The unfinished project for the socialist city and the legacy of its multiple ecologies

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Abstract

The transformation of socialist cities during the lengthy 20th century was closely integrated with the overall economic activities of the state and operated within a system where the means of production were nationalised and central governments were responsible for decision-making, be it spatial arrangement of the economy and political or military objectives of the country. At the same time, the transformation of cities during this period ideologically attempted to promote egalitarian society where access to assets and amenities, and allocation of commodities was consistent and equal to all. Somewhat surprisingly, as the topic has been relatively less discussed in previous literature, urban planning during the socialist era uncovers arguments for sustainable development. Yet, notions of priority during socialism also existed and this indicates some major constraints and dysfunctions in the transformation of cities under the centrally planned system of state socialism. This overview of the book "Urban planning during socialism: views from the periphery" (2024 Routledge) offers some fresh support points to unpack the unfinished research challenges of studies of urban space of socialist cities through transversalities of political, economic and social phenomena that contribute to diverse spatial configurations.

Keywords

Socialist City, Priority, Unfinished.

The transformation of socialist cities during the lengthy 20th century was closely integrated with the overall economic activities of the state and operated within a system where the means of production were nationalised and central governments were responsible for decision-making, be it spatial arrangement of the economy and political or military objectives of the country. The transformation of cities during this period ideologically attempted to promote egalitarian society where access to assets and amenities, and allocation of commodities was consistent and equal to all. However, these goals were not fully achieved in any socialist country. Many grandiose plans in cities were often not realised in their entirety until the end of the socialist period. The seemingly isolated section of the planet during socialism provided top architects from wider geographies opportunities to design a 'socialist city' under very different circumstances all over the socialist bloc—from world cities in central positions to more peripheral medium-sized and small cities with very different previous urbanization histories in the affected regions. The pearls of world architecture and urban planning, some of which could even serve as examples of sustainable planning for today's urban planners, as well as the biggest failures, originate from this ambiguous chapter of urban history. The book "Urban planning during socialism - views from the periphery" (Mariotti & Leetmaa 2024) provides a 21st century reflection on what could be the takeaway messages from the diverse experiences of attempting to plan a sustainable and egalitarian city—this time from the perspective of the socialist peripheries.

An important filter that directed the development of the socialist city—both in planning it and what was actually built during this period—was shortage economies (Kornai 1992) and a pragmatic approach to state priorities (Sjöberg 1999; Gentile & Sjöberg 2010). Notions of priority during socialism also indicate some major constraints and dysfunctions in the transformation of cities under the centrally planned system of state socialism.

One of the major socialist 'planning projects' was to urbanise the Central Asian steppes (Talamini 2024). From the longue durée perspective these aims indicate how the spatial periphery of the Soviet Union became a new centrality exploiting natural resources of the barren deserts and steppes, prioritising urbanisation, human colonisation and expansion of agriculture in areas that have not been cultivated previously. As the economic occupation of the land developed, also new references in architecture and urban development started to contribute to defining the political aspirations and priority entities in today's Astana, previously known as Akmolinsk, Tselinograd, Akmola, Astana and Nur-Sultan (ibid.). State's priorities can also be expressed through military ambitions, and this also had a significant role in shaping regions during the period of state socialism. The spatial priorities of the core and the specific role of the periphery are highlighted in the transformation of Valga/Valka cities, adjacent towns on the border of northern Latvia and southern Estonia, where the nuclear deterrence tactics of

the time shaped a specific role for the region and the city and directed its developments for decades (Leetmaa, et al. 2024). These are only few examples of the role played by the periphery during socialism in achieving the country's central priorities.

Some themes of relevance and also outlined in "Urban planning during socialism: views from the periphery" highlight (1) divergent paths under diverging world systems, according to the economies of priorities (Kornai 1986; Sjöberg 1999, Leetmaa, et al. 2009), (2) urban developments under the urban growth paradigm (Murray & Szelenyi 1984) and (3) environmental politics and ecological consciousness in transformation of cities during socialism (a topic that has received relatively little attention in previous literature). Urban planning of the socialist city aimed at promoting sustainable growth even when in practice this was often overlooked and ignored. Throughout state socialism, natural resources were often exploited in order to maximise economic growth, leading to environmental degradation in large areas in socialist countries (Whitehead 2005) and in particular as natural resources were "[n]ot owned privately, they had no 'value'" and were "'free goods'" (Richter 1997).

