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Szimpla Garden, Budapest

The opening of Szimpla Garden in 2002 was a milestone in the alternative life of Budapest. With the conversion of this old aluminium factory — which had been sentenced to demolition — into a huge open-air cinema and pub, Szimpla became a one-of-a-kind venue for non-mainstream concerts, theatre performances and other cultural events.

Having started as a grassroots company and self-styled “cultural reception space”, it gained traction in the local hospitality industry due to its accessible business model: Take a cheap, decrepit space; furnish it with throwaway chairs and tables; and present it as a gathering place for the alternative crowd. Within a few years, “ruin pubs” were opening all across the city, forming the backbone of downtown’s new identity and contributing to Budapest’s international reputation as a nightlife destination.

From the outside, Szimpla is indistinguishable from the other historic buildings along the cobblestone streets of Budapest’s old Jewish Quarter. But once inside, you find yourself in a funky
bar bustling with people dancing, talking and sipping beers and Hungarian wine spritzers. The interior features mismatched, well-worn furniture; walls festooned with graffiti by local artists; and a jumble of memorabilia gleaned from secondhand markets: Russian electronic devices, traffic signs, rusty bicycles, even a Socialist-era Trabant car.

By 2015, every ground-level space in the quarter had been converted into a bar, cafe or trendy shop. Hard to believe that just a decade earlier, the area was still suffering from post-war abandonment and was avoided by almost everyone. Through the alternative utilisation of the old building, Szimpla managed to draw attention to the hidden and forgotten potential of the Jewish Quarter, putting it on the cognitive map of young people in the city once again.

Szimpla led by example in channelling local civil efforts and supporting initiatives for urban sustainability. It continues to host regular farmers’ and flea markets and workshops. It serves as a business incubator and a venue for alternative art shows. Today, together with other ruin pubs and community areas, Szimpla is fighting for the pedestrianisation of Kazinczy Street, the busiest party area in downtown Budapest.

Source: www.szimpla.hu/