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EDITORIAL

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Post-Socialist Neoliberalism: Towards a New Theoretical Framework of Spatial Production

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Abstract

During the past five decades, the neoliberal market economy has become one of the most influential forces in the process of spatial production, transforming cities worldwide by subjecting them to the rationale of global finance. In a world where religions and ideologies continue to lose their influence, financial supremacy has turned into an adequate substitute. The global nature and overarching impact of neoliberalism has made it the research focus of a vast cohort of urban and architectural scholars, historians, theoreticians, geographers, and economists, leading to a significant body of literature that discusses the relationship between the market economy and the built environment on all scales. This "globality" of neoliberalism is recently being disputed by its widely-accepted depiction as a western phenomenon with varied local implementations. Post-socialist neoliberalism, we argue, is not an isolated occurrence but rather an extreme case that accentuates the distinct features of neoliberal spatial transformations, making its characteristics more evident and traceable. This thematic issue challenges the notion of neoliberalism as solely a post-Fordist Keynesian phenomenon, proposing a new theoretical framework that redefines the neoliberalization of the built environment as a global spectacle with diverse, yet analogous, localized expressions across various spatial scales.

Keywords

architecture; neoliberalism; post-socialism; spatial processes; urban planning

"One of the paradoxes of neoliberalism is that it is not new and not liberal," Noam Chomsky teased (acTVism Munich, 2016), suggesting that the values of the modern global market economy closely mirror those of classical 19th-century capitalism and colonialism. Correspondingly, the conventional perception of neoliberalism often portrays it as a resurgence of pre-Second World War economic structures, countering

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the socio-economic order advocated by the Western welfare nation-states and their Keynesian policies (Harvey, 2005). With this broad characterization, neoliberalism encounters many challenges concerning its framing, global applicability, and operation on different spatial scales. Its overuse turns it into a vague "theory of everything" used to describe any right-leaning negative phenomena (Rowlands & Rawolle, 2013, pp. 260–261), while its association with profit-oriented dynamics, inherent to capitalism, raises questions about its purported novelty. Viewed through this lens, neoliberalism risks falling into the category of "pseudo-theories," as defined by Popper (2002, pp. 45, 89), explaining virtually everything and thereby becoming tautological, ineffectual, and irrelevant. Moreover, the classification of neoliberalism as a primarily "Western" phenomenon with "non-Western" variations hampers its conceptualization, limits its global applicability, and disregards the influence of local agencies and internal power structures within non-Western states.

Attempts to address these complexities suggest that "neoliberalization" consistently grapples with various local forces rooted in the "contextually specific histories of institutional organization" (Peck et al., 2013, p. 1093). Yet, such arguments, rather than clarifying the global nature of neoliberalism, seem more like "ad hoc…auxiliary assumptions" meant to "avoid refutation," which eventually further impede the term's scientific utility (Popper, 2002, p. 48). When it comes to the built environment, discussions around neoliberalism and the production of space tend to focus either on the grandeur of skyscrapers or modern museums (Cupers et al., 2020), the erosion of welfare architecture (Mota & Allweil, 2019), financialized large-scale urban development (Aalbers, 2016), or the neo-colonial involvement of Western countries in developing contexts (Soederberg, 2004). Concurrently, the dichotomy between monumental architecture and financialized "investor's" urbanism also created inconsistencies in understanding how neoliberalism functions across various spatial scales. In order to relate neoliberalism with neoliberal spatial processes in a meaningful and scientifically sound way, a formulation of new hypotheses and a reconfiguration of existing theoretical frameworks are needed. Therefore, in this thematic issue of *Urban Planning*, we explore three main questions: What is "new" in neoliberalism to begin with (i.e., what distinguishes it from plain capitalism) in the way it influences the production of space? How is it a global phenomenon with local and regional impact? And how does it operate consistently on different spatial scales and between various social milieus?

A notable structural distinction between neoliberalism and capitalism lies in the prominent role of the state in the former. Unlike its classical predecessor, which advocated for laissez-faire and an entirely free-market approach, neoliberalism positions the state as a guardian of the market, preventing inflation, stabilizing markets, and providing a safety net (Friedman & Schwartz, 2008). This recognition of necessary "special interventions" to foster a favorable business and investment climate acknowledges that the market can never be entirely "free" (Harvey, 2005, p. 70). To comprehend the nuances of neoliberal spatial production, it becomes imperative to scrutinize the impact of privileged groups in steering the transition from state-controlled toward market-oriented urban development and analyze the spatial expressions of this transformation (Koleva & Magnin, 2018; Vujošević, 2003).

As argued by György Lukács (1971, p. 58), it is the capability to capitalize itself by "transforming its privileges into economic and capitalist forms of control" that enables a ruling class to adapt to the capitalist mode of production. A similar phenomenon occurs during the transition from socialism to neoliberalism, when privileged elites secure their interests through economic reforms (Harvey, 2005). This shift delineates a unique trajectory of *post-socialist neoliberalism*, characterized by the transformation of former

state-controlled enterprises into private corporations, led by the former regime's inner circle who capitalized on their status to become influential spatial agents (Schwake, 2020, 2022). The influence of these powerful agents on the production of space is unparalleled, resulting in a swiftly evolving built environment that, instead of public spaces and affordability, prioritizes investments, leverage, and profitability. Post-socialist neoliberalism, we argue here, represents an extreme case that accentuates the damaging features of neoliberal architecture. Furthermore, focusing on post-socialist (aka. "non-Western") contexts gives us the opportunity to redefine neoliberalism as a global phenomenon with diverse yet comparable localized variations—and their spatial manifestations.

In this issue we turn our attention to local implementations of neoliberalism analyzed through concrete case studies, which will give us the opportunity to propose new analytical and theoretical frameworks. Peck et al. (2013, p. 1093) described neoliberalism as a "creature of less-than-happy marriages" between global trends and local dynamics. Here, however, we wish to propose a different starting point, in which the neoliberal turn is not seen as an externally imposed transition but rather as one initiated and endorsed from within the state apparatus. In other words, we see it as a more than happy marriage between political and financial power structures that influences the production of space, to the detriment of the democratic and inclusive character of post-socialist cities (Staničić, in press). It is also evident, as all articles in this issue will testify, that this symbiosis manifests itself in the built environment in many different and often unexpected ways. Case studies discussed in this thematic issue are pushing the definitions of both "neoliberalism" and "post-socialism," to the point that the only way to make sense of them is to study them from a new, intertwined, and comprehensive viewpoint.

This is precisely one of the points of Łukasz Drozda (2024, p. 1), who in his article aims to "undermine the concept of the post-socialist city itself as reductionist, given the crucial importance of factors that differ from the influence of the pre-1989/91 times." He proposes instead the concept of "dubious post-socialism" to show how the socialist label is being fashionably attributed to many factors that, in fact, are not directly related to it, and that post-socialism can only be properly understood in much broader historical, political, and cultural contexts. In similar fashion, Gergely Olt et al. (2024, p. 1) argue "against the widely assumed hegemony of neoliberalism, not just in the post-socialist context, but anywhere." They point out that contemporary spatial production is so complex and intertwined with state ideologies that, to understand it properly, more-than-neoliberal rationales must be taken into account. Clientelist or neopatrimonial relations, for example, "can explain how [political] power is maintained without actual development, how corruption as a mode of rule is politically accepted, and why political struggles need to consider other aspects besides fighting capitalist class domination" (Olt et al., 2024, p. 1).

This coupling of authoritarian regimes with powerful international real estate development companies to secure political power under the pretext of economic progress was also the focus of Nebojša Čamprag. By analyzing three examples from former Yugoslavia, he demonstrates that "such a pattern is particularly noticeable in the implementation [of] large-scale redevelopment project[s]...causing many controversies due to state-led regulatory interventions, investor-friendly decision-making, and a general lack of transparency" (Čamprag, 2024, p. 1)—and we would add, state-sponsored violence. Čamprag, however, also offers glimpses of hope, arguing that these authoritarian planning trends have also generated a reaction from civil society organizations whose role in more inclusive and democratic urban planning is rising.

The role of planning system, and in particular planning institutions, is the key here as they are the ones that give legitimacy to these damaging trends. As Kucina (2024, p. 1) points out, “the mismatch between the dynamics of political and economic reforms and the static urban planning system” is constantly reproducing urban contradictions. He insists that the inconsistency of the socialist authorities in implementing urban plans has been continued with the “post-socialist governing tendencies towards irregularity, privatization, and commercialization of urban development” (Kucina, 2024, p. 1). Alternative approaches to urban planning, Kucina suggests, should install new institutional infrastructure for collaboration among citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers. Along these lines, Egor Muleev examines the role of bureaucracy in urban transportation reform under the pretext of implementing “best practice” scenarios that still favor markets. Muleev (2024, p. 1) contends that “the agency in the provision of norms and regulations, calculations and forecasts, orders of economic exchange, and knowledge production concentrates in the hands of bureaucrats regardless of their formal attachment to state or private entities.” The decision-making, then, lies in the hands of a selected few, who have the power to decide not only on money distribution, but implementation of urban plans as well.

The transition from community housing model built under planned economy to market-led commercial housing inevitably affects the usage and appropriation of connected public spaces. As Tao Shi et al. (2024, p. 16) show us, during this process in China, “neighbourhood services [were] commercialized [and] the high-end services…have been cancelled while some new services have emerged.” This led to the social stratification that was even more augmented by the diversification of housing ownership, privatization of public resources, changes in property management, and changing characteristics of communal spaces caused by population replacement. Sophia Ilyniak (2024, p. 1) argues that “emancipatory ideals promoted by Western institutions and reflected in urbanist literature [and practice] are contradicted by ongoing economic restructuring—austerity, privatization, and deregulation,” where urban devolvement has put cities “into the competitive environment of place entrepreneurialism.” While post-socialist decentralization and reterritorialization has fostered local self-governance and gave power to local communities, she argues, it also reproduced unevenness across local, national, and global scales.

These changes by rule discriminate against people with low income, the poorly educated, people with no ties to the regime, migrants, and rural and older communities. In her article, Aija Lulle (2024, p. 1) contends that “envisioning the future of housing planning in post-socialist cities necessitates the acknowledgment of a pressing reality: many societies are undergoing rapid aging and depopulation.” In her view, “entrenched neoliberal practices [idealize] youthful, robust, and entrepreneurial residents, [while] considerations of aging are conspicuously absent from urban planning visions” (Lulle, 2024, p. 1). Approaching and practicing neoliberal post-socialist transition with care and a humanistic agenda in mind can lead to more inclusive cities and societies in the future. This kind of future-oriented thinking also requires innovative methods for urban and architectural design. Dalia Dukanac et al. propose entangling empirical (interpretation and use of space by its inhabitants) and analytical (as determined by architects and architectural theoreticians) perspectives in order to close the gap between common and professional interpretation of social housing. According to them, this approach can help us explore and theoretize “new possibilities opened up by the [existing] buildings: interstitial, intermediary, transitional spaces, and spatial in-betweens” (Dukanac et al., 2024, p. 1). This pursuit of both “meticulously planned and dynamically conceived spaces [is] not only a way to respond to specific [socio-political] realities, but [it] foster[s] the capacity of architecture to accommodate the future population and socio-economic transformations” (Dukanac et al., 2024, p. 1).

Articles featured in this thematic issue make it clear that studying and practicing the production of space under post-socialist neoliberalism requires the multiplicity of readings, manifestations, implementations, and applied research methods. They also prompt us to think about multiple actors that are affected by these changes, and about the complex relational networks that make them all endlessly intertwined. Going beyond already established political-economic frameworks, here we would like to argue for a new approach to studying post-socialist neoliberalism that acknowledges the messiness of socio-spatial power relations, happy marriage of global financial systems and ideology, as well as structural deficiencies of existing mechanisms of production, management, and control of spatial resources.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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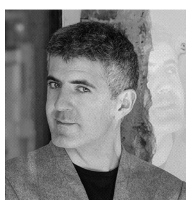

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ARTICLE

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Totalitarian Flower Pavilion: The Dubious Post-Socialist Legacy of Contemporary Eastern European Cities

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Abstract

More than three decades after the collapse of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, local urban processes are still very often associated with that historic period or post-socialist transformation. This article aims to undermine the concept of the post-socialist city itself as reductionist, given the crucial importance of factors that differ from the influence of the pre-1989/91 times. The article confronts the discussion on the applicability of the post-socialist framework with field research conducted in selected Polish and Ukrainian cities, in particular the examples of the Kvity Ukrainy (Flowers of Ukraine) protest movement in Kyiv, Ukraine, and the 2003 spatial planning reform's results in Krakow, Poland. The analysis is based on interviews with representatives of different actors involved in the policymaking process, such as local government representatives, policy advisors, urban planners, journalists, business circles, and members of grassroots initiatives.

