

Eighth District seeks its aristocratic roots

'Palace Quarter' may be more of a marketing moniker, but there is a lot to enjoy in this central neighbourhood. **Maja** and **Reuben Fowkes** explore old mansions and new cafés.

There are probably Budapesters who have never heard of the Palace Quarter, or who would automatically assume it to be a select neighbourhood in the Buda Castle District or elite Rózsadomb. Yet, as it turns out, the Palotanegyed has been rediscovered in one of the traditionally less salubrious neighbourhoods of the inner city. Partly the invention of savvy estate agents keen to rebrand the disreputable Eighth District, partly an exercise in wish-fulfilment by local civic groups hoping to generate a community spirit, the Palace Quarter today stretches from the Uránia Cinema on Rákoczi út to the Museum of Applied Arts on Üllői út, and from Múzeum körút at Kálvin tér to József körút. Whatever you decide about the appropriateness of the new name, the area itself is well worth discovering for its hidden architectural gems, quirky street life, outdoor cafés and abundance of nocturnal hideaways.



Statuary everywhere *Krúdy Gyula utca, above, and Lőrinc pap tér, below*



Like most urban myths, the Palace Quarter has some basis in historical reality. After the great flood of 1838, around 80 per cent of the homes in the area were destroyed, clearing the path for an ambitious building programme. Over the course of the following decades, many of the best known Hungarian aristocratic families, from Eszterházy to Károlyi and



in 1902, while the old aristocracy sold up and moved out after the World War I.

The remaining residences were nationalised by the Communists after 1945 and ended up taking on completely new functions, with their palatial pasts conveniently forgotten. The palace that was the home of the Hungarian Parliament from 1867 to 1902 is now the Italian Cultural Centre, while the adjacent Eszterházy and Károlyi palaces were converted into the building of the Hungarian Radio, which was notoriously the site of bitter fighting during the 1956 Uprising. Nearby, the distinctive one-storey Almásy Palace has long been the headquarters of the union of Hungarian architects, complete with a reliable basement restaurant, the **Építész Pince** (VIII. Ót Pacsirta utca 2, 267 3413, daily noon-midnight), which has beautifully situated courtyard seating. Their satisfying fare includes specialities such as 'pince (basement)-style pork chops', which comes with oniony ratatouille, and roast goose with apple-strudel cabbage and onion potatoes.

After the flood of 1838, aristocratic families built their palaces here.

from Zichy to Tokaj, built grand residences in this up and coming Pest neighbourhood close to the National Museum and the Hungarian Parliament. The eclipse of the original Palace Quarter set in when Parliament decamped to its current premises on the banks of the Danube



MARCUS GOLDSON

Palotanegyed

The palace built by super-rich Count Wenckheim was briefly the Museum of the Proletariat before reopening as Budapest Library in 1931, while the Zichy's residence on Lőrinc Pap tér is reincarnated as a four-star hotel. Several of the original palace buildings are open to the public, and if you look hard you can find many original features, such as the reading room of the archive of the City of Budapest in the Szabó Ervin Library, or the concert hall of the Italian Institute, although none of the palaces have been preserved or restored as museums.

As a result, the Palace Quarter is today more of an elegant concept than a bricks-and-mortar reality for visitors.

The heart of the new neighbourhood is Mikszáth Kálmán tér and its mystic epicentre is the **Frank Zappa Café**, which is better known to those in their thirties and upwards as the former 'Tilos az A'. The Tilos, which incidentally got its name from a passage in the Hungarian version of *Winnie*

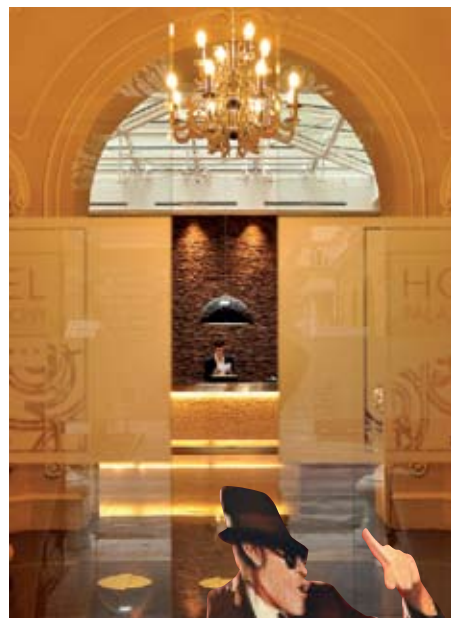
The Tilos was the heart of the Budapest underground scene.

the Pooh, opened on New Year's Eve 1989 and remained the heart of the Budapest underground scene until 1995, when it was closed down following a series of politically motivated police raids. The most famous rock star to play at the Tilos was Frank Zappa, which explains the name of the bar that has opened in its place. In a strange twist, somewhat reminiscent of the fate of the nearby palaces, the original wall painting from the Tilos az A has been preserved at the far end of the bar. It was painted by French artist Jean-Michel Verret in 1992 and shows a 360-degree view of a New York skyline. In an act of solidarity it was declared

to be a protected artefact by the Museum of Fine Arts, so the new owners were obliged to preserve the painted skyscrapers as a relic of the old days.

