

# In Search of Postmodern City: Urban Changes and Continuities in East Central Europe between Late Socialism and Capitalism (1970–2000)

Hledání postmoderního města:  
Urbánní změny a kontinuity  
ve středovýchodní Evropě mezi  
pozdním socialismem a kapitalismem  
(1970 – 2000)

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How is it possible to relate the dramatic story of the metropolises of Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 20th century? Perhaps the path of these cities from late socialism into restored capitalism could be framed as a tale of emancipation from the dead hand of rigid central planning, highlighting the potential of a deregulated market and the polyphony of democratic participation. Or conversely, as the search for an escape from the failure of modernist utopias, bringing in its wake the daring architectural experiments and the chaotic urbanistic reality of postmodernism. Yet no less justifiably, we could also speak of the self-destruction of urban-planning expertise, a narrative of the gradually weakening position of architects and even more so planners as they relinquished the field to spontaneous development, lay actors, political compromises, and primarily neoliberal commodification as the chief factor shaping the growth of cities in the wild 1990s. An unleashing of creative potential – or a new hegemony grounded in “creative destruction” and deregulation of public planning?

The primary ambition of the present issue is to understand the conditions behind the transformation of architecture, urban design, and indeed city functioning in the Central and Eastern Europe region that occurred in the final decade of the 20th century. Its theme is derived from an ongoing research project involving researchers from both the Institute for Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences (ÚSD AV ČR) in Prague and the Department of Architecture at the Historical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (HÚ SAV) in Bratislava, examining the transition from late socialism to postsocialism through the example of the development of the two capital cities of the former federal state of Czechoslovakia. Yet the current issue also works to present a wider geographic picture of the region in the condition of post-socialism. The reality of the 1990s was not formed exclusively by the export of economic, intellectual, or aesthetic situations from the “West” to the “East” after the collapse of the Iron Curtain: without a thorough understanding of the essence of late socialism, we cannot understand what happened to the cities between the Baltic and the Black Sea in the Nineties – or more importantly, why it did.

The larger cities, most prominently the national capitals, in this region had since the 1970s become incubators of criticism, even beyond the immediate target of dysfunctional central planning and its inability to react to the changing needs of the population. Harsh questioning and gradual

deconstruction turned, indeed, to the very ideological foundations on which socialist cities, at least from the late 1950s, had been created and in turn legitimated their form and function: the joint Marxist and Modernist faith in progress and technocratic trust in rational expert governance. In reaction to the thoughtless demolition in the 1960s and 1970s of historic urban sections and the loss of many worthwhile heritage sites and structures, the late-socialist era witnessed a strengthening of the belief in heritage protection (not only of medieval urban cores but extending eventually to the “bourgeois” construction of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries); urban air pollution from sulphur and nitrous oxides furthered the calls for ecology; and the anonymity of mass-scaled prefabricated housing did the same for ideas of the humanisation of the urban environment, both through creative architectural vocabularies and the participation of urban residents in their cities’ functioning and growth.

Many of these visions, however nationally and locally specific at first sight, crossed paths (unacknowledged or openly) with the American and West European postmodernist discussions of the “image of the city”, “genius loci”, or “liveable cities”. To what extent this crisis and critique of the modernist approach to city-building in Central and Eastern Europe was merely a reflection of the crisis and critique visible since the 1960s in the West, or drew upon specific local roots related to the economic systems and aesthetic codes in individual socialist states, is also part of the inquiry posed by the authors of the present contributions.

A second ambition, perhaps something of an adventurous stretch for a journal focusing primarily on the material and spatial dimension of our world, is to connect the analysis of changes in architecture and urbanism from the late-socialist to post-socialist eras with more general historic phenomena, i.e., the character and legitimacy of governance. Starting from the assumption that the architecture and spatial planning of cities in the modern age create a significant component in the formation of human lives, we conclude that without these wider ramifications it is not possible to analyse them in depth. On one hand, the way that cities are built (from prefabricated housing estates through the “Businessman Baroque” of the early 1990s up to later “smart” developer projects with green roofs) reflects the mental stance and ideological framing of the given era: whether stressing the responsibility of the state to give adequate housing to all citizens or conversely the exclusive responsibility of individuals for their own fates. At the same time, however, practices for planning and construction generate new problems, dilemmas, or blind alleys, which thus necessitate further questions and doubts about the current order. Architecture, in short, is both a mirror of its age and an accelerator of historical change. This “dialectic” can be discerned in the era under discussion in several senses at once – from the reaction against modernist uniformity or destructiveness, through the canalisation of the creative verve of postmodern architects who in the 1990s often found themselves harnessed to the services of wealthy clients through generic development projects, up to the efforts for a re-emancipation of urban expertise from its position of servility, visible in certain instances from the very start of the millennium.

Previous depictions of the trajectory of urban environments in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st, as the focus of the current issue, have been mapped with greatest thoroughness by sociologists, economists, and geographers. A pioneering role was played specifically by two generations of Hungarian scholars, most prominently Ivan Szelényi, György Enyedi and József Hegedüs. Most likely, a central reason was that Hungary was first among Europe’s socialist nations (starting roughly around 1970) to create its own socialist-directed privatisation grounded in a liberalised approach to ownership rights. Not only Hungarian researchers but successively sociologists and geographers from other countries formulated a basic narrative that well-informed readers have probably encountered in connection with the cities of Central and Eastern Europe at the 20th century’s end. In other words, the story of how not only the socialistically planned and governed city, but indeed the late-socialist efforts toward a more humane urban development with greater consideration toward historic heritage and everyday user needs all culminated in the 1990s in the massive privatisation of city enterprises, services, housing, or even sections of public space.