Keywords

CEE; Krakow; Kvity Ukrainy; Kyiv; policymaking; spatial planning; state socialism; urban policy

1. Introduction

With the passage of time since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the influence of post-socialist factors on the current state of urban affairs in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) seems to be waning (Bajerski, 2020). However, it is debatable what is to be understood as post-socialist, whether the phenomena associated with the state socialist past are actually linked to it, and how strong this relationship is (Müller, 2019; Tuvikene, 2016). It seems that "the post- and regional attributes" typical to post-socialist studies are only important when "their presence has a particular and indispensable meaning (which is rarely the case)" (Gentile, 2018, p. 7).

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The aim of this article is therefore to introduce the theoretical concept of dubious post-socialism. This concept does not assume that the state socialist past is no longer important, but questions the extent of its influence, treating it as an additional factor that merely modulates more important variables. The strict relationship between the different policies and urban forms of the former state socialist systems is dubious. They seem to be the result of various post-socialist course changes and external factors during the period of state socialism, such as the pre-socialist past and parallel non-socialist processes, for example, strong religiosity in Poland, which is the reason why numerous churches have been built after 1945 (Cichońska et al., 2019). Post-socialist phenomena can be, first, directly related to the old system (state socialist urban planning, for example, of newly-built cities around factories); second, organised in opposition to it (anti-communist rejection of the planning system in general, including spatial planning as something associated with the planned economy of the state socialist state); or, third, changed by post-socialism in parallel with the influence of other factors.

The topic of this article is the third aforementioned form of urban processes. I will try to show, using concrete examples (one from Ukraine and the second from Poland), that this type of post-socialist relations is particularly important. The first example is the protest movement against the demolition of a modernist pavilion in Kyiv, which can be placed in the context of a broader interest in the so-called themes of socialist modernism, i.e., various buildings located mainly in the former Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia (BACU & Rusu, 2021; BACU et al., 2021; Hatherley, 2016; Jędruch et al., 2023; Springer, 2011; Veryovki et al., 2019). However, the example of the heritage protection movement analysed here focuses primarily on the cultural and aesthetic value of this type of architecture rather than on the relationship of such buildings to the state socialist period itself. The second example is the spatial planning policy reform in Poland that is sometimes associated with the post-socialist context (Büdenbender & Aalbers, 2019; Niedziałkowski & Beunen, 2019), which seems to be a superficial simplification, as the political changes after 1989/91 are linked with the historical period that preceded it rather than with other contemporary processes that have more to do with this reform.

The article is structured as follows. First, I introduce the limitations of the post-socialist framework in urban studies. Second, I explain the sample used in the study described in this article, and then I describe the methodology and data sources used. Finally, I discuss the results of the study and draw conclusions.

2. Possible Limitations of Post-Socialist Analysis in Urban Studies

The experiences of state socialist cities are not homogeneous, since the cities functioned in different geographical and cultural contexts, although mutual relations existed (Stanek, 2020; Stanilov, 2007). Therefore, these regimes went through different phases, resulting in changes that affected strategic urban planning decisions or even the visual forms of architecture. Moreover, the regimes also differed internally, and the differences further increased after their later collapse (Malý et al., 2020). This article looks at four examples of cities in two neighbouring countries (before 1939, three of them—Krakow, Lviv, and Warsaw—belonged to one state) where the beginning of the state socialist period did not begin at the same time. The consolidation of the dictatorship of the communist party in Kyiv took place in the early 1920s, while in other cases it did not begin until 1945.

The concept of dubious post-socialism presented here does assume that the state socialist past has played a role in today's urbanisation processes, even if it emphasises to a lesser extent the transience of post-socialist

processes in the fourth decade after the fall of the former regimes in CEE. The assertion that transformation continued was certainly justified as the former members of the Eastern Bloc adapted the entire legal systems to the realities of capitalism and for the sake of integration with Western economies (Sýkora, 2009). However, the perception that cities in this region are still in transition does not seem justified so many years after the 1989 revolutions—this period is almost as long as the entire existence of the previous systems. Sýkora and Bouzarovski (2012), for example, cite unfinished privatisation as an example of the importance of post-socialism, but property transformations need not necessarily take place between points A and B, and the alleged transition period may simply be a different model. Of course, there are common features in modern policy-making that are reminiscent of the state socialist past, but all of these urban regimes are going through different development trajectories that do not necessarily fit into a single post-socialist pattern (Hirt et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2020). The post-socialist framework is still used, not only in older publications from the period immediately after the collapse of state socialist regimes (Koobak et al., 2021), but also by researchers dealing with welfare state regimes, who distinguish the post-communist model from typical models of Western capitalism (Piotrowska & Rae, 2018). This framework is also used to describe Poland and Ukraine, which are interesting from the perspective of this article, although it is worth noting that, for example, Mezentsev et al. (2015) wrote in the pre-2022 context, when the post-Maidan changes were not yet as established.

The perception of post-socialism as dubious suggests that it is highly controversial to give particular primacy to the state socialist past, as it is not necessarily a more important factor than other aspects, and although post-socialism still influences urbanisation and policy-making, its influence is limited and diluted—both by factors that are independent of the state socialist past and by those that instrumentalise it. Moreover, "like other major world centers, post-socialist cities represent nodes of global society and compete for places in the global and regional networks" (Nedović-Budić et al., 2006, p. 14). Urbanisation in the CEE countries is therefore only post-socialist to a certain extent, as it is also influenced by contemporary global and pre-socialist factors.

Under these circumstances, post-socialism functions more as one of the parallel variables modulating the course of urban development processes and not necessarily as a key variable. The spectre of socialism or communism, which are often equated (which is why I use the term state socialism in this article to distinguish the pro-Soviet type from other forms of socialist systems and ideologies), serves as a useful scapegoat to demonise various political postulates (Chelcea & Druţă, 2016). This bogeyman is also used in many far-right conspiracy theories whose influence on contemporary urban policies is increasing (S. Fainstein & Novy, 2023; Sager, 2020). Socialism is associated with many phenomena that have nothing to do with it, for example, the issue of pedestrians' and cyclists' rights (although in the pre-1989/91 period relatively wide main roads were laid out to achieve the monumental character of public space, or favouring individual car traffic according to modernist urban planning guidelines). In the case of conspiracy theories and anti-communist populism, this is a more or less deliberate manipulation, but similar errors also occur in professional or scientific discourse as a result of the emphasis put on a superficial relationship to the state-socialist factor.

3. Differences and Similarities Between the Ukrainian and Polish Urban Worlds

The study described in this article was conducted in 2021–22 (the last interview in Ukraine was conducted on 18 October 2021, before the start of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022) in four cities: two in Ukraine (Kyiv and Lviv) and two in Poland (Warsaw and Krakow). These are the two largest post-socialist states in the

CEE region, just behind Russia, which is the one most often analysed by researchers. These two countries are neighbours and culturally close, but institutionally very different, which is also a result of their pre-1991 status. Poland was an independent state then and Ukraine was a part of the Soviet Union. Nowadays, Poland is relatively well-developed economically, although the stability of the domestic political situation has become questionable after 2015 (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2019; Markowski, 2019; Smiecinska, 2020). However, these experiences are not comparable to the situation of Ukraine, which has been experiencing war and a foreign occupation of a part of its territory since 2014. Ukraine has also not undergone advanced integration into Western political and economic structures, unlike Poland, which is a member of the EU, NATO, and OECD, among others.

The selection of the above cities is based on the similarity of two pairs. The first consists of the economically and politically dominant national capitals, which are disproportionately larger than other cities in both states (Śleszyński, 2015; Zolkover et al., 2020). Kyiv and Warsaw have undergone major spatial changes and were the destination of intensive immigration after World War II (Cybriwsky, 2016; Grubbauer & Kusiak, 2012). At the same time, they show clear traces of the different types of state socialist urban planning. In both cases, the city centres representative in character have large sections in the socialist realism style; even the central streets, Khreshchatyk in Kyiv and Marszałkowska in Warsaw, are similar. In both cities there are also numerous large housing estates designed in a socialist modernist manner. Moreover, the general spatial composition is very similar—a clear division into a more developed western and a peripheral eastern part, in both cases concentrated around the country's largest river (Dnipro and Vistula, respectively).

Lviv and Krakow are also similar when it comes both to spatial shape and history. In the past, they belonged to the same region—Galicia (Eastern Europe)—and to the same states (Poland and Austria-Hungary). Today, they are cities of similar size (720,000 vs. 800,000 inhabitants) with an intensively developed tourism sector (Kowalczyk-Anioł, 2019; Rutynskyi & Kushniruk, 2020). The spatial structures of Krakow and Lviv were shaped over centuries of urbanisation and were not destroyed during World War II. Therefore, these cities can also be considered more "historical" than the aforementioned capitals.

In addition to the similarity of the cities analysed, the systemic institutional differences are an important context. In Poland, the changes brought about by the collapse of the state socialist system were implemented very quickly at the local level. Already in 1990, an independent local government, which had not existed during the period of state socialism, was reintroduced, and the 1990 local elections were the first fully democratic votes compared to the partially democratic parliamentary elections of 1989. In 1999, an even more advanced reform of local government was introduced, eliminating almost all remnants of the pre-1989 administrative structures (Ferry, 2003; Myck & Najsztub, 2020). The process of reforming urban planning procedures was also dynamic. In the early 1990s, responsibilities for land use were transferred to local authorities, and the legal acts regulating systematic spatial planning were completely remodelled, first in 1994 and then in 2003. The second wave of reforms radically changed the system and invalidated all previously adopted spatial plans, both those introduced before 1989 and those prepared before 2003 (Nowak, Mitrea, et al., 2023).

In Ukraine, changes of a similar magnitude took place with a considerable delay compared to its western neighbour. The first administrative reform in 1997 was of a limited nature and did not solve the fundamental problems related to the division of competences and the financing of local government. Serious changes were

only introduced in the course of democratic changes after 2014, when the process of amalgamating ineffective municipalities began (Horbliuk & Brovko, 2022). Spatial planning, which in the case of Poland was changed several times but comprehensively, in Ukraine is a mixture of Soviet regulations (e.g., Soviet general plans from before 1991) and modern solutions. To date, no separate legal act on spatial planning has been adopted following the regaining of independence (Nowak et al., 2021).

4. Methodology and Data Sources

The basic data source of this study are the opinions of policy-makers from the four cities mentioned above obtained thanks to semi-structured individual in-depth interviews with 84 people—49 in Ukraine and 35 in Poland. This qualitative study is not representative, but aims to differentiate the opinions of people who influence the policymaking process, such as local government representatives, policy advisors, urban planners, journalists, business people, and members of grassroots initiatives. Urban policy is multi-faceted and responds to "wicked problems" characterised by high uncertainty, complexity, and divergence (Head, 2022). In the case of urban policy, one can hardly speak of a linear formulation of policies in a closed loop from the formulation of the diagnosis to the final solution, and the implemented responses are downright chaotic and sometimes random due to the complexity of urban governance (Cohen et al., 1972; Lai, 2006).

All of this argues for using in this kind of comparative analysis, which describes different national, systemic, and urban policy contexts (Codd, 1988; Freeman & Maybin, 2011), methods more flexible than formal review of official documentation. There are often many contradictions between the officially stated goals of public policy and the solutions actually implemented. In Poland, for example, the radical right-wing populist government (Stanley & Cześnik, 2019; Szabó, 2020) at the level of policy planning declares the willingness to adopt sustainable development goals such as limiting individual motorisation (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2022) and it supports the organisation of international mainstream urban conferences such as the World Urban Forum XI in Katowice (2022). On the other hand, politicians from the ruling party publicly criticise such policy solutions in order to accuse their competitors of supporting an overly ideologised, irrational, and allegedly extreme-left urban policy (Wojtczuk, 2018). However, even avowedly progressive decision-makers from the opposition implement solutions that are not necessarily in line with officially stated sustainable policy goals (Grzeszak, 2019).

The in-depth interview method is also useful to analyse the complex phenomenon of urban policy, which encompasses many fields and diversified sectoral policies influenced by different actors with various professional backgrounds, political views, and demographic characteristics. To ensure the greatest possible diversity of interviewees, I tried to distinguish respondents not only by four cities, but also by age (from 21 to 65 years), gender (47 men and 37 women), and the way they are involved in urban affairs. For this reason, I conducted interviews with 30 business representatives (mostly real estate developers), 34 officials (politicians from different levels of government and political environments, policy-makers, and other public sector representatives), and 42 grassroots activists, researchers, analysts, or journalists combined. The three numbers above do not add up to 84 interviews conducted, as these roles are performed in parallel for some individuals. It is even possible to combine all three roles (entrepreneurship, social engagement, political activity). The interviews were transcribed and then edited to ensure anonymisation and as a result of conducting them in different languages (English, Polish, and Russian).

