

**THESIS SYNOPSIS  
for**

**Viktória Pap**

**Interpreting Sziget Festival as a place**

titled PhD dissertation

**Supervisors:**

**László Letenyi PhD**

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associate professor

Budapest, 2022

**Institute of Communication and Sociology**

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# 1. Background and relevance of the research

My doctoral research deals with the Sziget Festival as a place, and with the relationship of the festivalgoers with the environment.<sup>1</sup> The dissertation consists of the presentation of three complementary research parts, each based on a different method of mental mapping and supplemented by other qualitative and quantitative methods. Two of the three mental mapping procedures are methods developed during the research. The topic of the research is place interpretation, which was performed using four approaches, answering four theoretical research questions. I have attached the presentation of the research results to these spatial interpretation approaches, in order of the research parts.

**Table 1.** Ways of interpreting Sziget Festival as a place

	<b>Spatial interpretation</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Space as</b>	<b>Research part/ mental mapping method</b>
<b>1.</b>	symbolic	border, attribution of meaning, representation, familiarity	area	1. Free recall mental mapping
<b>2.</b>	constituted	space shaping, space creation, function assignment, experience	experience space, place	2. Experience Mapping
<b>3.</b>	metaphysical	perception, experience, reception, spirit of place experience	atmosphere	
<b>4.</b>	functional, structural, action based	remembrance, path, relationship, attribution of significance, function, structure, action, time, attendance	network	3. Day Path Mental Mapping

<sup>1</sup> So not with the virtual space of the Sziget.

The Sziget Festival, the object and field of the research, is a country image element and the most attractive tourist attraction in Hungary. It is one of the most significant events in Europe in its genre and the largest and most successful cultural festival in Hungary. Although festival research and research on various topics dealing with or conducted at the Sziget Festival have already taken place, no social science research has been carried out on the Sziget Festival as a place, environment, or use of the place. Previous festival research have not placed space in the focus, nor has it used mental mapping.

The main category of the dissertation, space as a sociological topic, is neglected, both in terms of theory and empirical results, and overdue especially in Hungarian sociology (see Berger, 2018), even though in recent decades there has been a strong shift to the theme of space (*spatial turn*) in various disciplines (see Soja, 1989; Döring-Thielmann, 2008). In addition, it can be said that sociology of space (or spatial sociology) does not look far enough towards the results of other disciplines. Beyond the transdisciplinary approach of the topic, the research further thematizes the possibilities of spatial interpretation especially with the concept of boundary important for relational spatial sociology, and with route networks attached to time-geography and action network. Research addressed on atmosphere, or even more so explorative research of *spirit of place* (*genius loci*), are also not common and are not sufficiently exploited based on a review of the literature, just like the closely related studies on tourism milieu, tourist experience and festival experience in the field of tourism research (see e.g., Getz, 2007; Zátóri, 2014; Kovács, 2014). The spirit of place seems to be attached only to the sacred places, possibly to the settlements, and its exploration of any place as a lived spatial phenomenon is neglected. Furthermore, I didn't find any research that used mental mapping to explore the atmosphere of a place. The importance of the topic, as well as the application of mental mapping, is highlighted in many disciplines and the lack of research on the topic is emphasized. The use of mental mapping as a method in the academic and market research of spatial experiences is untapped.

The dissertation is a bottom-up, that is a problem-oriented dissertation which is not based on literature, theories, or previous research results, but on field research, direct research experience and insights (cf. *backward research method* (Andreasen, 1985)). For my research questions, I tried to find and develop methods relatively freely, and then to build the results into theoretical frameworks. The aim was not to test a method or a theory on a (different) field, or sample, but to show how to explore a difficult-to-grasp field as a topic that only existed periodically and temporarily for a short time.

In addition to the scientific interest and contribution, the research also had an applied research goal, so I interpreted the research as a kind of *participatory planning* (see e.g., Horelli, 2002) as well.

My research presented in the dissertation was part of a wider research series, which included other research, and in which research series our teams visited the festival for the sixth time in 2019 in cooperation with the Corvinus University of Budapest and Babeş Bolyai University with the support of the Sziget Cultural Management Office. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the festival and thus the field research was not organized. The research series included several research, but the basic common goal was to explore the cultural anthropological and sociological nature of the Sziget Festival. The research teams were organized as part of the research management of lecturers and PhD students, and the fieldwork internship of BA and MA students.

