blaha becomes rhythm without resonance. People rarely move in unison long enough to coordinate their temporalities. Individualised flows shaped by design and data now occupy the square instead of shared pauses. However, any straightforward account of decline is complicated by these brief interactions. They show an ability to adjust, connecting through movement and mediation. Once rooted in co-located con-

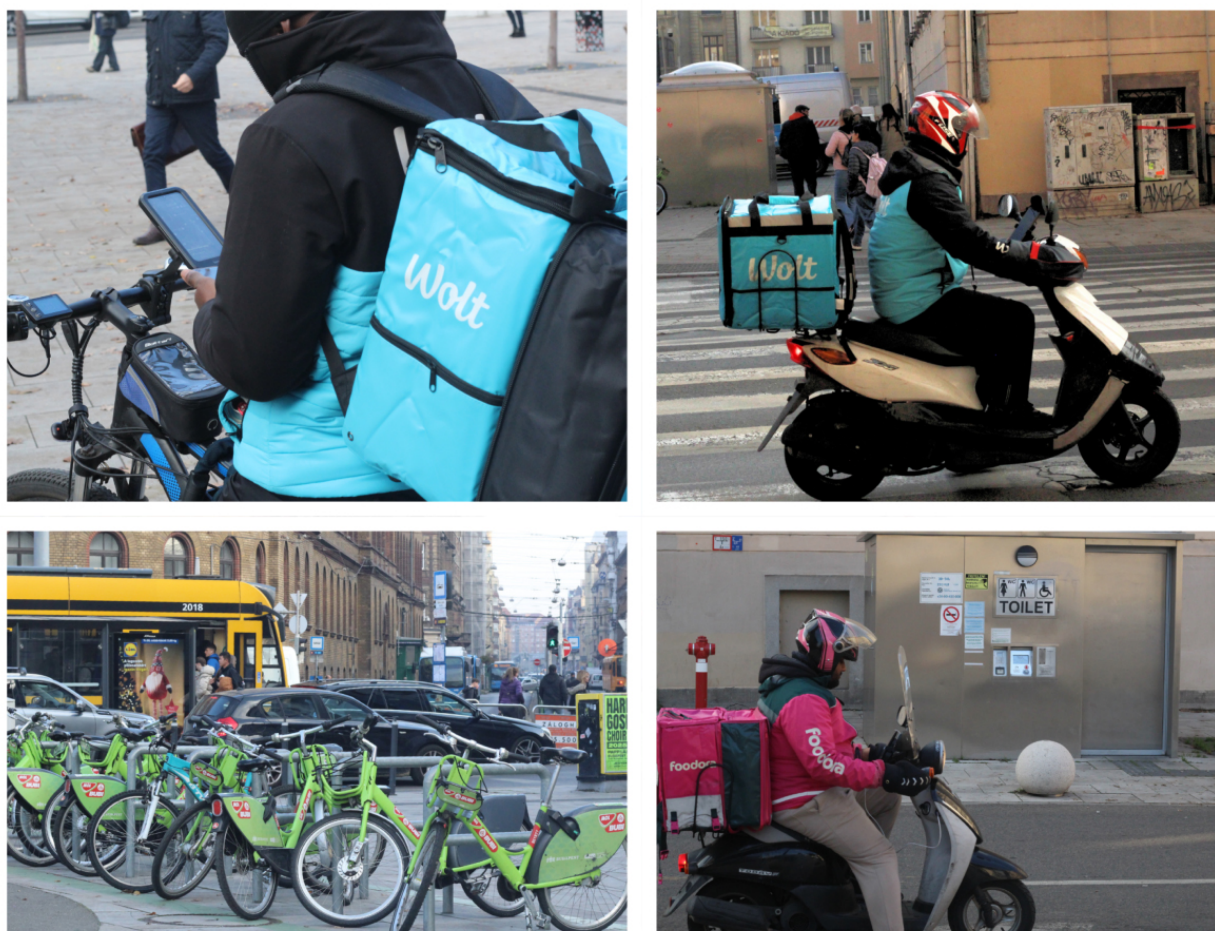


Figure 5. Delivery workers at Blaha Lujza tér. (Author's photograph, 2025.)

tact, presence now unfolds across multiple temporalities and spaces. Loss here is therefore qualitative rather than absolute: what disappears is the depth of public life and the gradual accumulation of shared experiences that once shaped the square's daily rhythm. Blaha's transformation reflects a broader condition of post-socialist urban modernity, where communal pauses give way to fragmented motion and cyclical time is replaced by linear efficiency. Encounters persist, but they are reorganised through mobility and mediation. The square no longer breathes collectively; it scrolls.

