

A SUBURB SURROUNDED BY FARMS WITH A SPECIFIC LOCATION – ENVIRONMENTAL ATTRIBUTES OF KECSKEMÉT–MÉNTELEK AND THE FUTURE PROSPECTS OF THE LOCAL SOCIETY

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Introduction

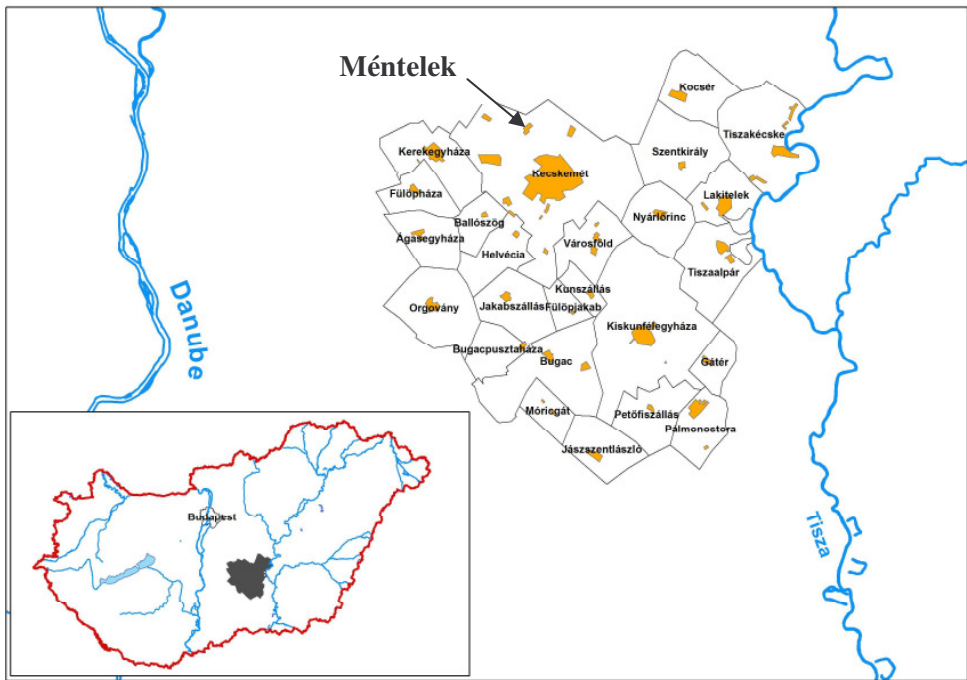
Most of our market towns on the Great Hungarian Plain are surrounded by diverse suburban fields, mosaic suburban zones (*Timár*, 1993, 1999). Individual outskirting processes have been in progress in the area of Kecskemét in the past period; therefore, the suburbs of the traditional market town – primarily due to the different natural characteristics and the structural differential effects in connection with the historical development – have become very varied (*Csatári*, 1987, 2003, 2006). During the 20th century economic and social changes cleared a way for a new development – usually different to the ones before – within the borders of Kecskemét. The increasing number of farms from the second half of the 19th century, the suburban settlement centres evolved between the two World Wars, or the double settlements developing in the garden zones have made the suburban areas diverse as well as the villages growing after the Second World War, the suburban yards given away in the borderland or the developing building of suburban houses since the change of regime. In the 20th century, a new type of spatial development was created in the town of Kecskemét by various environmental and socio-economical transformations. Due to this development, the present periphery of the town consists of several units of different features. Méntelek – a remote borough of special conditions – is one of those scattered settlements in the Kecskemét micro-region (even in the Great Plain) where depopulation may be cut and scattered farms may regain popularity. Based on a spatial empirical research, our study aims to show the specific attributes on the urban-rural fringe, and the future of the region.

Main settlement attributes and characteristics

The town of Kecskemét can be divided to several different units of different genetics and attributes (*Torkos*, 1990). One of these is Méntelek, more precisely Kecskemét–Méntelek, the furthest area of the town – some 12 km away from the town centre (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1

The situation of Méntelek on the north-western outskirts of Kecskemét



Source: Author's construction.

Among units further away from the town, the area called 'Méntelek farms' close to the northern-north-eastern boundaries kept the picture of a classic borderland with a dominance of farms. Its peculiarity is the village-like core composing the axis of the borderland on the northern side of the road to Kecskemét, containing a few streets and approximately 125 houses. This particular centre with 370 inhabitants is surrounded by farmland with about 500 inhabitants (*Figure 2*). While the present village centre image is a result of street-building in the 1960s and later the 1980s, the farmland in the surroundings is continuous and it is being cultivated even today.

Méntelek is a typical borderland settlement with Kecskemét and Lajosmizse in its surroundings, located on an urban-rural fringe area according to the social-economical views (*Timár–Baukó, 1998; Timár, 2005; Szirmai, 2007*).

