

Astra Film Studios expands – interview with Gábor Rajna

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When the streaming war started to emerge, Astra Film Studios tried to position itself to profit from the studio needs generated by the war. “I thought that whoever could react the fastest to this situation would come out on top,” says Gábor Rajna project manager.

The **Astra** studio has been operating in **Mogyoród** for a long time, but it has become more and more run-down over time. The studio was bought by investors, with the land surrounding the studio in mind for future development. Then came the 2020 COVID situation, which added to the streaming war that was just beginning, as demand for content increased dramatically. At the start of the epidemic, all the international crew packed up and went home. The whole world went on hiatus until the second half of the year.

Some productions were stopped or not even started but they have not canceled productions, they were just postponed, they had to be finished in the future. The productions that were scheduled to start in 2020 had to start in 2021. In **London**, **Pinewood**, the big studios have signed 5-10 year contracts, and in **Hungary**, all the studios are booked for that year, and more and more productions are coming in all the time.

Budapest Reporter: What impact did COVID have on the renovation? Is there a production currently shooting in the renovated studio?

Gábor Rajna: The shutdown didn't hurt us that much, because we had a five-month renovation period planned before, so we could do it comfortably. The moment we opened in October, a production moved in immediately. (As previously posted, it's probably “**Jack Ryan**”)

The dilemma was how to get the contract in place to get the transfer done by that time. We already had a production order in the studio before the handover. In parallel, we have started planning the new complex, which we call the old **Astra** stage one and stage two the one under construction. The new studio is roughly the same size as the existing one, except that it includes 5500m² of warehouse space.



The second phase of the development

The other conceptual leg is that, in addition to the classic warehouse, studio, office, and parking units, we would like to do as many things as possible that are special in some way, so that when our American colleagues see that there are opportunities here, we hope that they will bring the films that need to be shot in special conditions. Of course, whoever brings a part of a film here will most likely think that they will make the whole thing here in **Hungary**.

BpR: What special elements will the studio have?

GR: One of the special elements we have is the water shooting tank (watertank) which is a 20x10 pool, 6 meters deep, with a crane on top to lift the sets that are assembled on the shore and to do all kinds of underwater shots in studio conditions.

BpR: Was the indoor pool built specifically to attract foreign productions?

GR: Yes, we built it to attract as many foreign productions as possible. There is nothing like this in **Hungary**, but other studios have different pools (indoor and outdoor). **Budapest** could be the capital of water shoots.

BpR: Can you tell us a bit about the further developments and the concept of the new studio?

GR: Phase two and the wet pool are part of a much larger project that we call **Astra Filmland**. What we're talking about here, in practice, is that in addition to **Astra**, this group of investors has bought additional land. All in all, if I put it all together, it's a 50-hectare site that we have a vision for, which is no longer just studios and warehouses, but a whole film ecosystem, a film village.



Astra Studios under construction

Where, in addition to the studios and warehouses, as many elements as possible for film production can be found in one place, the architectural workshops, the costume warehouse, the prop warehouse, the post-production studio, the equipment rental.

BpR: What services will Astra Filmland be able to offer?

GR: All the things we need to make a film. Of course, this ecosystem also has those elements that are not closely related to film production, but **Hungary** as a servicing country for international films provides services that cannot be found in one place elsewhere.

We're in talks with an international kindergarten/school who would like to move here because these American series spend years in **Budapest**, and there's often a need for a place where they can place their children close to the filming location, in the fresh air, among the horses, in a facility where they're close by. This is a special service that is not directly related to filming, but we are trying to provide services that should make us stand out from the category of service countries.

BpR: What do you think, how Hungary could rise above the category of service country?

GR: My theory is that **Hungary** is ripe not to be classified as a Serbian, Czech, Bulgarian, Romanian servicing country, but quasi, we want to reach a level where we can operate along a **London-Budapest** axis, where American or English films can be made.



Beyond the services, beyond the capacities other than film studios, we are trying to gather everything in one area, we have a lot of ideas that are very, very specific, but we think that if they were to be implemented in **Hungary**, they could attract more productions.

We have, for example, a plan for an aircraft studio, where you can film all kinds of aircraft scenes, both interior, and exterior, without using an airport, so we assume that people will come here to film, say, an aircraft scene, but if they film it here, why not the whole film?

BpR: But Astra alone may not be enough, so how can you imagine that?

GR: That's why we rely on government involvement, not necessarily as **Astra Filmland**, but in general. The state, with the TAO, the film law, is helping us a lot with our work, and the film institute has also launched a lot of good initiatives, but we just need to build on them.



This American and international contract production and servicing have become an outdated industry, and people don't think that it has become a separate industry. It's an industry that should be treated in the same way, and it seems that we still have to work on it, so that this industry gets the same position in the state system, in the state subsidy and investment incentive system, like all the other classic industries.

<https://www.budapestreporter.com/astra-film-studios-expands-interview-with-gabor-rajna/>

Budapest could be the city of films in Europe – interview with Gábor Rajna part 2

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In the previous part, Gábor Rajna talked about the ASTRA film studio's expansion plans, and now he talks about the environmental protection of the studio and the new COVID-friendly terraced design.

You can read the first part here.

BpR: In the studio under construction, is the focus more on built or virtual sets?