Yet, the concept of nature was also a "central agency of political change" during late socialism, where renewed sense of freedom was refound in formal experiments with such concepts within the disciplines of architecture and urban planning (Panteleyeva 2024). After 1960 peri-urban areas of cities became important considerations of socialist urban planning practices, in particular "when the working week in the Soviet Union was reduced to five days", allowing people to spend their free time in the city's outskirts, acting as an extension to the urban environment, allowing relaxation and situating everyday spaces for family life distinct from the dense urban environments of the socialist city (Lankots 2024). The realities of everyday life under state socialism in large ordinary cities in Ukraine also outline hierarchies and priorities of use that are in contrast with the use of the 'official' spaces of power during the period of state socialism and were based on residents demands (Mezentsev, et al. 2024). Environmental considerations are also present in the planning of Yekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk) where neo classical ornamentation and visual embellishment of the Stalinist classicism were replaced with expansion of industrial territories, while raising also environmental concerns through ecological planning strategies related to city's urban development during socialism (Gobova 2024). Sustainability goals and emphasis on the environment during the period of state socialism were subordinated to the overarching priorities and ideologies that mediate the more hidden priorities set at national level. Within this context, Pojani and Pojani (2024) highlight the impact of the creative sector in Tirana, sought by many in the country, although the economy prioritised the productive sphere, highlighting economy vs ecology hierarchical dichotomies that existed during the period of state socialism.

Unrealised urban plans in the socialist city

Urban growth projects in socialist cities were rarely completed as initially anticipated in the original plans (Leetmaa & Hess 2019). The scale of the incompleteness of the socialist urban plans of cities varies too and contributes to defining their peripheries (Mariotti & Leetmaa 2024). Unrealised and incomplete projects in former socialist cities are often their narratives and formal representations, frequently bearing their planned global aspirations. Urgency towards housing during state socialism often resulted with incomplete auxiliary programmes or infrastructures in cities, resulting with spatial conflicts and dissatisfaction during this period.

In Bratislava, a city at the edge of both the East and the West and where the Iron Curtain run along its limits, in the case of Petržalka, ideas for post-war international architectural and planning projects were completed only in the southern part in the form of apartment blocks and schools (Moravčíková, et al. 2024). The incompleteness of the project for the neighbourhood (Petržalka) was impacted by the Czechoslovakia's worsening economic situation, and by the end of 1980's Petržalka remained a monofunctional addition to Bratislava. The public halls and recreational areas of GIdani, a neighbourhood in Tbilisi, were also not completed during the period of state socialism, while all of the residential units housing over 147 thousand people in it were built. The failure to complete the neighbourhood following its original plans was due to lack of funding, but also because of political priorities set on national level during the period of state socialism (Gogishvili 2024). Tomaszewicz and Majczyk (2024) analyse the priorities assigned to the construction of housing estates in the outskirts of Wrocław, which led to inequalities in the development of the city in which planned service centres were not built, although they were indicated in all post-WWII city development plans. Kiss (2024) explains how mass housing estates in the case of Budapest prevented the establishment of an egalitarian society through housing predominately the middle-class in the city and keeping the working class in the social peripheries during the period of state socialism.

In reflecting on the transformation cities during the period of state socialism we can acknowledge the contextual approaches of urban growth embedded in the politics of space of the socialist city. The case studies covered in "Urban planning during socialism: views from the periphery" indicate how the political and economic structures and objectives, and the context impacted the dynamics of the spatial development of cities and also about the sensitivity to scale, form and priorities in the transformation of cities during this period. The transformation of Skopje after the 1963 earthquake, acted as a place for "international solidarity", but the city was also a battle ground for global politics and global knowledge exchange (Mariotti & Hess 2021). In the transformation of the city after the devastating earthquake, contemporary leitmotifs travelled irrespective of the political system and professionals learned from each other, traveling for education and professional train-

ing (Babić 2024). Architecture and planning in socialist Yugoslavia, positioned as a hybrid in-between the bipolar world, were informed by Western sources, with references to the communist bloc noted as rare (Kulić, 2009; Perić & Blagojević 2024). The role of the architects in Lithuania during the period of state socialism outline also unique and innovative approaches in the design of housing when compared with the planning principles that originated from the core in 1954, highlighting regional differences that characterise country's residential urban planning and architecture during the period of state socialism (Drėmaitė 2024).

City's priorities changed after the fall of state socialism, but at the same time, new models for urban transformation emerged, integrated with the processes of economic globalisation (Sailer-Fliege 1999; Gentile, et al. 2012; Sýkora & Bouzarovski 2012), renewing emphasis on the necessities of understanding of the political and economic context in which they are situated and in which they emerge.

"Undoubtedly we can learn from the study of socialist experience", which is providing us with lessons to current and future problems (French & Hamilton 1979, p. 20). We argue that at present, this has never been more relevant. It is in this context that we propose to address the unfinished project of the socialist city, a place of value that is still to be fully unpacked.

The case studies of cities in socialist peripheries contribute to broader understanding of the core-periphery, East-West, North-South polarities, addressing the transformation practices and processes in architecture and urban planning. The papers in "Urban planning during socialism: views from the periphery" are therefore of significance offering a starting point to unpack these unfinished research challenges of studies of urban space and the transversalities of political, economic and social phenomena that contribute to diverse spatial configurations.

Figure 1: A group of 44 Swiss journalists examine the models of two neighbourhoods in Skopje, where two Swiss schools will also be built, 1964.
Source: Vaša pomoć Skopju [Your help to Skopje]. (1964). Skopje: Komitet za obnovu i izgradnju Skopja.

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