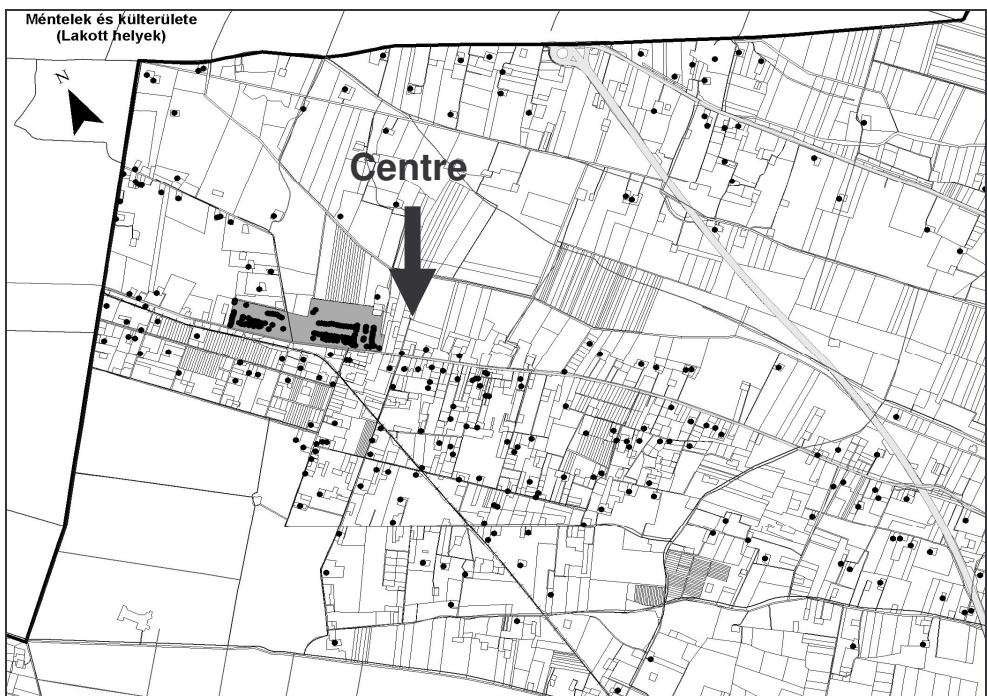
This peripheral location does not necessarily mean an underdeveloped lifestyle – although it cannot be compared to other suburban areas regarding size or the availability of services. This is proven by the quite good organisation of life and

farming activities the inhabitants managed to achieve independently from the town in the past centuries.

The Catholic and Reformed churches (together with the church communities) were playing a key role in the maintenance of the local farming community and the school between the two World Wars, showing the focusing role of the place. Méntelek never became an official village, but it can practically be regarded as a separate farming settlement within the civic boundaries of Kecskemét. This definite separation does not only arise from the spatial attributes and frame of the borderland, but also from the organisation of the local society, the identity of the local community and that of the town, which also presumes a certain level of separateness from the local leaders and inhabitants.

Figure 2

*Centre of Méntelek and the location of the scattered farms
(households marked with black dots)*



Source: Author's construction.

Diverse farm attributes

The character of the Méntelek farmland is defined by various ground and terrain attributes and therefore richer landscape appearance. The borderland is characterised by the foil of structured, nearby farm-like parts with gardens and remote farms, natural landscape and fields, ruined farms and fenced-off plots. The proportion of classic farm-like accommodations is decreasing, while the number of weekend houses and homes exclusively with living function has been growing.

Traditional, old structured farms from the 1970s and 1980s are present as well as buildings from socialism, as well as modern farms built in today's taste and demand (*Table 1*). Therefore, this farmland is quite diverse, which manifests itself in the remade and built environment, the diversity of the social landscape, the different lifestyle of the local population and the status of the families.

Table 1

Character of the Méntelek farm buildings

Character of the Méntelek farm buildings	%
Newly built farm	16
Farm built in socialism	34
Traditionally built (before 1945) restored farms	11
Traditionally built (before 1945) renewable farms	11
Traditionally built (before 1945) non-renewable farms	5
Farms in bad condition/ruin	23
TOTAL	100

Source: Based on the Méntelek survey 2009.

Starting point of the Méntelek investigations – problems and opportunities

Unfortunate environmental changes had occurred in Méntelek in the past centuries – as usual in the farming area of 'Duna–Tisza közti Homokhátság'. Processes in connection with drying-out, the decrease of groundwater and resulting tendencies have a heavy impact on the natural–ecological and at the same time the social–economical conditions. Natural–cultural degradation come along with conflicts, problems in the social environment; growing poverty among the population; segregation and exclusion. One of the biggest problems is the negative changes in the age structure of the families. In connection with ageing and migration, the population is decreasing in the remote borderland. Middle-aged and elderly people are typical to outskirts households and no new inhabitants are settling down.