During the interviews, decision-makers were asked what they thought were the most important historical events that influenced the current state of urban affairs in their cities, without suggestions formulated in advance or being given a closed list of options to choose from. There were 172 mentions in total, an average of two mentions per person, with the number of mentions per respondent ranging from one to five. On this basis, I made a selection of two events, which I discuss in more detail in the next section.

In addition to the sources mentioned above, field research was also conducted, including attending urban events such as conferences and public discussions as well as protests described in the article.

5. Case Studies

5.1. The Post-Socialist Heritage Protection in Ukraine

Ukrainian respondents named the Revolution of Dignity (2014) that led to a significant democratisation of their state as the most important event for the current state of urban affairs in Kyiv and Lviv—a total of 19 mentions in 49 interviews. Another name for this event is the Maidan Revolution, which derives from the central square in Kyiv that was the main scene of pro-democracy protests in 2013–14. As one of the interviewees pointed out, one of the networks that enabled the organisation of a long protest brutally fought by the security forces was a network of urban movements previously organised on the occasion of the defence of the Hostynnyi Dvir in Kontraktova square in Podil, Kyiv. The Maidan "was a manifestation of the right to the city" (KY12), this person claims. According to a local business representative, "urban policies in Ukraine are a mixture of Soviet economic planning and post-Maidan civil society tendencies" (KY06). For this reason, I have chosen another case study that is not this revolution itself, but its distant consequence: the protest movement against the demolition of the Kvity Ukrainy (Flowers of Ukraine) pavilion in Kyiv, a clear example of post-Maidan urban activism. This event was mentioned by the interviewees as crucial only three times (twice in the capital and only once in Lviv), but it is—as the statements of the interviewees show—a case that more people know about.

The Kvity Ukrainy is a modernist pavilion designed by Ukrainian architect Mykola Levchuk and completed in 1985. The project was appreciated by professionals from the beginning and received, among others, the Building of the Year Award from the Union of Architects of the Soviet Union. Originally, it was the largest flower shop in Kyiv, an institution that organised exhibitions and a research centre. However, after the dissolution of USSR, the property started falling into a state of neglect until it was finally bought by a real estate developer who decided to drastically remodel the site into a shopping mall with a coworking office. On 6 June 2021, the first protest against the investor's plans took place, and six days later the developer actually started demolishing the building. The protesters responded by destroying the fence around the site, and then they began to occupy the building to prevent further demolition to limit the extent of the damage and allow the main structure to be preserved (see Figure 1). On the same day, the protest was supported by the Ukrainian Minister of Culture, and in a longer context, a court battle with the investor began (Derevianchuk, 2021; Mamo, 2021).

Firstly, the court battle aimed at granting the building the status of a monument, which made reconstruction impossible, blocking the investor's plans. Second, it used the formula of strategic lawsuit against public participation, "a civil complaint or counter-claim filed against non-governmental individuals or groups because of their communications to the public or government on an issue of public concern" (Hurley &

Figure 1. Kvity Ukrainy: The state of the building after demolition was stopped by demonstrators (July 25, 2021).

Shogren, 1997, p. 253). This lawsuit is about the reputation of the investor who sued the protester that first appeared in the protest area due to the proximity of his residence. At the time of writing (December 2023), the case is still ongoing, but it became the starting point of a broader movement of municipalist activists invoking the “right to the city” (Domaradzka, 2018; S. S. Fainstein, 2014; Mayer, 2012), including the Marsh za Kyiv (March for Kyiv) demonstration that took place on 2 October 2021. It was the largest municipalist demonstration in Ukraine in recent decades, announced at a happening next to Kvity Ukrainy.

The defence of Kvity Ukrainy took place less than a year before the Russian full-scale invasion started. At the time of the building occupation and the Marsh, the participants of these protests could not anticipate the events of February 2022, but the demonstrations took place already after the outbreak of war with Russia, which was actually initiated by the invasion of Crimea and the Donbass (2014) or the show of force in the form of the deployment of Russian troops on the Ukrainian state border with Russia (Spring 2021). All this affects the context of the struggle for the widely understood legacy of the USSR, which is associated with contemporary Russian imperialism, leading to an increase in anti-communist sentiments and the popularity of the idea of so-called decommunisation. In Ukraine, however, the latter is taking place later than in most countries in the CEE region (Demska & Levchuk, 2020; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Verdery, 2012). Paradoxically, Kvity Ukrainy serves as an example of Ukrainian cultural heritage for the protesters, as can be

seen from the statements of the interviewees. For a former journalist who now works in the private sector, it is indeed “Soviet heritage, but it was done in a good way” (KY16). A university student involved in the protest movement declares:

> Our opponents say: Oh, you glorify the Soviet Union and want to make a new start. It’s not about glorifying the system or politics. It’s about the people [Ukrainians] who created it with their own hands. Modernism is the design of Ukrainian architects, so we have to appreciate it as the design of Ukrainians who lived under this regime. (KY03)

A journalist from Kyiv (KY04), younger than the first person quoted and older than the second, thinks similarly (“Almost all [Soviet] art and architecture was created by people who were mainly in opposition to the regime or to some aspects of the regime, and they were all Ukrainians, so we should treat them with respect”), as do respondents of different ages from Lviv (young activist, LV14) and an older journalist. According to the latter, the Kvity Ukrainy movement is the first example of such an engagement in defence of a building erected in the Soviet era, while “usually people defend buildings constructed before that time” (LV20). Kvity Ukrainy also has a function and a form that contradicts the oppression of totalitarian architecture, argues another interviewee. A longer statement by a politician from Kyiv is worth quoting here:

> The USSR was bad, everything was bad, modernism is bad. In the case of Kvity Ukrainy, someone tried to tell us that it was a Soviet building and totalitarianism. I told these people that they were completely nuts: “This is a flower pavilion.” And they said: “No, no, it’s a totalitarian flower pavilion.” What could be more humanistic than a flower pavilion? It’s a building that’s proportional to the street and has the best atrium in the city. “Totalitarian flower pavilion” is now my favourite joke! (KY12)

A law student (KY14) involved in the protest movement points out that the building also creates a court precedent. The object that the activists want to give monument status to is currently protected as the intellectual property of its designer, which restricts the investor’s freedom of action. In this way, the building is not only separated from anti-communist associations, but also from the Soviet legal system or the chaos of the system transformation. During the latter, copyright protection was very limited and it was only with the policy development in independent Ukraine after 1991 that more serious intellectual property protection was introduced (Eugster, 2010; Soltysinski, 1969).

5.2. A Policy Reform in Poland

In Krakow, the event most frequently mentioned by respondents was the 2003 spatial planning reform: 8 out of 13 respondents from this city mentioned it. In Warsaw, on the other hand, it was mentioned less frequently (only 3 out of 22 respondents), although the issue of the poor quality of spatial planning and problems related to it came up in more interviews. This case is interesting because the reform took place later than the phase of reforms to adapt the legal system to the conditions of the democratic state and its free market economy. The new building code had already come into force a decade earlier (Act of 7 July 1994 on Building Law). The 2003 spatial planning reform was mentioned twice as often by respondents from Krakow as other top mentions in this city: the state socialist past (4 mentions), Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004 (3), the 1990s transformation (3), or the long-term of the urbanisation of the city (3).

The Act of 27 March 2003 on Spatial Planning and Development served to adjust Polish law prior to the EU accession instead of dealing with the remnants of the state socialist past (Polanska, 2014). This happened several years after the collapse of the Polish People's Republic (1989), which led to the adoption of the much earlier Act of 7 July 1994 on Spatial Development (exactly on the same day as the above-mentioned building code). The 2003 law, which was considered controversial, ineffective, and conducive to corruption, abolished all previously existing plans and introduced the new planning system in a rudimentary form. After 20 years of the current law being in force, the total annual cost of this spatial disorder is estimated at more than 20 billion euros (Majewska et al., 2020; Śleszyński et al., 2020). In Krakow, the share of planned areas in the total area in 2021 was significantly higher (71.4%) than in the country as a whole (31.7%; Statistics Poland, 2023); however, there are still many areas that are built according to special procedures of the so-called building conditions (officially: the Decision on Land Development and Management Conditions). These decisions are issued as individual administrative decisions for investments in areas without spatial development plans: This hinders the coordination of spatial development and facilitates corruption due to the lack of transparency and public consultation when issuing individual decisions (Nowak, Śleszyński, et al., 2023). In 2021, over 163,000 such decisions were issued across Poland, of which 395 were issued in Krakow (a decade earlier, over 2,000 decisions were issued per year in this city; Statistics Poland, 2023). Figure 2 illustrates such decisions in Ruczaj, a neighbourhood often perceived as a blunt example of spatial disorder in Krakow (Klus, 2021; Wiśniewski, 2022). Although there is currently more systemic planning in this city than the national average, the spatial development of the area presented here is organised by building conditions decisions issued for many investments.

Figure 2. Decisions on Land Development and Management Conditions in Ruczaj, Krakow (2023). Source: Miejski System Informacji Przestrzennej Kraków (2023).

The map of such decisions is actually the complete blueprint of this part of the city, and the opinions of the respondents representing different professions correspond with this judgment. Many of the respondents talk about "plowing down" (KR03), "zeroing down" (KR04), "completely changing" (KR05) the planning system, which is the "original sin" (KR07) and the "rotten compromise with investors" (KR07). These statements refer to the cancellation of all previously valid spatial plans on the basis of the controversial spatial planning reform of 2003, which the interviewees from Krakow describe as an absolutely key event for contemporary urban policy. The authors of these statements are a high-ranked local government decision-maker, a local journalist, a member of national parliament, and a city councilor, respectively, declaring different political views. Similar critical opinions are also expressed by policy-makers from Warsaw, although somewhat less frequently than by their colleagues from Krakow. One Warsaw journalist points out that this is the city's "main problem," which is why even a particularly prestigious investment (the Varso Tower) is being realized on the basis of this particular procedure related to the lack of local spatial planning (WA04). However, the area that this interviewee highlights is not the legacy of the communist past, but the contemporary community of capitalist Western countries (the tallest skyscraper in the EU).

The liquidation of spatial planning is a "very old thing" (KR04), explains a 30-year-old journalist, for whom it is therefore a distant past. Such an opinion, it should be emphasised at this point, does not come from a person who has insufficient knowledge of the historical context and knows nothing about the state socialist period; this interviewee correctly gave the year 2003 as the date of entry of the law described into force and correctly located many other historical events. Similarly, a policy analyst of the same age described the destruction of the planning system as "an urban legend he heard from [his] mom" (KR10). These statements are not so much evidence of the short memory of the younger interviewees but rather a proof that a long time that has passed since the aforementioned reform (almost half the period of communist party rule in Poland).

The case is assessed quite similarly by a developer from Krakow, whose memories of this period are short and only cover early childhood. During the interview, this person complains about the quality of spatial planning based on a disparagingly inaccurate diagnosis of the initial situation. This investor compares such actions to the well-known Polish film *Man—Woman Wanted* (1973) directed by Stanisław Bareja. In this popular comedy, a character of a communist party apparatchik works as a "director." Symbolising communist incompetence, this decision-maker orders the lake to be moved, which is easy to do on a mock-up but difficult in the real world. According to KR01, this is not a satirical story from the past, but an almost real description of some contemporary methods of thoughtless spatial planning in contemporary Krakow. This reference is to the cultural text describing the new institutional order, not the pre-1989 practises. The same interviewee believes that "the last intelligent, spatial planning idea in Krakow was the plan for Nowa Huta. Beautiful…a masterpiece" (KR01)—a district of Krakow that was built entirely during the period of state socialism.

6. Conclusions

The historical event most frequently mentioned by Ukrainian respondents was the Revolution of Dignity (2014)—the moment that led to a significant democratisation of their state. In Poland, this function seems to be fulfilled by the second phase of spatial planning reforms from 2003, which replaced the older, purely post-socialist law from 1994. Both events are rather consequences of the transitional period of the first decades after the collapse of state socialism and close this transitional period, which is why it is controversial

to regard them as the embodiment of post-socialism. Indeed, there are many remnants of the former state socialist system in both states—post-Soviet master plans in Ukraine, countless examples of the built environment in both states, and a phrase mentioned by many people, including some of the interviewees, a specific “state socialist mentality” (Sharafutdinova, 2019). However, the component referring to the aftermath of the historical period before 1989/91 is not necessarily the leading one in this mix.

