

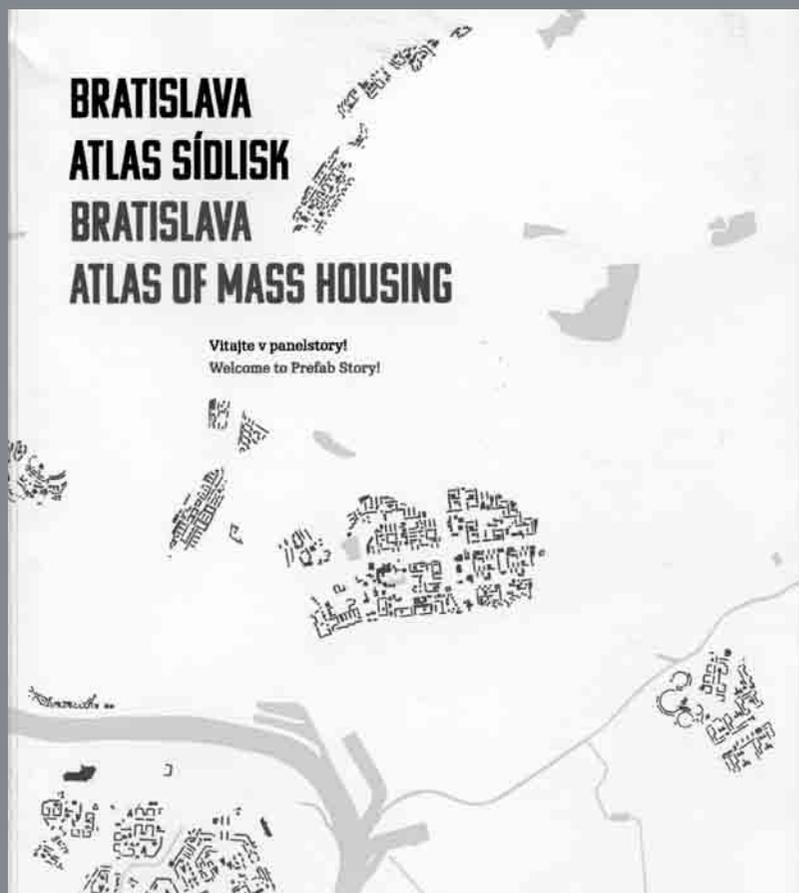
RECENZIA BOOK REVIEW

Moravčíková, Henrieta – Topolčanská, Mária – Szalay, Peter – Dulla, Matúš – Ščepánová, Soňa – Toscherová, Slávka – Haberlandová, Katarína: Bratislava, atlas sídlisk. Bratislava, Atlas of Mass Housing. Bratislava, Slovart 2011, 344 p., ISBN 978-80-556-0478-7.

DOCUMENTING MASS HOUSING IN A SOCIALIST CITY

Mass housing complexes constitute one of the largest, and often most bitterly controversial, elements in the built production of the postwar Modernist decades in many parts of the world. These often colossal estates have never sat easily within the mainstream trends of MoMo heritage, either at a national level (in government designation strategies) or internationally (in the campaigns proselytising and research of DOCOMOMO).

That uneasy status partly stems from the intrinsic tensions of the original Modern Movement itself, always torn between the dashing individualism of the 'masters' and the collective utopias of programmed social provision. On the whole, MoMo 'heritage' has emphasised the former, through campaigns monographs of individual showcase-buildings and architect-creators. But of all Modernist building types, mass social housing complexes are the least well-served by this approach. In order to convey their character adequately, a far broader coverage is necessary, inventoring entire areas and deploying systematic statistical information rather than glamorous imagery. However, the sheer scale of the subject-matter itself poses enormous challenges to any published inventory project. Thus there have been only isolated attempts to inventorise the entire mass-housing 'stocks' of individual cities, let alone countries. The 1994 publication *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, (co-authored by Stefan Muthesius and the present reviewer) attempted a basic-level inventory of all postwar multi-storey public housing in the UK, as an appendix to a monograph book on the subject. However, due to inevitable space constraints, this took the form of an extremely compressed statistical list, confined to certain basic data – original name, dates, dwelling numbers, bibliographic references, etc. – with no illustrations or accompanying maps. A far fuller treatment of a whole mass-housing 'stock' – albeit of a single city – was presented in the 1992 *Amsterdam Social Housing*



Atlas. Here, a series of colour-coded district maps, cross-referenced with area lists of social housing projects, provided a comprehensive coverage, although with only limited information on each individual housing scheme. Even this limitation led to a book of unwieldy size (A3) that can only realistically be used in an archive or library.