The square opposite the Frank Zappa starts to fill up with café tables in April, which is when the neighbourhood is at its most attractive. Rumour has it that some of these tables will belong to the **Kafana** restaurant and bar, which is expected to complete the move from the high-rent, high-hassle Fifth District to the revived Palace Quarter in the near future. The Kafana's popular offering of Balkan specialities from *cevapcici* to baklava, served by a tolerant and good-humoured crew, are sure to go down well in the ethno-oriented, trendy atmosphere of the Krúdy Gyula café scene.

The other prime location on the square is the **Lumen**, which is both a well-regarded venue for exhibitions of contemporary photography (see *Art Listings*) and a relaxed place for a coffee or snack. In keeping with



Old rockers, new digs *Nothing But the Blues*, above, and the Zichy Palazzo Hotel, top



the community spirit of the new neighbourhood, Saturday mornings at the Lumen are a family affair, with selected friends and artists invited to prepare breakfast for a regular clientele that doesn't seem to mind not knowing whether they'll be having Mexican or muesli with their morning coffee.

Moving along Krúdy Gyula utca, there are a couple of mediocre pizzerias and the desultory hang-out of ageing rockers, **Nothing But the Blues** (VIII. Krúdy Gyula utca 6, 322 8602, www.bluespub.hu), which most people will give a miss. On the corner with Horánszky utca the **Fiktív Pub** (VIII. Horánszky utca 27, 06 20 286 2118 mobile) caters to a slightly more upmarket clientele, with imported beers only on sale. In a sign of spreading economic woes, the Fiktív now offers 'Recession Specials' such as bread with lard and mince patties with pickled cucumber and mustard, alongside pricier menu items like fillet steak.



Stop, drink, shop APA Cuka and bike on Horánszky; CDs on Krúdy



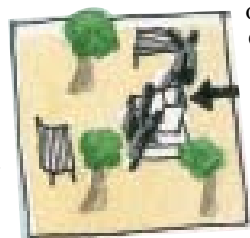
Over the road is the **Darshan Udvar** (Krúdy Gyula utca 7, 266 5541, www.darshan.hu), which aims to cater for all the basic needs of the Palace Quarter set. This covered courtyard includes a health food shop, world music record shop, and an ethno clothing and books outlet, along with a restaurant that mostly caters for

noisy groups on long tables. The decor of the Darshan looks increasingly outdated rather than retro, as all the walls are covered with annoying crazy-paving combined with amateurish pseudo-ethnic designs. If you can hack the decor, the food is basic but okay, and it's worth knowing that they also serve cheaper lunch options during the day.

You won't find many palaces on Horánszky utca, but there is the **A.P.A. Art Centre & Café** (VIII. Horánszky utca 5, 486 2378, www.ateliers.hu). Established by an American investor a few years back, the A.P.A. specialises in offering artist residencies in converted studios. The ground-floor **APA Cuka** restaurant (06 20 938 2677 mobile, www.apacuka.com) is more international and eclectic than most of the other eatery options in the quarter, and it shows a sense of humour by offering an A.N.Y.A. salad (with chicken and sesame) – *apa* and *anya* are, of course, the Hungarian for 'father' and 'mother'. Its setting is an attractive courtyard.

A younger student and traveller crowd

has taken a shine to the **Kamra Club** (VIII. Lőrinc pap tér 4, 06 20 972 2609 mobile, www.kamraklub.hu), which used to be an art cinema and is now a late night boozier-schmoozier with occasional alt-rock acts. It shares the square at the far end of Krúdy Gyula with the **Church of the Sacred Heart**, which this year celebrates 100 years of the Jesuit Order in Hungary and is one of the many religious institutions in the Palace Quarter. Nearby, the recently opened **Zichy Palazzo Hotel** (VIII. Lőrinc pap tér 2, 235 4000, www.hotel-palazzo-zichy.hu) is well placed to cash in on the new urban identity, and during April will continue to offer rooms at the very reasonable introductory price of 59 euros.



This month sees a competition to come up with the best stories about the Palace Quarter, with the results to be announced at a grand ceremony in the **Uránia National Film Theatre** on Rákóczi út at 10am on April 18. Beyond Budapest (www.beyondbudapest.hu), who are professional enthusiasts of District VIII specialising in alternative English-language guided tours, will then lead a walk around the area based on the winning story. This should be another promising fusion of fact and fiction in the Palace Quarter.