The Kyiv case described in this article proves not so much post-Soviet nostalgia, but several other contexts: Ukrainian national pride directed against Russia, copyright protection almost unknown in state socialist systems, and modernist architecture also present in Western capitalist countries. This process also functions as the concept of the right to the city, which manifests itself in both Poland and Ukraine as a slogan or even the name of various urban initiatives in all four cities. However, such a framework has nothing to do with the past before 1989/91. Urban grassroots initiatives were not possible on a larger scale in societies deprived of freedom of speech, where the revival of local government was only possible after the collapse of state socialism. It is precisely the decentralisation resulting from this process (which has since developed intensively in Ukraine) that has been associated with the progress of democratisation (Kaliuzhnyj et al., 2022; Levitas, 2017; Oleinikova, 2020; Swianiewicz, 2003).

What really unites urban areas in the former Eastern Bloc are also non-post-socialist features: Western-born urban managerialism and neoliberalism (Harvey, 1989; Kinossian, 2022; Peck et al., 2009); contemporary conspiracy theories influencing urban policy (S. Fainstein & Novy, 2023); and various other phenomena of a more global nature that can be found in virtually any urban context (Robinson, 2005, 2022), such as the financialisation of housing, the privatisation of commons, global warming, etc. The correct identification of processes that are not necessarily unique to the post-socialist urban world or its individual parts is important for understanding the processes and events related to contemporary urbanisation. Moreover, Russian imperialism not only is based on the traditions of USSR, but stems from a much longer colonial tradition of the Russian Empire (Velychenko, 2002; Wolff, 1994). It is the lack of understanding of this fact that enables the popularisation of racist theories such as the need for alleged “denazification” as a justification for the Russian invasion (Kuzio, 2023; Rossoliński-Liebe & Willems, 2022). The misunderstanding and orientalisation of urban processes in CEE is often the result of interpreting all events in this region only in the context of a period in its past that lasted only a few dozen years and whose main common feature is the absence of occurrences in the Western urban world. As I have tried to show in this article, the scope of the impact of this period is limited, even when it comes to policy reforms related to post-socialist factors or discussions about the built environment created during the state socialist period.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Captured by Political Power: More-Than-Neoliberal Urban Development and Planning in Post-Socialist Hungary

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Abstract

By critically reflecting on the concept of "post-socialist neoliberalism" proposed by this thematic issue, we argue against the widely assumed hegemony of neoliberalism, not just in the post-socialist context, but anywhere. We suggest taking features that do not fit in the narratives of neoliberalism seriously and highlighting more-than-neoliberal rationales, too. We present cases from the literature focusing on post-socialist and illiberal contexts, especially in Hungary. As the critical reading of the literature and the secondary and primary data about Hungary shows, narratives of capitalist class domination and accumulation can be less than adequate. The maintenance of clientelist or neopatrimonial relations dominated by political power with politically created rents is a separate issue. Therefore, instead of assuming "in the last instance" determination by neoliberalism, which is only camouflaged with theoretically irrelevant contextual issues, we argue for the examination of neopatrimonial relations besides neoliberalism to better understand the mechanisms behind urban development. In doing so, we can explain how power is maintained without actual development, how corruption as a mode of rule is politically accepted, and why political struggles need to consider other aspects besides fighting capitalist class domination.

Keywords

elite capture; illiberalism; market capture; neoliberalism; neopatrimonial; post-socialist; state capture; urban development; urban planning

1. Introduction

In this article, we reply to the invitation to write about how the post-socialist transformation affects regions, cities, and buildings. We reflect—in the words of the editors in the call for papers of this thematic issue—on

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"the unique circumstances of post-socialism" challenging "the conventional understanding of neoliberalism," such as, for example, the reactionary movement of pre-WW2 financial elites (see also Harvey, 2005), because in these contexts the financial elites were defeated after the war and the Stalinist takeover, and the political class and the armed forces stepped into their place. While critically reflecting on the concept of "post-socialist neoliberalism," we argue against the conventional understanding of post-socialism as a transition from state socialism to market rule (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012) and use the narrative of the post-socialist transformation instead (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). Continuities and anti-continuities of the transformation (Tuvikene, 2016) create their own consequences and influence power relations and institutional contexts in various directions. Therefore, to contextually varying degrees, other rationales need to be considered (Bernt & Volkmann, 2024, p. 6), beyond the assumed hegemony of neoliberalism.

We present our theoretical argument, supported by secondary and primary data, about other rationales in the post-socialist transformation and urban developments beyond neoliberalism, especially after the advance of illiberalism and illiberal tendencies. We criticise the concepts of "hybrid neoliberalism" and "neoliberalisation" (Brenner et al., 2010) as they maintain determination by neoliberalism and render empirical variation theoretically irrelevant (Barnett, 2005; Robinson, 2016; Welsh, 2020). Instead of the ever-growing number of adjectives and prefixes added to these concepts, which, "in the last instance," still keep neoliberalism determinant, we suggest considering it as one factor among many (Collier, 2012). Therefore, we rather consider certain empirical deviations from the blueprint of neoliberalism as "more-than-neoliberal" (Gibson et al., 2023; see also Bayırbağ et al., 2023) and also take into account issues not contained by the concept. In post-socialist, illiberal, and authoritarian contexts, even authors criticising neoliberalism's advance note the non-economic rationales of state-led urban and regional investments (Koch & Valiyev, 2015; Trubina, 2015). The interests of political power and clientelist/patrimonial relations are highlighted, and we also refer to these in the Hungarian case. By pointing out the more-than-neoliberal elements, we argue that illiberal politics and neopatrimonial political and economic relations should be taken more seriously (Szelényi & Csillag, 2015) rather than assuming domination by the capitalist class in a neoliberal or by the domestic capitalists in a state-capitalist framework (Scheiring, 2020; Szabó & Jelinek, 2023).

We consider the above theoretical positioning important because many path-determining development projects are irrational and harmful, not just socially and environmentally but also economically. Similarly to other post-socialist and illiberal/authoritarian examples (Bayırbağ et al., 2023; Trubina, 2015), many Hungarian cases of transport infrastructure, local tourism, entertainment, and sports developments are rather serving the reinforcement of neopatrimonial relations than the accumulation and profits for capitalists. Public and EU funds are appropriated to maintain political power even if accumulation weakens and most capitalists suffer losses. After these examples of "corruption as a mode of rule" (Fogel, 2019) set the context, we present the relevant results of our research about urban planning in Hungary. We highlight examples when urban planners and other stakeholders admitted their own irrelevance and uncovered the real rationales behind development processes. Rather than planning ideals and capitalist interests, the interests of the national level of political power or its local vassals are satisfied. Finally, in our conclusions, we summarise our argument. We are well aware that very similar stories and mechanisms are often, but not always, labelled as different types of neoliberalism in the literature. However, in many cases, the assumptions about the control by the capitalist class and the goal of capital accumulation are not relevant, and therefore we argue to look beyond neoliberalism (Parnell & Robinson, 2012) as their explanation, and also to take political power more seriously in state-capitalist models.

2. All-Encompassing Neoliberalism?

The ubiquitous use of neoliberalism has long been criticised because of the all-encompassing claims behind it (Barnett, 2005). In the absence of real theoretical revision (Robinson, 2016), more recent criticism repeats the earlier issues about exaggerated claims and relevance (Watts, 2022; Welsh, 2020). One fundamental problem is that the expansion of the meaning of neoliberalism covers very different fields and aspects that are not necessarily compatible with each other. First, neoliberalism was originally understood as a macroeconomic doctrine favouring free markets, competition, and capital accumulation (Watts, 2022, p. 461; Welsh, 2020, p. 63). Second, the reason behind the macroeconomic doctrine was identified, namely the political project or the global conspiracy of the capitalist classes, where state power is mobilised to support their domination and their hegemonic ideology (Watts, 2022, pp. 460–461; Welsh, 2020, pp. 64–65). This conspiracy also resulted in a geopolitical order through financialisation (Welsh, 2020, p. 63). Third, the success of this class project also means that the neoliberal logic is used in governance, working according to economic goal rationality and the ideology of markets and competition, favouring capitalist interests and creating neoliberal governmentality (Watts, 2022, pp. 462–463; Welsh, 2020, p. 64). Finally, there is the claim that neoliberalism also disciplines people to think and act accordingly, legitimising austerity policies (Welsh, 2020, p. 65) and propagating personal autonomy, self-reliance, and responsibility (Watts, 2022, pp. 465–466).

However, neoliberal ideas and the actual policies differ; the class project and neoliberal governmentality are also in tension, or ideas of self-reliance and responsibility are not necessarily neoliberal (Watts, 2022, pp. 461–462, 463, 465, 471). The tension between the criticism of the "quasi-feudal character of social relations" and neoliberal ideas of competition and markets also remains untreated (Welsh, 2020, p. 75), apart from evoking the concept of hybridity. The ideas of hybridity and variegated neoliberalism (Brenner et al., 2010) are supposed to tackle these problems, explaining differences by the pre-existing institutional contexts (also determined by global neoliberalism) that are universally affected by neoliberalisation. However, this still presupposes an overarching neoliberal ideology (Watts, 2022, p. 462): The "nature of the whole" is assumed in advance, independent of the "parts" (see Robinson, 2011a, p. 8). In this tradition, hybridity still means determination by neoliberalism, not the co-existence and mixture of distinct things (neoliberal and other-than-neoliberal).

Rather than sweeping different elements under an all-encompassing paradigm of neoliberalism with parallel and contradictory meanings, the concept needs to be "weakened sufficiently" so we can see what is beyond it (Welsh, 2020, p. 75). Besides a better understanding of social mechanisms, this is also crucial in the struggle against forms of oppression and injustice that are not neoliberal (Robinson, 2011b, p. 1104) and in imagining political struggles beyond the expectation of systemic collapse (Welsh, 2020, p. 76; see also Bernt, 2022, p. 220). Therefore, instead of an all-encompassing neoliberalism, neoliberal features of social relations can be imagined in a deterritorialised manner, parallel and in conflict with other mechanisms and interests (Welsh, 2020, pp. 62, 75). Instead of calling a hybrid the same neoliberalism camouflaged by painting it in a different colour (Barnett, 2005), we can actually analyse the effects of other rationales and forces (Collier, 2012) beyond the assumed hegemony and "in the last instance" determination of capitalist interests.

3. More-Than-Neoliberal Political-Economic Relations

The melding of political power and capitalist interests can mean the exclusion of both competition and planning rationales by creating monopolies and crony relations by law (Gibson et al., 2023, pp. 186–187), often against neoliberal ideas of economic efficiency and strategic planning (Gibson et al., 2023, p. 189). Rather than including the opposite of neoliberal ideas into the extension of the concept, the creation of incomes by legal and political tools and consequent closed social relations (i.e., rents) can be considered as "more-than-neoliberal" (Gibson et al., 2023, pp. 192–193). This allows us to follow how distinct political decisions instead of market relations create monopolies in a state-capitalist manner and how politically determined groups dominate instead of the capitalist class in general (Gibson et al., 2023, p. 194). Thus, beyond the supposed class project (or conspiracy), an "elite capture" can often be observed (Lauermann & Mallak, 2023). Elites can be defined beyond economic status and class and also by political position (Lauermann & Mallak, 2023, pp. 2–4), giving them the ability to circumvent and influence rules (Lauermann & Mallak, 2023, p. 8). An elite position does not simply depend on financial status and seizing power is not simply about financial gains.

Besides capitalist interests reinforced by state power, other political goals, electoral considerations, and the self-interests of political actors also determine the trajectory of policies (e.g., urban development). For example, land rents can be created by political goals (Bayırbağ et al., 2023), and beyond the market process, by the direct use of violence (Burte & Kamath, 2023). These more-than-neoliberal relations are observed in the example of Ankara, Turkey (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, pp. 474–475), where land ownership rights and rents were distributed through clientelist relations between political power and their electorate (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, pp. 467–469). However, such a political project can still use the rhetoric of market and business (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, pp. 470, 475), and becoming rich overnight through land regulations depends on international and national financial capital flows, but this political project is also very far from privileging economic calculation and increasing efficiency of accumulation. This is well illustrated by politically initiated land use plans (determining speculative land prices and rents) that assume the population of Ankara to be 18 million in 2038 while demographic projections predict 9 million at best (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, p. 476). This "Ponzi scheme" creates a "narrative of hope," dispossessing the late-comers (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, pp. 468–469) and enriching only the "well-informed'' who cash out in time (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, p. 476).