The doctoral research began in 2014, when I participated as a researcher for the first time day and night, for a week at the festival. This year was the foundation of the research parts discussed in the dissertation. At this time, I conducted an introspective participant observation to describe my assimilation and attitude changes at the festival. My most basic observation was that the place has a very strong emotional imprint, an impact on the individuals at the spot, and that the Sziget is a special cultural world with a special atmosphere defined by many endowments and circumstances that is difficult to describe but deeply livable. In the summer of 2015, I tried to explore and deepen my understanding of this elusive phenomenon, that is the spirit of the place, which I continued in 2016. Partly in parallel with this research, I also followed the mental maps of the festivalgoers of the Sziget four years long from 2015, using another method. And in 2018 and 2019, I mapped the daily route memories of the festivalgoers. My continuous participatory observation was also marked by a *progressive focusing* (see e.g., Stake, 1995), meaning that my research questions were articulated underway and became increasingly clear. The aim of this research strategy was to get to know the object and subjects of the research by integrating myself into the given community. This is because not only research results are obtained from the participant observation, but most of the time the research questions are also formulated during the research, so the research questions per se are part of the research results (Letenyi, 2006).

The main objective of the research was the multi-level interpretation and depiction of the Sziget Festival as a socio-cultural environment that existed for a week, a lived and experienced material and non-material space, that is a special place. This was a challenging aim, since the

Sziget is an experience environment, an event tourism event lasting only a week on a geographically separated area, where people and cultures come from almost all over the world.

The theoretical contribution of the dissertation aims to synthesize the different results of the relevant disciplines and to point out the importance of spatial sociology in a transdisciplinary approach, thus emphasizing the interrelationship between space, places and society. Among the aims of the research, the main point of the dissertation was to point out the role and importance of the experience in relation to the places, as well as to draw attention to the research possibilities of the spirit of place, the importance and usefulness to research it. Namely, an aim of the research was to conceptualize and operationalize the concept of the spirit of place as a *central phenomenon* of the research (see Creswell, 2007; Horváth – Mitev, 2015). By putting the concept into a theoretical framework and with the research results, I argue that space for social research is both social and non-social, relational and absolute, constructed and a priori as well.

My methodological contribution aim is to present the development of methods of data collection, analysis and representation the mental mapping procedures and the experiences gained from them based on different mental mapping techniques. The basic aim of the research is to point out the usability and importance of the study of spatial experiences in both academic, social science research and applied studies in field of business and market research, as well as the possibilities of interpreting, developing, and combining mental mapping.

Along with all these theoretical and methodological results, the aim of the research was also to contribute to anthropological and sociological festival research with its approach.

## 2. Methods

The research lasted six years and was based on three main research parts, basically on three different mental mapping methods, two of which were self-developed research tools, mental mapping methods tailored to research questions and to the field. Thanks to the approach of the research and the main method used, mental mapping, it was possible to represent some of the explored results on a map and as networks.

I applied my six-year long participant observation beyond the *researcher introspection (subjective personal introspection, SPI)* (Wallendorf–Brucks, 1993) to observe place and space use, since it preceded and accompanied the other research parts. On the one hand, these information formed the basis of research questions, and on the other hand, they were integrated into the other research methods and the interpretation of their results, i.e., they contributed to the formulation of research questions, the finding of the appropriate method and the deeper interpretation of the results.

There were no quota criteria in case of any of the methods applied on fieldwork, only the *method of readily available people* used for walking sampling (*convenience sampling*).

*Free recall mental mapping* (see e.g., Letenyei, 2006) was used on the field from 2015 to 2018. The essence of the method is to ask the respondents to draw a map of the Sziget on a white A4 sheet provided by us. No other instructions are given. Each respondent draws his or her own subjective map on paper. During the data processing, the information of the drawn maps on paper was coded into an SPSS database.

I used Experience Mapping, a mental mapping method developed during the research that maps the experiences, to identify and draw place constitution, experience spaces, and to explore the spirit of the place<sup>2</sup>. The method is related to Urry and Sheller's (2006) *new mobilities paradigm*, which requires a methodological innovation that makes it possible to study the atmosphere of places, for example. We asked interviewees to indicate their own spaces on a blank map showing the whole Sziget (only the main paths), meaning that they should assign cognitive or emotional buzzwords (*sentiments*) to their important places.

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<sup>2</sup> See the article about the research: Pap, 2019.