However much the socio-geographic and sociological approach is formative for most of the current issue’s authors, they nonetheless work towards capturing the historical processes and changes in the formal approach to city planning and shaping of public spaces and architecture in their own right. Through the specific historiography of the procedures used in architecture and planning. In this historicization of post-socialist cities, four essential aspects emerge that have not

been sufficiently examined by the adjacent disciplines: the individual actors, their strategies for action, hidden continuities with the past (in contrast to the drama of sweeping change), and the specific imprint of such generalised developmental trends on the organisation of space and formation of architecture. Who were the people that launched and accelerated the seismic shift in the conception of the urban environment and the practice of city building? How did the activities that powered and enacted this change in everyday reality themselves change? In what way did the new patterns of thought or architectural form emerge from those that came before?

The selection of scientific studies for this monothematic issue is the result of an open call for authors providing in-depth analyses of the architecture, urbanism, or politics that formed the cities of Central and Eastern Europe in the era known as the “postmodern”. In no sense is it a homogeneous group of texts, but instead a series of autonomous and individual achievements, where the explicatory and testament value only increases if they are not viewed merely as echoes of a uniform and predetermined historical path.

The matter of the form assumed by postmodern architecture and planning in different variations in the lands of the socialist block is brought up by the study of Florian Urban. Comparing postmodern architecture in Poland and East Germany, he points out the links between its formal architectural language and the erosion of central planning in late socialism, as well as underscoring that the postmodernist project was not exclusively a capitalist one but capable of full adaptation even in such strictly centralised regimes as that of the GDR.

The same historical timeframe of the period just before the fall of the socialist regimes applies in the contribution by Petr Vorlík, examining the rise of postmodern approaches in Czech urban planning in the 1980s. These reflections create a metaphorical springboard as well as a shared basis of continuity for the other studies primarily based on cities in the stage of post-socialist transformation.

In contrast to the broad perspective of Vorlík, bringing together large-scale tendencies in the postmodernist planning and construction of Czech cities, the study by Henrieta Moravčíková and Petr Roubal focuses on two highly specific localities and architectural forms: the Parks of Culture and Leisure (PKO) in Prague and Bratislava. Through an extensive comparative analysis, the authors demonstrate that despite the differing initial conditions, the history of both sites was quite similar in the state-socialist period, yet their post-socialist transformation unravelled in sharply diverging ways. In Bratislava, the PKO was privatised, demolished, and replaced with generic investment real estate. In Prague, however, despite various shifts and difficulties, the complex remains an exhibition and social space still in public ownership. The diverging trajectory of both complexes brings up the question of the varying dynamics of post-socialist transformation, the importance of structures of political governance, and no less vitally, the crucial historical, spatial, and cultural-social specifics of the two metropolises.

Housing, in its transformation from the end of late socialism through the past three decades of post-socialism, is an area of particular interest for several contributing authors. Matěj Spurný presents a thorough investigation of the post-1989 process of privatising the municipal housing stock in Bratislava’s Old Town (Staré Mesto). His detailed analysis highlights several continuities with socialist housing policies, but more notably points to specific individuals and public figures and their senses of what changing housing ownership should imply. Through this examination, he notes that post-socialist housing transformation was dominated by the wider effort to shift the entire economic system into a largely unregulated market economy, as opposed to a more democratic and transparent redistribution of housing. Following this empirically rigorous treatment of the political-technical methods for privatisation, other contributions address the study of changes in given housing estates or urban neighbourhoods, where the main question is the formal transformation of the architectural and urban aspects of housing and the related political mechanisms involved.

Cosmina Bouaru uses the example of changing practices in planning late-socialist housing estates in the Romanian capital Bucharest, invoking the context of the postmodern return to traditional forms of streets and boulevards, as well as the post-socialist change in housing policy and privatisation, resulting not only in the transmission of the great majority of the housing stock to private ownership but also the further densification of central residential neighbourhoods.

One of Belgrade’s most widely praised housing estates, with notable postmodern elements, is the topic of the study by Jovana Bugarski. Here, the main argument is the importance of compact volumes and scales, not only in the actual apartment blocks but more significantly in the public

spaces, putting the estate among the rare instances of recent construction to be declared a cultural heritage site by the Serbian government.

The Croatian researchers Melita Čavlović and Antun Sevšek use their study to analyse the process of “urban renewal” in selected localities in the wider centre of Zagreb, where the idea of redevelopment was discussed by urban planners starting in the 1980s. In contrast to the planning dating from before 1989, the later development and privatisation of these areas took place spontaneously.

The idea of creating new urban centres after 1989 is examined by Eva Špačková. Differing stances toward urban renewal and envisioning the shape of a contemporary urban centre are analysed in terms of the designs submitted to the urban planning competition for the centre of the Hranice housing estate in the Moravian mining town of Karviná.

One phenomenon closely linked to the post-socialist transformation of most of the larger cities in the region was that of suburbanisation. The geographers Pavel Šuška and Martin Šveda present the political and social mechanisms initiating and shaping the suburbanising processes in the vicinity of Bratislava, outlining the characteristic physical manifestations associated with the process. Suburbanisation is treated as a universal occurrence in the post-socialist transformation of larger urban areas in Central and Eastern Europe, grounded in the idealisation of private property as well as a renewed pattern of deepening regional discrepancies between centres and peripheries.

The last of the published studies is an investigation of the transform of the Albanian capital Tirana after the fall of Communism. Authors Blerta Dino and Sam Griffiths use urban morphology to trace the turbulent shifts and crises in the post-socialist transformation of the city, a kind of concentrated report of the salient conditions for the region. The growth of the city and its architectural forms are revealed as a significant propellant for post-socialist transformation toward the crises and global challenges that face all cities today to a similar extent, which are now rapidly losing their specific features that set them apart as “post-socialist”.

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