However, the burst of the bubble and consequent economic harm, such as very high inflation, does not mean the end of these regimes at all, as, for example, the Turkish and the Hungarian elections showed in 2023 and 2022, respectively. Among the clearly understood and normalised clientelist relations, it is accepted that, in large part, economic success depends on feudal political connections (Arslantaş & Arslantaş, 2023, p. 243). In the all-encompassing neoliberalism perspective, aspirations towards the partisan, clientelist, politically determined elite (stretching over and fragmenting class relations) and the consequent lack of solidarity and privileging individual responsibility (in choosing the right political side and becoming a client, such as a subcontractor) is equated with the acceptance of neoliberal ideology (Arslantaş & Arslantaş, 2023, p. 244). However, we think this equating overlooks the tension between the above-mentioned partisan, feudal, and traditionalist ideas and neoliberal features, such as class rule, economic goal rationality, effectiveness, and flexibility. Considering the feudal and traditionalist elements separately besides the neoliberal ones can explain the acceptance and normalisation of the above-mentioned development plans against rational calculation, similar to "crazy" infrastructural investments that only benefit politically

connected construction companies (Bayırbağ et al., 2023, pp. 475–476), and more generally the separation of economic problems and the popular support of the ruling party.

Because of the above, instead of using different adjectives and prefixes before the concept of neoliberalism (e.g., authoritarian, illiberal, or post-neoliberalism), meaning that hegemonic neoliberalism is only camouflaged but remains determinant, we suggest analysing neoliberal (as an adjective; see Welsh, 2020, p. 62) and other rationales too. This way, we can differentiate between neoliberal rhetoric and actual processes, connect and theorise the empirical differences between contexts, and explore the elements that make cases "more-than-neoliberal" beyond economic rationality and capitalist class rule.

4. More-Than-Neoliberal Post-Socialism

4.1. The Post-Socialist Transformation

Far from a simple transition from state socialist to a liberal market economy (see, for example, Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012), post-socialist history shows that the change of institutions, rather than a simple legal act (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012, p. 44), is a transformation that means ongoing change (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008, p. 329) and can drift in different directions (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008, p. 326). While private property and market relations became important slogans, both continuities and anti-continuities of the transformation can be observed (Tuvikene, 2016, pp. 141–142). Other approaches consider the concept of post-socialism obsolete as the regime change happened too long ago (Müller, 2019) or argue that post-socialist contexts are simply dependent or semi-peripheral areas of the World System (Nagy & Timár, 2012; Petrovici, 2015; Scheiring, 2020).

However, these latter approaches overlook both the institutional and the historical features related to the transformation. Creating private property and market relations is not a self-explanatory process, and the different methods of privatisation, among other fields, for example, in the housing market, have ongoing consequences (Sýkora, 2005, p. 102). Up until today, the fragmentation of property ownership, high "procedural risks" (Bernt, 2016, pp. 572–576), missing legislation, uncertain and non-transparent judicial decisions about restitution (Kusiak, 2019), and the chances of corruption being built in the regulation (Chelcea et al., 2015, p. 118) work against the commodification of housing markets in many post-socialist contexts (Bernt, 2022, pp. 186–192). In Hungary, political interests and lack of control capacities weakened the neoliberal features of housing markets, and despite mass privatisation, commodification levels could remain lower. Later, though, the institutional and political context fuelled real estate speculation despite the lack of economic fundaments. Still, the renewal rate of the housing stock remained low and institutional landlords remained absent (Olt et al., 2024).

The history of capitalist elites is also specific in post-socialist contexts. For example, in other semi-peripheral contexts with post-colonial history (without state socialism), the contemporary political system still privileges private rural estates and their landowner elites in centuries of continuity (Fogel, 2019, pp. 155–156). However, in post-socialist contexts, these economic elites did not exist at the time of the regime change of 1989/1991 and were created with the active involvement and control of political power and armed forces (Mihályi & Szelényi, 2017; Szelényi, 2016). This political creation of the capitalists has ongoing consequences today and normalises the current wave of politically created capitalists or the questioning of property rights in Hungary.

Meanwhile, in an authoritarian continuity, high-ranking members of the secret services, the police, the Minister of Interior Affairs, and many currently right-wing politicians were important cadres under state socialism. Such examples of "heterochrony" also make post-socialism relevant today (Chelcea, 2023).

4.2. Neopatrimonial Relations

The above institutional and historical aspects of post-socialist transformation are underlined by the illiberal turn and democratic backsliding (Scheiring, 2020) in Hungary (especially from 2010) and Russia and by similar tendencies in other countries (Poland, Romania, and even Czechia; see Szanyi, 2022). In illiberal politics, nothing limits the ruling party that controls the government and the legislative and judicial branches of power. Therefore, it can routinely violate the rule of law or change rules retrospectively (Szelényi & Csillag, 2015). According to class-focused political-economic analysis, the illiberal turn still serves the domination of the capitalist class; it just means the primacy of the national bourgeoisie over the international in the dependent accumulative state capitalist context (Scheiring, 2020, pp. 18–19, 21, 26, 55–56, 66, 71, 74).

However, this claim overlooks the fact that even among domestic capitalists, companies directly connected to the state party are dominant: They are larger and generate more income and higher profit, or rather rents, than more independent domestic companies, who operate in "upwind"; furthermore, their rents are not reinvested but cashed out (Delikát, 2024; Delikát, personal communication, March 6, 2024; Tóth & Hajdu, 2021, p. 32). Rather than an independent national bourgeoisie, a rent-seeking politically created elite dominates (Szanyi, 2022) due to the post-socialist transformation (Szelényi & Csillag, 2015). On the other hand, political power is highly selective with international capital as well (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019, p. 1087): certain companies and sectors are privileged as strategic partners (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019, p. 1077), while others are targeted by renationalisation and hostile regulation (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019, pp. 1075–1076). The domestic capitalist domination narrative also downplays the importance of politically allocated EU transfers, without which the Hungarian economy would have shrunk for years (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019, p. 1078). Hence, political power is selective according to its interests, both among domestic and international capitalists. Besides this selectivity, the narrative of domination by domestic capital also overlooks the coercive elements of illiberal political power; for example, the selective criminalisation and character assassination by propaganda also threaten the members of this class fragment (Szelényi & Csillag, 2015). It is not these domestic capitalists who dictate, but politics is in command (Mihályi & Szelényi, 2017, p. 25).

In governance, too, loyalty to political power matters the most: Authorities are filled with party-related delegates (Csanádi, 2022, pp. 48–56) and sub-branches of governance and professional organisations from healthcare through education to culture are also controlled by loyal cadres (Csanádi, 2022, p. 66). Meanwhile, NGOs are under political attack, and party-related pseudo-NGOs receive large financial support (Csanádi, 2022, pp. 46, 85). Additionally, many of the public responsibilities, such as the operation and maintenance of healthcare and higher education institutions or motorways, are overseen by "foundations with public tasks." They are officially outside the public realm and the state budget. However, they are controlled by loyal cadres, fixed in their positions with supermajority legislation, to maintain control even in the case of an electoral loss (Kozák, 2021, pp. 29–32, 59–60). Instead of a general rationality that governs at a distance, as in liberal governmentality (see Rose & Miller, 1992), political control is much more direct, even if that decreases state capacities.

To highlight this more direct political chain of command, the political capture of both the markets (Mihályi & Szelényi, 2017; Szanyi, 2022) and the state, and privileging political interests over capitalist economic rationality, we suggest that neopatrimonial political and economic relations be taken into account (Szelényi, 2016; Szelényi & Csillag, 2015) besides neoliberal ones, instead of just claiming the overall dominance of the latter, and considering the former as merely a colouring of it. As a type of elite capture (Lauermann & Mallak, 2023), in neopatrimonialism, similar to cronyism and clientelism, the interests of political power fragment class relations and reach over them as well. Through public spending, regulation, and coercion, politically created rents are provided, which are channelled back to the maintenance of political power in different forms of "kickbacks" (Jávor & Jancsics, 2016), which ensure the political commitment of selectively supported social groups. Electorates of poor constituencies, depending on politically created local economic actors and local party cadres, are forced to keep the state party in power. This feudal chain of dependency (also apparent within the "political class"; Scheiring, 2020, pp. 58–59) can explain the firm relative majority behind the ruling party, consisting of very different "classes," that remain stable despite the apparent failure of state services and economic policy.

4.3. More-Than-Neoliberal Post-Socialist Urban Development

The lack of economic calculation and feudal relations between political power and investors in development projects also appear in many post-socialist contexts (Koch & Valiyev, 2015; Trubina, 2015). However, with the above-explained political domination, the more-than-neoliberal elements of these developments are perhaps even more spectacular. Examples of (second tier) international events in the post-soviet context show how the speculative and often irrational economic narratives behind them, considered as neoliberal (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, p. 577; Trubina, 2015, p. 128), are also pretexts to maintain and strengthen authoritarian politics and clientelist relations between political power and vassals (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, pp. 575–576; Trubina, 2015, pp. 133, 139). The tools for this are the appropriation of public spending realised by overpricing and low quality and delayed realisation (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, pp. 583–585; Trubina, 2015, pp. 136, 138) and securing state spending for realising oversized infrastructural investments (Trubina, 2015, pp. 135, 139).

Profits are not created, and "'growth' becomes an ideological category" (Trubina, 2015, p. 138) as the construction of empty hotels, event halls, stadiums, or extremely costly administrative buildings shows (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, pp. 589, 591; Trubina, 2015, pp. 128, 135–136). Investments are controlled and funded by the centre of political power, and even contractors are extorted by politicians (Trubina, 2015, pp. 137, 138). The rhetoric of wealth and development, considered as neoliberal, is used to justify this burning and appropriation of public resources by political power (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, p. 579). Authors "in the last instance" connect these projects with neoliberalism, but they also highlight the political closure and "selective engagement with market capitalism" (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, pp. 575, 579) and the context-specific political system of dependency on central power (Trubina, 2015, pp. 130, 133) behind them.

By taking seriously authoritarian and neopatrimonial/clientelist elements besides the neoliberal ones (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, p. 578), we can point out what is a manipulative use of the neoliberal rhetoric of economic growth that justifies politically created rent-seeking (Trubina, 2015, pp. 131, 136, 139), rather than actual profit and accumulation, and how neoliberal rationales are negated while political rationality is privileged (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, p. 578). Certain international events worldwide are considered profitable, but in these post-soviet examples, it was never an issue (see Trubina, 2015, pp. 131, 138). These contexts are

dominated by political power rather than international corporations, and political power can also be maintained despite spectacular economic failures (Trubina, 2015, p. 139); even without the possibility of accumulation and development, spectacle (Koch & Valiyev, 2015, p. 580), dependency, threats, and violence are used to prop up political power.

5. Methodology

To illustrate the political capture in the fields of broadly understood territorial and urban development in Hungary, first, we present cases documented by investigative journalism (see the Supplementary Material, articles A1 to A11) and corruption research that rather fit in the above described more-than-neoliberal logic than the neoliberal one. We do not claim that "normal" neoliberal processes are not present; we only claim that they are not hegemonic and other rationales are at play, too (see again Bernt & Volkmann, 2024, p. 6). Similarly to the above cases, we highlight "crazy" infrastructural projects and touristic and entertainment investments controlled by the state party elite that lack market fundaments and bypass local authorities. In these examples, the waste and appropriation of EU and public funds (aimed at boosting economic development) work against accumulation and growth.

After these different cases of territorial and urban development and their common neopatrimonial logic set the context, we present the findings of our research based on semi-structured interviews conducted between 2019 and 2023 with urban planners and other stakeholders, as a part of our national-level research project about the sociology of urban planning. Altogether, we collected 55 expert interviews and 95 interviews from local stakeholders and residents from six areas of the country. This included two dynamically changing districts of Budapest with different histories and social composition; two cities from the poorer regions of Eastern Hungary with different development dynamics; two cities from the more industrialised Western Hungary, one close to the border and a more central one; and a more in-depth interview-based research of a rich agglomeration village of Budapest (Csizmady et al., 2022). This was supplemented with 15 interviews with mayors in other agglomeration towns. Additionally, we analysed 19 interviews from our smaller research project about participatory budgeting from eight districts of Budapest, from the metropolitan level of the city of Budapest, and from six other towns and cities.

To illustrate the less than hegemonic role of neoliberalism, beyond the apparent and mentioned neoliberal features, we present anonymised examples when interviewees spoke about the political logic of urban developments, despite the professional and personal risks this may have meant to them. We particularly present the cases when they took the difficult self-reflexive step of admitting how their professional knowledge, visions of economic development, and rational economic calculations were sidelined by political power and party hierarchy. With this, we present how the neoliberal urban development logic of EU funds is often overruled by the neopatrimonial logic of national-level politics: The neoliberal rhetoric differs from actual implementation (Varró, 2010). However, neoliberal narratives were also often mentioned in our interviews, yet, due to word count constraints, in this article, we only include the other-than-neoliberal examples (see Bernt & Volkmann, 2024, p. 6) to illustrate their existence.