In our opinion – in spite of the negative processes – the scattered farmsteads are important elements of the whole environmental system in this area, so they have a huge impact on local and even regional sustainability. It is presumable that some of the scattered settlements will be considered in the future for rural environmental potential and values as society's interest and needs for so-called “eco-systematic services” grows. After 2014, this view will be of increased importance in the rural development policy of the European Union and in the agricultural subsidy system. Hungary and Poland try to pass an objective about the preservation of scattered farms at the pending negotiations about the CAP reform. This may help bring new life to this rural settlement type in Central Europe. Moreover, the Hungarian government legislates an act about scattered farms in these days, so there is demand from the Hungarian Ministry of Rural Development for various researches to provide clear reading and recommendations about this topic. Nowadays, scattered farms are one of the most important elements of agriculture and rural and ecotourism.

Based on these ideas, a territorial research programme was carried out by the professional leadership of the Great Plain Research Institute of Centre for Regional Studies of Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2009 in the Kecskemét–Méntelek area. Since the plots sampled were selected based on the statistical data of various settlement features, the survey is regarded as representative.

Research was carried out during two main periods – in the spring and in the summer of 2009. Nearly 20 persons, mainly college-students, participated in the research work. Under the direction of researchers they walked all over the outer areas and collected data. The aims of the research were to discover the peculiarities of the local lifestyles, the natural, the architectural and social environment of the farms on the outskirts. In addition to that, we tried to find out the views of the local society concerning the regeneration of the settlement and the scattered farms.

Concerns, future ideas and expectations of the local society

During the Méntelek survey, we have visited 230 habitations – in the inner city as well as on the outskirts. We have prepared a long interview-like survey of 35 farm households that revealed the lifestyle typical of the Méntelek farms in detail. We have also created an assessment with set parameters about each habitation. The sampling was over 90% so the examinations can be regarded as full scale. Then we interviewed the local leaders, intellectuals and civilian activists that have done and are able to do for the settlement. More than 30 people answered our questions that were mainly aimed at the development requirements and the planned programmes, concepts.

- A very important starting fact, strongly influencing the future of Méntelek, is that the interviewees have lived in the farming area of Méntelek since they were born or for many years. Presumably this also relates to the result that the local people like living here. 80% of the interviewees are drawn to the rural lifestyle further away from the town.
- 70% of the Méntelek inhabitants consider the survival of farms important, therefore they do not wish to move anywhere else.
- People living here are expressly proud of the countryside and natural attributes of the settlement. Among the basically local approach of the people, satisfaction with the different settlement factors shows a large divergence.
- Regarding the overall opinion of the interviewed inhabitants it can be said that they find the tidiness of the settlement, local education, public transportation to Kecskemét and the relationships in the neighbourhood good; residential opportunities and the work of the local leaders are also regarded as favourable.
- Public utilities and public security are regarded as average.
- The largest problem is unambiguously the lack of job opportunities and good quality health services, but many complained about the accessibility of the shopping, cultural and entertainment opportunities as well.
- Regarding the development factors, three quarters of the interviewees think the most urgent task to solve is creating local job opportunities. 70–70% think it is important to improve health services and the road network between the farms.
- The improvement of the accessibility of the farms and the construction of cycle paths would be favourable to most of the inhabitants as most of the farms can only be accessed on dirt roads. (Some of these roads are of a quite good quality, a quarter of them are passable, a quarter of them are especially bad, sometimes – depending on the weather – impassable).
- The inhabitants think it is less important to restore the centre and to develop tourist attractions. The answers show that a significant part of the population does not see farm (village, green, ecological, bike, horse etc.) tourism in the area as a real opportunity.
- More than half of the interviewees would support the renewal of the farm agriculture and economical farming, and they would pay more attention to brushing up local traditions. Regarding the keeping of traditions and culture, the majority would support the construction of a village hall and organising village days, but first of all would like to liven up the local social life, to strengthen local society – partly expected by the investments and local events.

Summary reflections

It can be generally said that the rural areas of Hungary are facing complex and very difficult challenges. Unfortunately, many signs show that the disadvantages of rural areas – lagging of economical and social status – have been growing in the past few years. This is the reason why these inner peripheries must be directed to be lined up with more developed areas, otherwise areas in question can lose their population and economical and cultural functions specific to these settlements can also cease.

The examined area around Kecskemét has indeed several issues, however we think that there are many future opportunities in the area between the Duna and the Tisza.

Our belief is that suburban, farm-like esplanades like Méntelek can play an important role in preserving the specific natural-ecological-cultural attributes of the Hungarian Plain together with the appearance of traditional as well as post-modern values in endurance of the farms or rather reinterpretation of the farm lifestyle.

The briefly outlined survey results – complemented by the summary of the local conceptions – hopefully give guidelines to the composition and phasing of the farm-developing orientations regarding the future of this suburban farm area around the town.

However, as it is a specific settlement type, concerns and future expectations mentioned in Méntelek could be standard to other settlements as well, so tendencies and specialities observed here could provide good lessons for other farm areas on the Plain as well.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express his thanks to Jenő Farkas for the construction of the maps in this paper.

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