4.2 The loss of ease and belonging: datafied publics and exclusionary atmospheres

The transformation of Blaha does not end with new materials or rhythms. It extends into the logics that now govern how sociability itself is organised. What was once a square of collective rhythms and informal relations has become an environment structured by data, automation, and exclusion. In this shift, a different form of urban loss emerges: an affective and moral loss marked by the erosion of ease, recog-

nition, and unconditional belonging. The renewal of Blaha exemplifies how algorithmic and neoliberal forms of urban governance reconfigure who can appear, linger, and interact in public space.

The new infrastructures of the square like the automated toilets, surveillance cameras, and benches designed to prevent lying down perform control not through prohibition but through calibration. These material forms guide movement, duration, and visibility. Public behaviour is managed in advance, programmed into the design itself. As Kitchen (2017) and Leszczynski (2020) note, algorithmic urbanism operates by embedding governance in the material and digital fabric of the city. In Blaha, sociability becomes a function of compliance: an individual can sit, pause, or move, but only within the aesthetic and temporal parameters the design allows.

The regulation of presence in the renewed square must also be understood in relation to Blaha's long-standing stigma. For years, the square has circulated in public discourse as unruly, unsafe, or "taken over" by homeless residents, a framing that appears repeatedly in online comments (Sági, 2022). In this context, the introduction of automated amenities, partic-

ularly the timed, fee-based public toilet, functions as a subtle tool of deterrence rather than mere modernisation (Fig. 6). By automating and limiting access to basic facilities, these infrastructures make the square less inviting for those already perceived as “undesirable”, quietly narrowing who can stay, rest, or meet bodily needs within the space. This controlled atmosphere contributes not only to the erosion of ease and informality that once supported everyday sociability in Blaha, but also to the production of uneven feelings of comfort, safety, and belonging, as such affective conditions are actively shaped through spatial design and governance (Tulumello, 2015). This subtle filtering of presence reflects broader shifts in urban governance in Budapest, where exclusion is increasingly enacted through design, regulation, and discourse rather than overt prohibition. As Ámon (2019) argues, revanchist urban policies in Hungary frame the control of public space as the protection of order and majority rights, effectively legitimising the marginalisation of homeless populations and other stigmatised groups.

The surrounding architecture reinforces this contrast. The Courtyard Marriott in the Europeum complex emerges as a symbol of investment and connectivity (Fig. 7). Above its polished façade, surveillance cameras scan the square, linking security, consumption, and visibility into a single urban logic. This view represents what Loughran (2014) calls the aesthetics of global urbanism: a surface of transparency and order that conceals deep social stratification.

This convergence of algorithmic systems and economic power creates forms of selective urban citizenship akin to the Ong (2006) notion of graduated citizenship and the analysis of racial banishment conducted by Roy (2019), in which access to urban space becomes conditional, stratified, and monitored. Certain users, such as tourists, consumers, and gig workers, are absorbed into the city’s circuits of mobility and consumption, while others are made invisible or unwelcome. The renewed Blaha embodies this uneven geography of sociability: its red benches and smart infrastructure are open to everyone in theory but designed for particular forms of behaviour. Those who do not fit the aesthetic and algorithmic ideal of order, particularly the homeless or informal vendors, find themselves displaced by design.

Platform capitalism extends this pattern beyond the square. The proliferation of Airbnb apartments in the adjacent neighbourhoods has contributed to rising rents and the displacement of long-term residents, replacing local familiarity with transient flows of visitors. Several interviewees described this shift as altering everyday patterns of recognition and familiarity in the area. One 53-year-old resident who has lived in the neighbourhood since the late 1990s recalled the following:

I get to see different faces of people in our building. I am familiar with the faces of those who live in our building, but every week I see different ten-

ants because some house owners are renting their houses for visitors.

This sense of living among constantly changing populations reflects broader processes of post-socialist urban restructuring and platform-mediated urbanism in Budapest, where market-oriented development and housing transformations have reshaped patterns of stability and belonging in central urban areas (Czifusz and Jelinek, 2022). These dynamics are rooted in the post-socialist restructuring of housing and urban space, where market liberalisation and large-scale privatisation have intensified inequalities and reduced access to secure housing. As Missetics (2017) shows, the withdrawal of the state from housing provision and the commodification of urban space have produced structural conditions that sustain exclusion and precarious urban belonging in Budapest.

Encounters thus become shorter in duration and more weakly embedded, sustained by the pace of check-ins, deliveries, and platform-mediated transactions rather than repeated familiarity. As Leszczynski (2020) argues, platform urbanism transforms relation into transaction, turning presence itself into a monetisable event. What emerges around Blaha is an affective landscape shaped less by attachment than by circulation, where the square’s atmosphere of hypermobility extends into surrounding streets and loss is felt in the thinning of everyday recognition. Similar patterns have been observed in inner-city districts such as Józsefváros, where processes of studentification and urban regeneration have increased socio-cultural diversity while simultaneously weakening neighbourhood cohesion and long-term social ties.