6. More-Than-Neoliberal Territorial and Urban Developments in Hungary

6.1. Infrastructural Investments for Political Capture

Building motorways through centrally located Hungary lacking this infrastructure seemed a good idea right after the 2004 EU accession, and funds were poured into the country to realise such projects. However, besides the rational economic calculations behind increasing connectivity, we see that Hungarian motorways were notoriously overpriced with unnecessary elements already before 2010. After 2010, with a step further, explicitly unnecessary motorways were built (A1). An overpriced but "needed" motorway can contribute to more accumulation, only with longer turnover. However, the unnecessary one hinders development and pays only the clients, as in the post-soviet cases above.

Besides the age-old political business of motorway construction paid by EU funds and public money, the Belgrade–Budapest railway development is a new model using Chinese credit and Hungarian state funds. Besides Chinese companies, the subcontractors of the constructions are closely related to the ruling party (Szabó & Jelinek, 2023, p. 1294). It is very hard to find the economic rationale behind the project, as the increase in railway traffic will simply not be substantial enough, and the railway line in Hungary is far from larger cities and industrial plants, while the construction is spectacularly overpriced compared to the Serbian section (A2).

Framing the project with a simple financial rationality as a way to gain further credit from China and decrease financial dependence imposed by Western capital (Szabó & Jelinek, 2023, p. 1295) overlooks the fact that the EU transfers and loans would have been much cheaper for the Hungarian budget. However, the EU has political and civil rights conditions in exchange for the money, while China does not. The Chinese economic rationality can be the use of overcapacity and the conquest of EU markets (Szabó & Jelinek, 2023, p. 1288). Yet, the apparent inability to overcome the differences between Chinese and European technical standards in railway safety systems seems to be rather bad PR (A3). Framing the project as forced by Hungarian capitalists' aspirations in the railway business, who therefore acquired regional expertise in railway safety (Szabó & Jelinek, 2023, pp. 1296, 1298), overlooks the complete informal political control of these particular companies, and that the Chinese side simply does not approve the involvement of either Western or Hungarian expertise on this field (A4). As a result, trains may still be very slow on the newly built tracks, as higher speeds will not be allowed if safety systems are missing (A4). Far from the business-as-usual narrative of capitalist class domination and accumulation, only with different actors this time (Szabó & Jelinek, 2023, p. 1299), the economic rationality of the project seems to be completely lost because of the delays and presence of alternative routes (A5). Nonetheless, the Chinese credit and cooperation in law enforcement (Lee & Woo, 2024) are useful for maintaining political power.

6.2. Tourism and Sports Captured by Political Power

Investments in tourism, spectacles, and sports are also often far from neoliberal economic goal rationality. In 2020, at the time of Covid-19 lockdowns, the government of Hungary supported hotel developments for 83 billion HUF (233 million euros) while the Hungarian Tourism Agency was given only a 1 billion HUF pool for keeping tourism jobs (A6). This meant the end of many formerly profitable hospitality and tourism businesses, while the hotel constructions often proved unprofitable, even for the son-in-law of PM Orbán (A7). While 2/3

of the public funds in tourism development were given to 0.5% of the applicants (Kozák, 2021, p. 27), many tourism investments are involved in corruption and misuse of public and EU funds (Kozák, 2021, pp. 114–117, 117–119). Recently, the most emblematic example of this is an EU-funded canopy walkway, which has no surrounding trees in the village of Nyírmártonfalva (A8). These investments have little to do with making a profit and much more with appropriating public and EU funds, trickling down to the lowest level of the party hierarchy.

Despite the resistance of local activists (Buzogány et al., 2022) and the (opposition-led) municipal government of Budapest, the government began implementing the so-called Liget Project, a currently 625-million-euro investment project (double the original figure) constructing museums and other cultural venues in the oldest park (Városliget) in Budapest. By law, this territory in the middle of the capital no longer belongs to the city's jurisdiction so that the project can go undisturbed. According to the main lobbyist for the project, the increased tourism consumption will make the investment profitable in 10–20 years (A9). However, the failure of the Biodome project, a planned indoor tropical experience, whose costs increased fivefold during realisation, and remained unfinished with a further 150 million euros needed for completion (while maintenance of the half-finished structure costs 1,2 million euros/year; A10), warns us to be cautious with such long term predictions about pay-offs.

Finally, PM Orbán's favourite hobbies, football and related stadiums, have to be mentioned. These structures constructed in Hungarian towns and cities cost close to 1 billion euros after 2010 from public funds (A11); on average, they operate at 30% of their capacity (Balogh & Bácsné, 2023), with extremes such as an 8,000-capacity stadium with an average of 200 spectators (A11). Meanwhile, their maintenance costs millions for the municipalities, as football clubs are also far from profitable. As we have shown, many publicly financed urban and territorial development projects, from transport infrastructure to sport, have little to do with profitability and accumulation. Certain players gain one-time income in the construction process, as public and EU funds are appropriated by the clients of political power, who then finance the ruling party. However, equating these one-time rents with the process of capital accumulation through profitable investment and further reinvestment of profits is more than a stretch.

6.3. Neopatrimonial Features of Urban Development

Before the illiberal turn, Varró (2010) found that the Hungarian urban governance and planning system did not fit well into the models of neoliberalism. This is due to the highly politicised nature of the post-socialist transformation, which is more than a technocratic change of rules and legislation (Varró, 2010, p. 1267). Rather, a "caricature version of the 'entrepreneurial municipality'" (Varró, 2010, p. 1260) was observed. Urban development and planning appear on the municipal level, while the mezzo level of territorial planning is missing in Hungary. However, these municipal-level development plans are not determinant, and bargains at the national level are more important. Below, we present interview excerpts that illustrate our argument about neopatrimonial relations with contextual information to aid comprehension. By their nature, these issues are not easy to document. Nevertheless, our interviewees talked about them as something obvious and natural ("You know how it goes…"). Hence, far from exceptions, these procedures form a substantial part of urban development in contemporary Hungary. Of course, in many cases, the investors dictate local politics in a neoliberal manner; yet, due to our word count constraints and because few would argue they do not exist, we do not present them. By highlighting the counterexamples only, we support our argument

about the co-existence of already supposed neoliberal and less explored other-than-neoliberal features (Bernt & Volkmann, 2024, p. 6).

Even in stories and explanations of our interviewees with neoliberal rationality, the personal connections between political power and investors also showed neopatrimonial features. Instead of general rules, methods, and rationales (favouring capitalists in general), we have seen the non-transparent selectivity of these relations and dependence on specific persons and political leaders. Related to that, the neoliberal principle of cost-efficient state administration is also often violated. In the example below, the mayor was very proud of his informal ties with the investors so that they could bargain without the rigidity of legal processes. He claimed that politically selective relations are more effective, and this is why investors came to the town in the first place. However, what exactly is on the other side of this "something for something" relationship for the town's leadership remains unknown:

> There is no relationship formalised, or there are no contracts and agreements that fortify these; these are simply working and living human and professional relations. And if the folks from [the private company] phone in because that public lighting doesn't work near their site, then everybody drops everything and goes to fix the public lighting there. Something for something. (Mayor of a small town)

In an example related to a participative budgeting project, the administrative costs set by the ruling-party member mayor are considered fraudulent by the opposition council member. Participative budgeting is often accused of naturalising neoliberal agendas (Purcell, 2009), and in our Hungarian cases, too, we found examples of non-inclusive and very limited scope participation. However, ruling-party politicians, in this case, could also use the process of diverting public sources towards their clientele without much risk of being caught in the illiberal context:

> Yes, we constantly criticise this aspect of the project [the participatory budget programme], that the project management costs are extremely high, 50–60 million HUF [of the whole 300 million participatory budget programme], in the first year maybe it was even 70 million....And they buy these services [of the project management] from FIDESZ companies [companies related to the ruling party] not on market prices [but for higher prices]....And then another company does the advising, but if you look at them, they have nothing to do with participatory budgeting [they are not real experts, and do not actually do the work]. (Non-ruling party council member, Budapest district)

Both quotes illustrate that even in "normal" neoliberal procedures, political power also moves beyond formal business relations and reinforces its informal power.

6.4. Calculations of Experts vs. Political Power

Neoliberal governance is often characterised by the post-political rule of experts (Swyngedouw, 2005). This is related to technocratic and business-minded thinking, which maximises the economic benefits of interventions without democratic legitimation. In our experience, though, especially since the illiberal turn in 2010, neopatrimonial relations and political considerations are more important than any kind of expert rationality. This is well illustrated in the plaintive and disillusioned comments of experts and planners involved in creating integrated development plans for cities in Hungary. Writing these plans is often

degraded to a necessary bureaucratic task, and the actual developments are decided in a much more ad hoc manner, according to political connections, electoral considerations, or available funds that are easy to appropriate:

> And we fall for it again, and believe that what we write down [in the planning document] will be realised. And then we get disappointed again, as always before. (Expert in urban development plans)

Instead of expert opinions and rational calculations, political connections can be more effective in securing funding:

> As far as we can see, the mayor always knows what to do; he knows how to get the money with who knows what kind of tricks and political connections and lobbying...and everything else is just a technicality. (Expert in urban development plans)

One of our interviewees practised the above-mentioned irrational tourism developments. After the decree of a locally connected high-level cadre to support such a project, the local mayor embraced the construction of a spectacular and costly tourist attraction, a glass bridge, as a development goal and applied for funding:

> His excellence, the Minister Without Portfolio, suggested a glass bridge in [name of the town]. Yes! Just like in China. And they put it in the application. Thank God he somehow lost the trust of the PM because it would have been realised! (Planner 3)

Earlier, we also presented (Olt & Lepeltier-Kutasi, 2018) how the independence of a municipal development company in Budapest was stripped after a ruling-party mayor took power in the district. In a case, this ruling party mayor simply rewrote the rehabilitation plans, which originally aimed to maximise quality improvement of buildings. He favoured more spectacular results, renewing more buildings but only their facades, angering the residents living in incompletely renovated houses. Nonetheless, their anger targeted the development company and not the mayor. These examples illustrate that the neoliberal post-political rule of experts is only one side of the story in the Hungarian context. Far from the hegemony of economy-centred internationally travelling neoliberal policies, many developments are realised because of political logic or to appropriate the funds related to the projects.

6.5. Neoliberal EU Procedures vs. Neopatrimonial Reality

As EU funds are aimed at economic growth, with a lot of procedural rules to monitor the spending, they are often considered neoliberal. However, the actual distribution of the funds is decided on the national level, over which the EU has limited control. In Hungary, this creates a series of pseudo-activities that need to happen pro forma, but their actual relevance is limited. This is the case, e.g., with the development plans mentioned above, but also with the administrative infrastructure for using EU funds, as key decisions are made on the national level (mostly by the prime minister or ministers). This is mentioned in the following interview quote with a great deal of sarcasm:

> The strange thing is that if you ask about it, you will find strategic planning cabinets and urban development groups. Pro forma, they are everywhere. (Planner 2)

Sometimes, though, EU rules are clearly broken, but the projects still go on, and the money extraction happens, while further consequences are irrelevant. In a complex case that aggregated numerous small projects into a big one for direct political control over a larger sum of project money, the administrative complications caused delays:

> They know very well already that there is no time for these public procurements. So what will they do? They are going to do them without open tenders. And then what will the EU do? Quite probably, the country will have to pay back the money. The Hungarian taxpayers! (Planner 1)

The recent blockage of EU funds for Hungary represents these issues in a very clear way. Even if, in most cases, everything is legal pro forma, the neopatrimonial logic of spending EU funds seems to have reached a critical mass, and the flow of funds is currently stopped.