Is it feasible to produce a published mass-housing inventory of an entire city, in a form that can be employed both as a comprehensive desk-based reference tool and as a portable handbook for use 'in the field'? This, after all, was the same dilemma faced by the Pevsner Guide series in the UK, as its county volumes gradually inflated in size over the decades. In their new, Slovak-English bilingual Bratislava Atlas of Mass Housing, Henrieta Moravčíková and colleagues have made the most ambitious attempt yet at satisfying both these aspirations. The outcome is a book that sets a new international benchmark for published MoMo inventories.

The book comprises both a thematic monograph and an area-based gazetteer. Its first section includes a wide variety of essays on the historical and cultural context of postwar housing in socialist (Czecho-) Slovakia, which appropriately highlight the special emphasis on standardisation and industrial prefabrication within housing of the Khrushchev/Brezhnev eras. This is followed



by the main 'atlas' itself, filling 206 of the book's 343 pages and providing a comprehensive chronologically-arranged inventory of the 21 housing schemes built in Bratislava over the four decades 1955 – 1995, complemented with maps, statistics and historic photos and text summaries.

Here, pride of place naturally belongs to the vast and celebrated Petržalka, whose 50,000 flats were built in 1973 – 1980 following a famous 1967 competition. However, Petržalka is placed in its proper context of more everyday developments, up to the concluding Dlhé diely project of 1979 – 1995, distinctly Postmodern in detailing. The small overall number, and the very large size, of postwar developments in Bratislava – far fewer than the equivalent number in many major western cities – emphasises the highly concentrated, coordinated character of Eastern-Bloc housing production. The final section of the book, which presents type-plans of standard housing blocks and social institutions, and images of public art projects, underscores the socialist countries' characteristic





pocket, and weighs over 1 kilogram! Electronically-minded readers might of course object that published books, in any size or shape, are an obsolete form in which to present topographical information of any sort, information that nowadays properly belongs in GIS-type databases, accessible via internet links, 'tagging', portable devices, etc.? But in response, one could counter that old-style publication still offers a more tangible, 'concrete' way of accessing diverse visual and textual material – as demonstrated in the Bratislava Atlas.

Perhaps the ideal formula would be to combine the two. One example of this is the recent English Heritage/RCAHMS-backed programme to make available on-line the text of Tower Block, converting its Gazetteer into a pilot on-line database covering several regions of England and Scotland (see www.towerblock.org) The DOCOMOMO-International Specialist Committee on Urbanism and Landscape (of which Henrieta Moravčíková is an active member) is currently investigating the potential of on-line databases. Maybe Bratislava's achievement of the most comprehensive published inventory hitherto could become the foundation for a Slovak database that could command an equivalent internationally exemplary status?

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combination of extreme type-plan standardisation and ambitious, usually incomplete landscaping and social provision schemes – and, more generally, the vast spaciousness of the layouts and the moderate height of the housing slabs and towers.

Seen in the light of the politically contentious status of these developments in the post-1989 years, the dispassionate character of this book, aiming (in an echo of Tacitus or Thucydides) 'not to romanticise... but instead to analyse truthfully and without prejudice', is a remarkable achievement. Internationally speaking, the book provides by far the most comprehensive coverage yet of mass housing in a single city, with very few identifiable flaws. Only the maps themselves could perhaps have usefully been enhanced: an overall map of the city would have been very helpful, as would more explicit captioning of the useful layout plans of the individual housing areas.

Could this book realistically be employed as a fieldwork aid as well as a desk research guide? Probably, although it would not fit in even a large