The third mental mapping method, the Day Path Mental Mapping maps the routes walked along with their temporality based on memories. Through the map of the festival's programs in 2019, festivalgoers drew their previous day's path. The online questioning platform was used for questioning using smartphones with larger displays or tablets. On the on-screen map the festival program spots (with the campsites) were seen as dots, with the help of which the respondents marked on the display the spots what they have visited the day before based on their memory. The time intervals of the times of the day were adjusted to the dynamic of the Sziget. An important tool of the analysis was the "Gephi" software which is appropriate for visualizing networks and calculating network indicators. Using the method, we did not collect real data, but mapped memory. Therefore, this method is suitable for capturing structures deeper than attendance or consumption statistics. This mental mapping captures both spatial and temporal memory. Thus, the data obtained with this technique also contain vector information, directions, and temporality in a unique way compared to the databases from the other mental mappings discussed in this dissertation. Theoretically, the method is related to *time-geography models* (Hägerstrand, 1975; Giddens, 1984) and – like the Experience Mapping – to Urry and Sheller's (2006) new mobilities paradigm, which requires a methodological innovation that could provide real opportunity to explore spatial and temporal change. They mention as example the participant observation of people's routes and movements, application of a kind of "itiner" ethnography, writing space-time logs, and examining memories. Compared to the time-geography models used by Hägerstrand (1975) and Giddens (1984) to represent the temporality of spatial use, the network-vector depiction of Day Path Mental Mapping is based on a two-dimensional representation and takes into account only succession, relative time, i.e., the timeline, within that the times of the day corresponding to the rhythm of life of the environment (the corresponding time intervals). However, the durations, that is, how much time someone spent somewhere or how long it took them to get from A to B, are not considered. This information, or at least part of it, is given here by the weight of the memory. Although the time-geography models illustrate the (typical or certain) daily path of people, the results presented in the dissertation, which also process time information, analyze places, the outbound and inbound route connections of certain locations and the daily dynamics of the Sziget based on the movements between the spots. This is mainly due to the focus of the research, but by increasing certain subsamples, the method can also provide an opportunity to analyze typical time-geographic daily routes that could even handle the representation of the time spent on the spots. At the same time, the other results obtained by the method also show the network of

people and social groups, but due to the relative low sample size, it is not possible to draw a typical network, only to compare and analyze the network characteristics of different groups.

Via the questionnaire survey – within the research part of the spirit of place, i.e., of the Experience Mapping – I mainly sought answers to two questions: the definitive atmosphere of Sziget Festival that can be described in one word (the one-word expression of the spirit of the place) and the emanation of Sziget society, that is, what kind of determining atmosphere the non-material nature of the spirit of place has, and how it contributes to the atmosphere. As Sziget is a special place – a “festival society” that exists only for one week per year – the important elements of the spirit of place are social elements, which are also personal and subjective mental elements: feelings, associations, and emanations. In addition to the two questions, the questionnaire also contained questions about the most important values of the environment, the event, which also provided useful information for the research of the spirit of place. These questions were asked by our research team as part of a longer, *elastic survey* (Letenyei, 2006) questionnaire.

In addition to the questionnaire, I supplemented the research part dealing with the spirit of the place with the analysis of the fieldwork logs. The texts created by the researchers involved in participant observation (i.e., the field logs) also contained elements of the spirit of place without the focus of the authors (i.e., researchers in the field). As part of the research series, all participating field researchers had to write a field log in which they recorded their observations. In this fieldwork sample, there were 30 individuals. During the analysis, I collected the words and phrases regarding the atmosphere-related elements and created research categories from them. I then supplemented the information derived from the previously analyzed and categorized questionnaires and formerly mapped information. Although most of the logs were written on a daily basis, I conducted the analysis on an individual basis. The analytical unit of encoding is the reception channel, which procedure was carried out with the so-called *open coding* technique (see e.g., Strauss – Corbin, 1998). Without the mentioned frequencies, every relevant, at least once-recurring term was included in the category system. The result of the analysis was a concept map that presents the elements of the spirit of place and the channels of reception in case of Sziget Festival that organizes experiences, feelings, and attitudes into a structure.

### 3. Results and scientific contribution

The place interpretations presented in the dissertation point out that there may be multiple spatialities and overlapping social spaces in a given place. Sziget is a huge environment of stimuli and experiences, which appears in spatial symbolism, rituals, place perception, place interpretation, place constitution, atmosphere, memories, actions, and in functions.

Several empirical results of the research can be listed, which not only helped to answer the questions with theoretical relevance, but also have practical applicability.<sup>3</sup> These results lead to the answer to four theoretical questions relevant to spatial sociology:

1. How is the border of the Sziget Festival represented as a social construct?

The boundary of the Sziget Festival is represented differently in the image of the festivalgoers as a social construct from its real geographical boundary, or even the (also) socially constructed boundary line designated by the festival organization. The perception of the extent of the geographical environment cannot be considered primary, social space as a lived space is freely constituted in comparison.