6.6. Urban Development Plans vs. National-Level Politics

In an illiberal context, the national-level political power is virtually uncontrolled. Power is exercised in neopatrimonial hierarchies from top to bottom in the ruling party. Therefore, mayors are often less relevant regarding local development than local members of the parliament/high-level cadres of the party. In the case of a rural town, given that the opposition mayor was in power, applications for state and EU funds were often unsuccessful. The former ruling-party cadre mayor, currently a minister, commented on this before cameras, openly admitting that it wasn't the need for or the quality of the application for funds that mattered—it was political considerations:

> It was a big mistake to elect an opposition mayor…[with a grin]. (Important cadre of the ruling party before cameras)

In an illiberal context, a reason for not funding a local project in an opposition-led municipality is easy to find. So, beyond the legally implemented stripping of resources, tasks, and jurisdictions in the last decades during the constant decreasing of municipal sovereignty, there can be additional, selective cuts concerning funds controlled by the national-level political power, as the following quote illustrates:

> Well, I just say it then. So, in the case of the distribution of money [EU sources], the [aspect of] political side is very strong. (Leader of the mayor's office, bigger city)

On the other hand, resources can be allocated towards the ruling party-led municipalities while officially respecting the relevant procedures:

> So yes, we did not win the funding…because of these formal mistakes….But then, a year later, out of the blue, they told us that we should apply for funding [for the same project]. And the call was obviously made for [the names of three municipalities, including theirs]. And all three got the funding. (Planner, municipal development company)

The prospects of towns and cities also depend on infrastructural decisions at the national level of political power, often meaning the building of roads and motorways. However, such infrastructural decisions do not

always support the settlements most in need or with the most potential. They often depend on political factors rather than growth poles and local potentials. The current conflicts about implementing environmentally polluting battery factories—another state project involving Chinese capital—which are often opposed by ruling party mayors as well (who are concerned about losing the local elections) and also lacking economic rationality (Éltető, 2023), also show the lack of local sovereignty and the neglect of local planning.

7. Conclusions

Deviations from the original understanding of neoliberalism have often been mentioned in the literature. Balancing the pros and cons, many authors decided that despite the contradictory empirical findings, their story fit into the grand narrative. Even if the original ideas of free market competition and decreased state involvement in market processes were violated, it was maintained that in any "hybrid" case, the domination of the capitalist class and their relentless capital accumulation is determinant. This was also maintained by many using the concepts of the accumulative state or state capitalism. We have shown that, far from the power of the capitalist class and market processes serving their domination, different elite coalitions and their capture of state power create monopolies and rents. Instead of economic calculation and creation of surplus and profit, resources can be appropriated by those with political power and their allies, and rents can be created according to political programmes. This reallocates public and private resources for these elites and their allies without actual accumulation, as the example of the land-rent Ponzi scheme illustrates.

In authoritarian and post-socialist contexts, the ideology of growth without actual development can be spectacularly illustrated. In the presented urban development projects, we highlighted that the spending of public resources is determined by the possibility of appropriating and re-distributing them through clientelist networks to maintain political power and not by economic rationality advancing accumulation. It is also clear from these examples that far from a hegemonic capitalist class, political power determines and orchestrates these developments. Without the political capture of state power, these irrational investments used to appropriate their construction costs could not happen to this extent. In the illiberal post-socialist EU member state of Hungary, such examples include unused motorways and railways, stadiums, and hotels that do not aspire to make a profit—they merely appropriate public and EU funds for their construction. The immediately cashed-out one-time income of construction companies is something other than creating profit and reinvesting it to accumulate capital. These incomes are rather rents created by the closed social relations of the illiberal political system and used to maintain neopatrimonial relations dominated by political power. State-capitalist narratives about dominant domestic capitalists and state-led accumulation overlook how these capitalists were created by political decisions, how they are controlled informally, and how replaceable they are, while development is missing. Finally, we presented how these neopatrimonial social relations, the capture of the state and markets, appear in the process of urban development and planning. Instead of neoliberal planning rationales and the narrative of an entrepreneurial city, we can often observe domination by the national level of power according to the neopatrimonial logic, hijacking economic development and investment in the future.

To sum up, we suggest that instead of the concept of "post-socialist neoliberalism" that still evokes domination by neoliberalism, we should note both the neoliberal and the neopatrimonial elements of territorial and urban developments, because often neither capitalist class domination nor the logic of accumulation applies. For the same reason, state–capitalist narratives should also take the power of the political class more seriously. This is

also true in many other places, even in core contexts, but perhaps in a less spectacular way and with a less clear domination of political power. This also has significance in the struggles against the increasingly oppressive and harmful illiberal regimes. Not simply the owners and the workers, but fractions of several different classes are in conflict, according to their relations with the regime.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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Effects and Consequences of Authoritarian Urbanism: Large-Scale Waterfront Redevelopments in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Novi Sad

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Abstract

This article highlights the (post) transitioning urban context as an emerging market for powerful international real-estate development companies, supported by an authoritarian planning trend aiming to secure foreign investments. Such a pattern is particularly noticeable in the implementation of the large-scale redevelopment project Belgrade Waterfront in the Serbian capital city, causing many controversies due to state-led regulatory interventions, investor-friendly decision-making, and a general lack of transparency. Although proactive but fragile civil society organizations in Serbia failed to influence the implementation dynamics of this megaproject, it inspired contestation by professional and civic organizations elsewhere, which finally led to significant disputes over similar developments. This study highlights similarities of this project to the initiatives emerging in other cities of the ex-Yugoslav countries: Zagreb Manhattan, announced to settle on the waterfronts of the Croatian capital, and more recently the Novi Sad Waterfront in the second largest Serbian city. The article concludes with a general overview of the effects and consequences characterizing the emerging trend in the production of space and highlights the rising role of the civil sector in more inclusive and democratic urban planning in ex-Yugoslav cities.

Keywords

authoritarian urbanism; post-socialism; regulatory capitalism; urban megaprojects; urban politics; waterfront developments

1. Introduction

Although urban megaprojects (UMP) played a crucial role in the post-industrial development of cities (Grabher & Thiel, 2015; Orueta & Fainstein, 2008), this study approaches this phenomenon from a different

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perspective. It departs from the entrepreneurial shift in urban governance that made such initiatives a profitable tool for high-performing private developers and reconfigured relations between public and private actors. In such cases, proponents of the large-scale initiatives resorted to extraordinary measures to circumvent democratic control and promote obscure political-economic regimes that led to a lack of transparency in their development and increasing criticism on democratic, economic, and social grounds (Murray, 2015; Olds, 2002; Orueta & Fainstein, 2008). The phenomenon demonstrated particular dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The reliance on UMPs played an essential role in attracting foreign capital (Appel & Orenstein, 2018), tourism, and new political identities (Čamprag, 2018; Graan, 2013; Kolbe, 2007) but also promoted investor-friendly decision-making along with the recent decline of democratic regime characteristics in the region (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Against the backdrop of emerging investor-friendly urbanism that promotes the interests of the powerful elites and diminishes democratic regime characteristics, this article adopts a qualitative research approach to outline characteristics of this phenomenon and highlight its effects and consequences. One of the currently largest initiatives on waterfront transformation in the CEE context is the UMP Belgrade Waterfront (BW) in the Serbian capital. As a joint venture between the Republic of Serbia and the Abu Dhabi-based investor Eagle Hills, this ambitious riverfront redevelopment has garnered over the last few years considerable attention and sparked many national and regional public debates. Its implementation has also inspired a controversial trend of waterfront redevelopments emerging across the ex-Yugoslav region—the Zagreb Manhattan (ZM) was announced to settle on the waterfronts of the Croatian capital only a few years later, and more recently the Novi Sad Waterfront (NSW) in the second largest Serbian city. The study relies on a comprehensive literature review and examination of academic articles, reports, policy documents, and media sources for the period between 2012 and 2023 that provide insights into the selected UMPs. Through an in-depth analysis of these sources, the study aims to critically evaluate the extent to which these large-scale waterfront redevelopment projects reflect autocratic decision-making, investigate their implications on public welfare, social equity, and democratic governance, and explore the role of civil society organizations for more inclusive and democratic urban planning in the ex-Yugoslav region.

The article first sets up the main theoretical concepts and highlights the historical context of urban planning in the region. In the following sections, a detailed analysis of the BW project is provided to determine the characteristics of its implementation, followed by an analysis of the proposed waterfront developments in Zagreb and Novi Sad. The article further explores the responses and initiatives of professional and civil society organizations in the region, concluding with an overview of the effects and consequences of the authoritarian trend in the production of space in the ex-Yugoslavian context.

2. UMP and Authoritarian Urban Development

From Barcelona's transformative conversion of its coastal areas for the 1992 Olympics to London's successful regeneration of the Docklands, waterfront redevelopments have emerged as a key element in the urban development agenda of numerous European cities (Imrie & Thomas, 2023). By creating mixed-use spaces that blend residential, commercial, recreational, and cultural functions, these projects are characterized by high visibility, aiming to attract investment, tourism, and new residents, and thus drive urban growth and prosperity (Burton et al., 1996). Nevertheless, large-scale waterfront redevelopment in Europe presents a rich tapestry of successes, shortcomings, and debates (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019),

particularly after the financial crisis of 2008 that opened new perspectives in urban governance. This includes an apparent rise of a new regime in the contemporary political economy of governance, described as authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Gallo, 2021; Juego, 2018; Piletić, 2022; Swyngedouw, 2019). The regime generally embraces invoking economic necessity, favouring constitutional and legal mechanisms over democratic debate and participation, centralizing state powers at the expense of popular participation and other nodal points of governance, including mobilizing state apparatuses to suppress oppositional social forces. It also influences how urban development initiatives are governed—mostly through decoupling politics from political decision-making, by prioritizing the interests of powerful international investors, and with professionals acting in project implementation through hybrid public-private corporations with little democratic control.

CEE offers many possibilities to explore this new regime, particularly due to the collapse of the socialist system at a time when most of its countries showed different rates of transition to market-oriented democratic societies (Stanilov, 2007). Regulatory capitalism, as their common denominator, should be understood as complex dynamics between state government and big business, rather than the state being responsible for providing the framework for the market competition (Cope, 2015). For many development projects in the region, a deep discrepancy has already been described between the market-driven development rhetoric and the strong dependence on lucrative government regulation (Kinossian, 2012; Koch, 2014; Müller, 2011). Large-scale interventions in CEE often involve the construction of luxury housing developments and office spaces that primarily serve the purposes of capital gain and the interests of international capitalists (Cook, 2010). Far from traditional concepts of the local, such projects radically reshape urban space and demonstrate the power of international real estate companies, but also the "political weakness" (Temelová, 2007, p. 172) of city administrations to advocate for the public interest. There is also a general agreement in research about the crucial role of the nation-state in financing, legitimizing, and instrumentalizing UMPs in this context (Bruff & Tansel, 2019) that highlights "exceptionality" measures in planning and policy processes (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), facilitated by a system of contractual relationships between global companies and local businesses and governments (Lauermann, 2015; McNeill, 2015; Raco, 2014). What emerges from these reports is that in much of post-socialist Europe, the political elites have great potential for corruption and are often supported in their efforts by local authorities to legitimize and conceal such illegal plans by dressing such projects in nationalist and populist language (Koch & Valiyev, 2015).

The post-Yugoslav urban space represents a particularly valuable case to investigate the trends in focus. After decades of influence of socialist planning and modernist functionalism that fundamentally transcended national boundaries and local specificities, the successor states faced civil wars, economic challenges, and still present political instability. All of these circumstances have diverse implications for the planning and development of its cities, with the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism re-emerging in the way large-scale urban development projects are initiated, funded, and executed. The following section highlights the most prominent socio-spatial circumstances and their effects on urban planning in this context.

3. Political, Socio-Economic, and Spatial Development in the Post-Yugoslav Space

The outbreak of the civil war and many other subsequent events during the 1990s marked the end of an era of a mixed centrally planned self-governing economy in ex-Yugoslavia and rendered transitioning trajectories

for its successor states. Following the armed conflict (1991–1995), Croatia faced not only the socialist legacy and comprehensive social and economic redevelopment in a post-conflict context but also the challenges of establishing democracy, protecting human rights, and ensuring the return of refugees. Its national priorities were to rebuild and revitalize war-affected areas and later to transition from central planning to market-oriented development (Cavrić & Nedovic-Budic, 2007). Furthermore, the ruling political establishment managed to overcome its extremist nationalist legacy in the early 2000s, when it embraced a moderate conservative and pro-European orientation. Although the subsequent period was characterized by many problems such as unemployment, corruption, and the inefficiency of public administration, this was at the same time an era of rapid democratization, economic growth, and structural and social reforms (Puljiz et al., 2008).

Zagreb, as the capital city of a newly independent nation, was strongly influenced by the conditions in the country. The city consequently underwent significant urban planning developments, and after Croatia joined the EU in 2013, the focus of its urban planning initiatives gradually shifted towards sustainable development and adherence to EU standards. This implied priorities in infrastructure upgrades, environmental protection, and urban renewal to enhance the city's quality of life and international competitiveness. In 2014, the city administration finally started to explore the possibility of public use of locations along the Sava river by introducing various activities and attractions. However, contrary to significant socio-political changes on the national level, they failed to improve the generally low levels of citizen trust in democratic political institutions and especially the political parties (Zakošek, 2008), which also reflected on further development of the capital Zagreb and its riverbanks.