GR: There's a part of this area that's relatively this secluded, quiet, big place, where all these backlots, exterior, built sets, **New York, London, Auschwitz**, are being built.

We've got an idea about that, we've come up with the technology. The idea is that if a film builds a set like this, it's very good, but the only problem is that if the film builds a set like this with its own money, it's perfectly normal for it to build it to such a high quality that it shoots in it for six months, but then if it collapses in five days or breaks down in a month, they're not interested at all.

Logically, because they needed it for one film. We, on the other hand, have another theory, even if it's pre-built, but with different technology and a different method, to create opportunities for foreign crews that, like I said with the airplane pool or the water pool.



The studio's airplane under construction

It has to be a timeless, very high-quality thing. After all, if the production itself is doing it then it's not going to have any regard for how good it would be to keep it because it's not in their interest.

BpR: This is not negligible from an environmental point of view, have you paid special attention to this?

GR: Indeed, in the film industry there is an increasing focus on all kinds of environmentally conscious investments and I'm not saying that in the current situation, but the future it could be an important consideration of how environmentally conscious a studio is if you have to choose.

BpR: Also, does Astra have other environmental efforts?

GR: We have a green team that we are in constant contact with, and we are already looking at the design of the building, which when it is operational will need to reflect an environmentally conscious approach. This is certainly a good point with the Americans.

We are looking at solar energy, we are going to start using solar panels soon, we are looking at large green areas in the **Astra Filmland** area, which is not a nuisance or a burden because I think that a studio should look so that if anybody moves in for a year, they will feel comfortable. It has an important psychological effect, and you feel much better if you have a bit of green around you.

BpR: Speaking of design, how did you make use of the land?

GR: There's another aspect that's very interesting here in Mogyoród, the h3 phase 4 is in the planning stage, hopefully, phase 3 phase 4 can open by the end of September next year if all goes well. This is already on the extra land that the investors have bought. There's a feature of the site that's very good, it's a hillside that will have terraces and basically, every terrace is a production terrace so within that you'll have the studio, the office, the storage, the parking and everything you need.

There are bigger terraces and smaller terraces, bigger terraces with bigger studios, more studios, more storage, smaller terraces with a little bit less of everything.

We are hoping that there is a production that wants to come to **Hungary**, for example, and then you can choose your production terrace according to what your needs are.

BpR: What are the other advantages of this terraced design?

GR: Now why is this very exciting nowadays, we are hopefully out of the covid period, but I think that this uncertainty, this fear, will remain in people. So the fact that we can create terraces in this area, and that there are access roads to the terraces on the sides, so that if a production rents one, it can close it off with two barriers, and from then on no one else can enter except the production's crew.

In the current situation, this will be a very good feature of this filmland. These days there is an incredibly strict protocol for such films, and this terrace system will make it much easier to comply.



The hillside next to the studio

BpR: Will this level of studio development keep the industry going?

GR: The problem is that in **Hungary** there are various plans to build studios, **Mafilm** is building, and studios are being built in **Budakalász**, but we can only fill them if we have the right amount of qualified staff. The film institute has a training program, which is very cool, but training is always a tough job because you have to spend a lot of time on it, you pay very little money for it, you have to give the best professionally, you have to train the best people.

We think it is very important that within **Filmland**, hopefully in cooperation with the **Film Institute**, there will be training courses that will serve to train extra crew members who can jump into these productions in the shortest possible time and to the highest possible standard.

We developed a concept for this a year ago, which is of a very high standard and certainly, so it's important to mention that the importance of training and education, which we pay a lot of attention to, is just not the responsibility of a studio.

BpR: Is that why you want the government to get involved?

GR: That's why we would like all the other players in the market to get involved, it's a totally common interest, it's in everybody's interest that we need people, we need professionals.

For these productions to come here in a way that we can give them not only all the capacity but also trained professionals.

This is an export activity in **Hungary** because foreign money is coming into the country. It is very important for the country's image, beyond job creation, beyond the significant amount of GDP. To show that we have an industry in which we are a leader in **Europe**.

BpR: How do you see film production in Hungary developing in the future?

GR: It was **Andy Vajna** who laid the foundations that we now have to continue to build on. It's a conceptual idea, there are already many existing studios, **Origo, Korda, Mafilm, Stern, Astra**, you have to understand that all film production investments in **Hungary**, whether it's new studios, in my belief, are not competing with each other at all, but as a street of cafes, if another one opens, there is no less of one, but rather you end up with a cafe party place where everyone who is there fills it up.

It's very important to make sure that there is no competition, no battle, no contest, and that all these separate objects if we're talking about the studios, will all have a job, the only question is whether someone can bring them together, and again I'm only thinking of the state's involvement, and coordinate it, and whether these participants can sit down at the same table, so that we can build and you can build, and let's discuss the fact that we shouldn't do two special things that are the same because they are unnecessary, but one should do one thing and the other.

These capacities will not be in competition with each other but will be added together, and an image will increasingly develop from **Hungary** as a country where all kinds of film-making opportunities are available.

It will not be a problem of too many studios, but rather a street of studios, **Budapest** will become a city of films.

<https://www.budapestreporter.com/budapest-could-be-the-city-of-films-in-europe-interview-with-gabor-rajna-part-2/>