Neighbourhood sociability becomes fragmented, sustained by the rhythm of check-ins and data metrics rather than everyday recognition. The square’s surrounding life now mirrors its internal logic: mobility replaces attachment, and social value is determined by visibility and performance. This redistribution of sociability also operates through moral and sensory codes. The absence of shade, the glare of lighting, and the uniformity of materials produce a landscape of overexposure. These design elements create a subtle discipline that regulates how long one can remain in the square. Green renewal, while marketed as ecological improvement, functions as aesthetic governance. Savić (2013) and Lelandais (2014) observe that pleasantness can be exclusionary: comfort for some entails discomfort for others. At Blaha, this tension manifests in the simultaneous presence of comfort and control, openness and surveillance.

What emerges is not the disappearance of sociability but its algorithmic reorganisation. Encounters remain possible, but they occur within scripted parameters: monitored, time-limited, and often mediated through apps. The city no longer requires social negotiation to maintain order; it is managed through design, software, and code. In this condition, the public sphere becomes an interface. The aesthetics of re-



Figure 6. Protest installation by local right-to-the-city group *A Város Mindenkié* (The City is for All), who provided free toilet access for the homeless. (Author's photograph, February 2023.)

newal mask a deeper transformation: sociability persists as data, movement, and visibility, but its texture, unpredictability, and depth have thinned. Blaha thus epitomises the paradox of post-socialist modernity. It is both a symbol of European progress and a laboratory of algorithmic control. More broadly, these transformations reflect the uneven and multi-layered nature of post-socialist urban transition, where market-driven restructuring, global urban imaginaries, and local governance practices intersect to produce fragmented and stratified urban spaces (Misetics, 2017).

The same networks that promise connection also enforce separation. The loss of sociability here is not the absence of relation but its automation, the conversion of togetherness into coordinated isolation. Between the protest for access and the surveillance of the hotel façade, the city negotiates its future as a place that looks public but feels private, that connects through systems but disconnects through experience.

5 Conclusions

This paper argues that urban loss in Blaha Lujza tér is not a singular outcome of post-socialist transformation, but an ongoing and relational process that unfolds through the reorganisation of space, rhythm, and sociability. Rather than signalling disappearance, loss emerges through subtle yet cumulative shifts in how people wait, gather, and encounter one another in the square. What is being transformed is not only the material fabric of the space, but the temporal and relational conditions that once enabled shared public life.

At the same time, these changes point beyond the post-socialist condition alone. The contemporary dynamics of Blaha are increasingly shaped by the wider logics of global digital capitalism, in which platform-based labour, data infrastructures, and algorithmic coordination reorganise everyday rhythms. The presence of delivery workers, the prevalence of mediated attention, and the acceleration of circulation reflect a broader restructuring of urban life, where sociability becomes entangled with optimisation, visibility, and real-time responsiveness.



Figure 7. The Europeum Courtyard Marriott and surveillance infrastructure overlooking Blaha Lujza tér. (Author's photograph, 2025.)

In this context, public space is not simply lost or privatised, but reconstituted as a hybrid socio-digital environment. Blaha remains formally open, yet its rhythms are fragmented and its encounters increasingly fleeting, transactional, and unevenly distributed across physical and digital domains. Co-presence persists, but without the temporal depth and mutual recognition that once anchored the square's everyday sociability.

Even the figure of Blaha Lujza herself, once associated with public vitality, is said to have withdrawn from the stage later in life – a gesture that quietly resonates with the square's own transformation. This is not a withdrawal through absence, but through a reorientation of conditions: the diminishing of invitation to linger, the thinning of shared rhythms, and the gradual displacement of co-presence by circulation and mediation.

Blaha thus offers a lens for understanding urban loss as a relational and processual condition, one that extends beyond post-socialist transformation alone. As the square becomes

increasingly embedded within the dynamics of global digital capitalism, sociability is reorganised through platform-mediated interaction, data-driven mobility, and accelerated temporalities. What disappears is not public life itself, but the depth, duration, and mutual recognition that once sustained it. The challenge, then, is not to recover a lost past, but to recognise how publicness is being redefined in the present – and to consider what forms of sociability might still emerge within, against, or beyond the logics of efficiency, visibility, and algorithmic control.

Data availability. No data sets have been used for this article.

Competing interests. The author has declared that there are no competing interests.

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Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Márton Berki for his guidance and support throughout this research. I am also grateful to Manuel Schramm for the invitation to contribute to this special issue following the Urban Loss conference in Jena in 2025. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and constructive suggestions, which helped strengthen the manuscript.

Review statement. This paper was edited by Simon Runkel and reviewed by two anonymous referees.

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