This statement, based on free recall mental maps, but also confirmed by experience maps, confirms what has appeared in spatial sociological theories since Simmel (1994 (1909)), that is, due to its sociality border is permeable (Giddens, 1984), folded (Shields, 2013), perspective, blurred, membrane-like (Löw – Weidenhaus, 2017).

Thus, it can be concluded that the Sziget, as a festival held in a geographically defined place, clearly goes beyond the spatial and physical boundaries. The atmosphere of the event, and the experiences and memories associated with it, outline the place more strongly than the objective, physically existing and measurable boundaries.

2. How is space constituted at the Sziget Festival?

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<sup>3</sup> These results and the 10 field research questions belonging to the 4 main theoretical research questions are described in detail in the dissertation. E.g., the cultural anthropological analysis along the spatial symbols and rituals about what are the most symbolic border crossing points at the Sziget Festival. (Pap, UNDER PUBLICATION!)

Along the natural and cultural endowments, the space is constituted further socially by the festivalgoers at the Sziget Festival through experiences and alternative attributions of functions.

This result from the Experience Mapping method supports the theories of space as a place formed by individuals' experiences and constituted by experiences. Thus, the ideas of space have been internalized by spatial habits and worlds of thought (Halbwachs, 1950), lived environment (Kirk, 1963), immanent space (Beck, 1967) and lived space (Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1989). At the same time, it confronts the relational perception that seems to be common in sociological thinking that society alone constitutes and produces social spaces, and points out that natural determinations (e.g., weather) are also present in the process of social space constitution.

This kind of social spatial formation on the Sziget is not a conscious spatial constitution, but an organic process, which by its nature can only be observed from below, up close. Although there are some places created by the festivalgoers that are indirectly and not consciously a consequence of the organization as well, it is still determined by the users of the space, the people who embrace it and the natural conditions through the attributions of functions and experiences.

### 3. How to capture the spirit of the place in the case of the Sziget Festival?

In case of the Sziget Festival, the spirit of place is also social and natural, i.e., it is beyond the scope of the participants in the constitution of the festival. The components of the spirit of the place can be classified into sensory, intersubjective, and other (material and immaterial) perceptions and experiences.

Results of Experience Mapping, questionnaire, and fieldwork logs support the views of Norberg-Schulz (2004 (1980)); Böhme, 1995 and Schmitz, 2007 (1998) that the mood of a place can be interpreted both in its human (social) and natural definition at the same time. In the literature dealing explicitly with the spirit of place, the result confirms the formulation of the human and non-human elements of the spirit place (Jankó, 2002) and the interpretation of the spirit of place as a holistic (physical, psychological, social) metaconcept (Vecco, 2019). The result in spatial sociological theories is closest to Simmel's (1908; 1913; 1919 (1911)) idea that the unique atmosphere of a place is given by cultural meanings and spatial objects, and thus its carrier is the whole landscape

(environment). At the same time, the results challenge Shields's (1991) and Löw's (2001) notions that the atmosphere is purely socially determined, for example, deriving from ideologies or bound to habitus. The mythology of places (Shields, 1991) and the atmosphere according to Löw (2001) have different meanings and are not identical to the notion of the spirit of place, which is – as it can be seen from the results – intersubjective, a phenomenon that affects social characteristics (lifestyle, ideologies), but also all the senses and intangible experiences. This, in the light of the results, necessitates a distinction and the use of the phenomenon, a concept, in spatial sociology.

The Sziget Festival is an ensemble of atmosphere defined by several places and spots. Although we do not yet have a comparative analysis, the atmosphere of the Sziget is described by many as unique, and the research proves that a festival as a periodically created place can have its own atmosphere, a spirit of place, to which natural and social determinations, uniqueness can mutually contribute.

4. What network spaces can be identified at the Sziget Festival based on remembrance routes?

Based on the network of remembrance routes of the festivalgoers, social, demographic and times of day network spaces can also be identified in a well-distinguishable way. The latter is simultaneously constituted on the basis of social and natural determinants. Functional networks of venues can also be drawn along the remembrance routes, highlighting, embossing out of space the most significant venues, road connections and festival functions.

Together with the method of data collection, analysis and representation, the Day Path Mental Mapping method is related to the network theory (Latour, 1996; 2005) and to the results and ideas of spatial sociology dealing with networks. The time information of the data collection and the network and vector depiction and analysis method are partly a time-geographical result (Hägerstrand, 1975; Giddens, 1984) and are also related to Urry – Sheller's new mobilities paradigm, which emphasizes not only temporality but also the importance of mapping memories. The difference between the route network of men and women refutes Löw's approach, according to which the space use competencies and habits acquired in gender socialization result a larger radius of action in case of men than women and supports rather the results of marketing research in supermarkets that women follow more paths than men (see, e.g., Underhill, 2008 (1999)).

Overall, the results show that space and society are interrelated, and that space is both a social and a non-social category for social research, with elements beyond human influence. Thus, the dissertation contrasts with the view that social space is constituted solely by society, or at least for social studies, the study of society as a constituent force of space is sufficient in the field of spatial sociology. Contrary to certain sociological ideas of space, theories of spatial sociology, the research and thus the dissertation prove that society is not a subsistent power without the influence of things beyond its control. Thus, the results ultimately mean that factors that seem to be outside the sociological topic must be taken into account in the studies of spatial sociology to a different extent or in different perspective, which may direct spatial sociological analyses to the results of other sciences and disciplines.

The scientific contribution of the research is both theoretical and methodological. In addition to the main theoretical findings, which confirm or refute certain views based on the answers to the research questions at the theoretical level, the dissertation also draws attention to shortcomings and possibilities in the theoretical and methodological field. The dissertation has thus critical, confrontational, but mainly developmental approach.

Among the results of the research, the dissertation draws attention to the transdisciplinary significance of the spatial turn, the theoretical and empirical neglect of spatial sociology, the need to thematize it, and the importance of the results of other disciplines, and thus to the possibilities of synthesis. The dissertation draws attention to the phenomenological and knowledge sociological aspects of spatial sociology as a sociological area, mainly with the nature of the research field, the concept of experience and the spirit of place, and with its main method, the mental mapping.

From the sociological point of view of spatial theory, through the interpretation of different spatialities and overlapping social spaces, border interpretations, spatial constructions, route networks but mainly through the conceptualization and operation of the concept of spirit of place, the dissertation can contribute to break down the absolute and relational dichotomy, to the emphasis of the interrelationship between space and society, and also to the interpretation of social space by describing the natural definition of space.

The research contributes to the social scientific interpretation, description, and research of the place, especially the festivals such as the Sziget Festival, while its approach and results contribute to scientific, academic research and theories, as well as applied research for business

purposes (e.g., business anthropology, marketing (communications), market research). The doctoral dissertation can contribute not only to the encountering of academic and market research, but also to the synthesis of the results of different disciplines, and thus mainly to the thematicization of spatial sociology, but also to the related results of the relevant disciplines (such as anthropology, tourism, marketing).

The category of space has received increasing attention in the social science discourses over the past two decades. For sociology, the significance of this shift of focus lies in that some of its topics can be researched from a different approach, and its questions can be re-thematized. The dissertation draws attention to an important research topic within spatial sociology and presents a new way of interpretation and approach in the field of festival research, emphasizing the spatial sociological aspects of the event. The research thus also contributes to previous festival research, mainly in its approach and methodology.

In the theoretical field, the dissertation adds to the empirical knowledge sociological research published by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and to the Hungarian sociological research not only by its results but also by its applied method, mental mapping, which is presented as a phenomenological, knowledge sociological, and spatial sociological method. With the network and vector representation of space and time, the dissertation is partly related to the modeling results of time-geography (Hägerstrand, 1975; Giddens, 1984), partly to action networks (Latour, 1996; 2005) and partly to the new mobilities paradigm of Urry and Sheller (2006). Research also contributes to the latter with its Experience Mapping method. In the field of analysis, the dissertation can enrich the research practices and possibilities, primarily by processing the data obtained from mental maps, their geographical/spatial, network illustration and analysis, as well as the possibility of depicting the results.

From a methodological point of view, the research series provides a field research example for festival research and spatial sociology research. It points out the importance of bottom-up, problem-oriented, backward research, such as introspection or progressive focusing. The dissertation presents alternative methods and draws attention to the combinability of different directions. Research results include methodological innovations that can contribute to the space interpretation of a place, a tourist destination or another festival, and the results can be used even as a starting point for the development of map applications.

The results show that mental mapping is a suitable method for place marketing, place image research, experience research, and for understanding the spatial behavior of festivalgoers from a consumer perspective, which enriches the research tools and results inter alia of tourism and marketing and spatial sociology through its space linkage.

Through the methodological and theoretical orientation of the research, it points out that the spatial turn also means a turn towards understanding research, soft factors, and the subject, and that it is reasonable to thematize spatial sociology and expand its methodological and empirical results along these lines.



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## 5. The author's publications on the topic

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