Contrary to Croatia, Serbia's transition towards a democratic society and market-based economy was much more complex. The early transitioning phase was marked by the UN-economic embargo (1992–1995), jointly imposed sanctions by the UN, the EU, and the United States (1998–2001), and finally the military conflict with NATO in 1999. The long-awaited political turn occurred only after the massive demonstrations following the elections in 2000. Withdrawal of the sanctions a year later marked the beginning of the next phase of economic transformation, which finally unlocked more substantial political and institutional transformation. However, in addition to poorly legitimized transition reforms and inherently unsustainable spatial development patterns (Vujošević et al., 2012), the issues of economic, ecological, and other restructuring got even more complex over time, making the long-awaited democratization failing to satisfy the expectations of the population (Vujošević et al., 2012). The return to the populist, centre-right political option in 2012 only pushed the country back to moderate nationalism (Lazea, 2015). Many authors agree that Serbia still hasn't departed from a post-socialist proto-democracy, with rudimentary developed institutions of representative democracy, civil society, and market economy (Petrović & Backović, 2019; Vujošević et al., 2012). In addition, by achieving the role of a central power figure in mid-2010, the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić gained near-monopoly control over the country's political institutions and media ("A Serbian election erodes democracy," 2017). His image as a "great leader" who "cares about the people and the state" (Vasović, 2022), secured his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) at least 800,000 members, making it the largest political party in Europe in 2020.

Resulting from a long period of political instability, the revitalization of run-down inner-city areas in the capital Belgrade was among many missed opportunities for urban development, particularly along the riverbanks (Vukmirović & Milanković, 2009). The transformation of its cityscape began when a new master plan advocated

for making the city more competitive with other European metropolises by exploiting its remarkable locational advantages (City of Belgrade, 2014; Vujović & Petrović, 2007). The second largest city in Serbia, Novi Sad, also suffered from the general political and economic situation, in addition to rapid centralization. The local government therefore recognized an opportunity for development by reaching out to the international sphere. After the city won the title of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) for 2022–2023, a new chance for international networking was recognized, including an opportunity to address some critical urban issues of an ethnically and culturally diverse city on the Danube corridor. The main idea was to define new goals toward inclusive and democratic development, which created a context for the establishment of a modern urban identity, revitalization of the city's cultural heritage, (re)activation of its public spaces, and the development of civil cultural participation in Novi Sad (Stupar et al., 2023).

In specific socio-political settings of young (post) transitioning democracies in Croatia and Serbia, a new trend of autocratic planning unfolded more recently. Marked by the neoliberal development agenda and pushed through under the auspices of political elites, the large-scale waterfront regeneration initiatives emerging in the largest and most important urban centres of ex-Yugoslavia are selected as representative case studies (Table 1). The following section investigates the three controversial UMPs in more detail.

Table 1. The main features of the analysed case cities.

City	Belgrade, Serbia	Zagreb, Croatia	Novi Sad, Serbia
Area	359,9 km²	305,8 km²	106,2 km²
Population	1,383.875 (2023)	758,941 (2021)	306,702 (2022)
International river corridors	Danube, Sava	Sava	Danube
Political significance	National capital, the former federal capital	National capital	Capital of an autonomous province
Ruling political parties	SNS (centre-right) in coalition with the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS, centre-left)	Until 2021: Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ, centre-right) Since 2021: We Can!—Political Platform (left-wing, green political party)	The SNS/SDPS/SPO–SPS/JS–SVM coalition, led by the SNS (centre-right)
Local economy features	The economic hub of Serbia; national/regional financial centre; tourism destination; important information technology hub; contains a diverse industrial base, including sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and services	International trade and business centre and transport hub; service sector that includes finance, trade, and tourism; centre of production of electrical machines and devices, chemical, pharmaceutical, textile, and food industries	An economic and cultural hub; financial and insurance centre; home to major national energy companies; growing information technology centre

4. Authoritarian Implementation of Waterfront Regenerations in Serbia and Croatia

4.1. The BW Project: From Secret Dealing to National Interest

The flagship of waterfront urban renewal in Belgrade implied the conversion of around 90 hectares of derelict land (Figure 1), which the Belgrade Master Plan 2021 identified as one of the city's most valuable development areas (City of Belgrade, 2014, p. 109). The BW project was announced after the political shift following the 2012 elections when the SNS coalition gained a parliamentary majority. The vast area on the banks of Sava was covered by old railway tracks, characterized by a complex ownership structure with both public and private landowners (Figure 1). The initiative was seen as a flagship for revitalizing the national economy (Filipovic & El Baltaji, 2014) and received the greatest publicity ahead of the national parliamentary elections in March 2014 (Bakarec, 2015).

Originally, only six to eight years were estimated for the planned BW project, although the actual prerequisites for its implementation depended on extensive preparatory work with unforeseeable completion dates (Slavkovic, 2014). Despite these and other challenges that arose before the foundation stone was laid in 2015, the Serbian government assumed an autocratic role from the start, seizing decision-making power, excluding local authorities and expert opinion, and bypassing effective legal regulations. The background for this was the previously signed cooperation agreement between the governments of Serbia and the UAE (Government of Serbia, 2013), marked by the personal relationships of important players in both parties (Filipovic & El Baltaji, 2014). In the ensuing events, several controversial changes were made to the existing national and local legal framework to enable the project implementation.

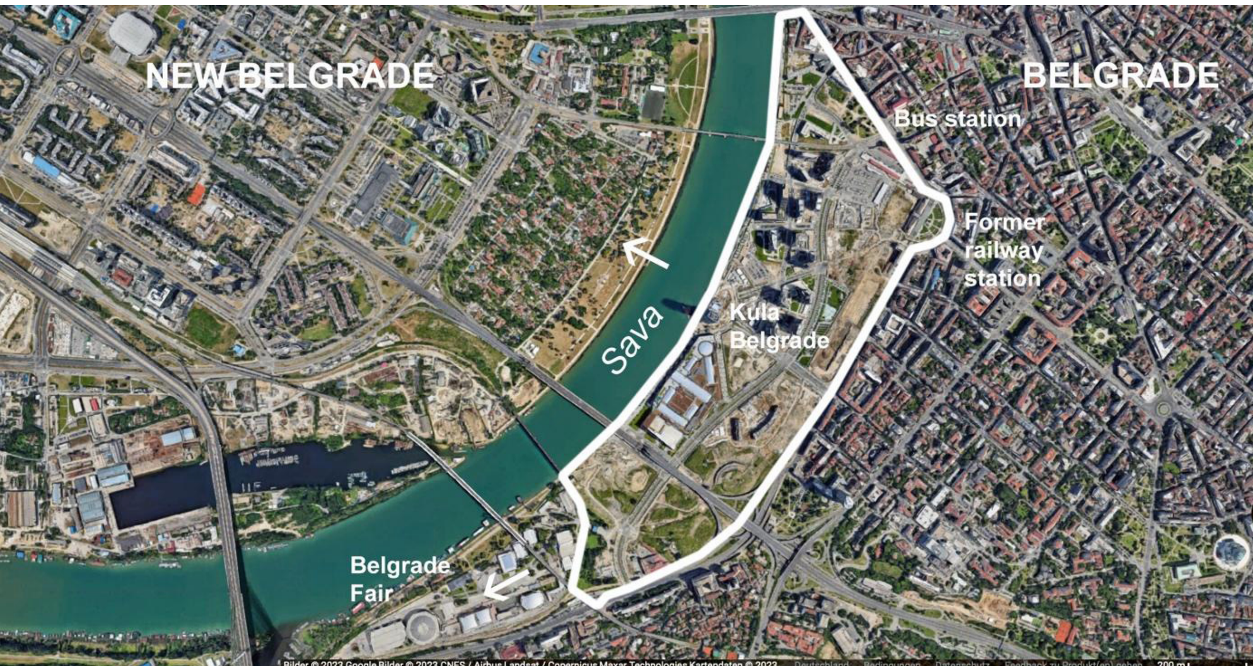

Figure 1. The location for the BW project in Belgrade. Notes: The arrows show recently announced extensions of the project including the site of the Belgrade Fair. Figure generated from Google Images and CNES, with own additions.

With the updates of the Belgrade Master Plan 2021, the urban planning document with the greatest legal authority, some initial barriers to investor interest have been removed (City of Belgrade, 2014). At the same time, the Serbian government implemented changes to the existing national planning and construction law. The "specially designated areas" of national importance that require special regulation for the organization, development, and use of space (Republic of Serbia, 2014) have been redefined to include areas "for which the government has determined that they are of importance for the Republic of Serbia" (Republic of Serbia, 2014, para. 41). Based on these adjustments, BW was officially declared a specially designated area and a project of special importance for the national economic development (Republic of Serbia, 2014). The decree on the spatial plan for the special area that came into force in 2015 (Republic of Serbia, 2015) was entirely based on the investor's proposed design, whose implementation had already begun before the plan was legally approved (Spalević, 2014). Furthermore, the national parliament also passed a special law granting BW the status of a public interest (Republic of Serbia, 2015).

Public concerns grew due to a series of conflicting information, such as the originally announced investment of three billion euros, which was significantly reduced to 150 million euros after the announcement of the contract (Sekularac, 2014). The opposition openly accused the ruling political establishment of corruption and claimed that the project aimed to hide a massive looting of city and state finances (BETA, 2016; Tanjug, 2015). Another contradiction concerns the master plan, which was developed with a general disregard for public participation and whose authorship remains unclear. The local and national associations of architects pointed out that the proposed plan "could have serious consequences for the development of Belgrade as a whole in terms of the principles of sustainability, identity, accessibility, competitiveness and contextuality" (Commission for Public Insight, 2014, n. 12.1). Furthermore, the joint venture agreement signed in April 2015, setting the rules for a newly formed public-private partnership, was not released publicly until five months later following public pressure. To date, information about the parties involved in the project and their ownership is incomplete since the investor was granted full anonymity by a decision of the Commission for the Protection of Competition.

Besides many public debates and other forms of contestation, the implementation of BW began in 2014—although residents of Savamala, where the project was to be built, continued to resist their eviction. When a group of masked people with excavators demolished their homes on a night in April 2016, forcibly evicting the residents, this incident finally triggered the first massive protests. The illegal demolitions were described as a "breakdown of the rule of law" (Ignatijević, 2017) to which neither the police, state officials nor state-controlled media responded.

Despite increasing challenges and public concerns, then Serbian Prime Minister Vučić continued to advocate for the implementation of the BW, describing it as "the future and the new image of Serbia" (Tanjug, 2016) that was paradoxically based on the mere construction of luxury real estate (Figure 2). Most of the high-rise buildings were characterized as oversized and unsuitable for the location (N1 Beograd, 2020; Serbain Academy of Architecture, 2015). In addition, BW does not envisage the construction of social or subsidized housing but is undoubtedly relying on home ownership and a rapid return on investments (Jovanović, 2020). The citizens' initiative Ne da(vi)mo Beograd (NDMBGD; a play on words meaning: we won't let Belgrade sink) particularly emphasized such issues, mobilizing the public through the involvement of the media, expert opinions, and other NGOs. They called for the cancellation of the plans for BW on legal grounds, as "the proposed draft violates the law and is contrary to the public interest" (Commission for Public Insight, 2014, n. 127). However,

Figure 2. View over the BW construction site.

most of their claims were rejected by the Commission for Public Insight, justifying the project by its previously obtained special legal status.

Apart from the legal changes and the lack of adequate responses to the increasing public criticism, the development strategy also relied on flagship projects and minor public facilities introduced during the second implementation phase. The new urban landmark, Kula Belgrade by renowned international architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, who designed the world's tallest building the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, intended to emphasize national modernization and progress. Furthermore, the unveiling of the controversial 23-meter-high monument to the central historical figure more recently was an opportunity for the political elite to emphasize national sentiment and ensure political support ("A monument to Stefan," 2021). The development trajectory of the project hasn't significantly changed since, even after a political coalition with the citizens' initiative NDMBGD won its first mandate in local and national parliaments (Stevanović, 2021), aiming to "oppose the autocratic regime also in the institutions" (NDMBGD, 2022). The public-private company in charge of BW implementation even announced in 2023 that it purchased the neighbouring land occupied by the Belgrade Fair complex with several listed buildings, which only created additional public concern (N1 Beograd, 2023).

4.2. The ZM: Citizen's Victory Against Investor Urbanism?

Not long after the BW project was announced, the municipal authorities in Zagreb also sought to revitalize the underutilized Sava River waterfront. Following a similar scenario, the then-mayor Milan Bandić (HDZ) signed in March 2019 a Memorandum of Understanding with the chairman of Eagle Hills, at that time already developing BW in neighbouring Serbia. Their plan in Zagreb was to turn 1.1 million square meters of city-owned land between the River Sava and the Večeslav Holjevac and Dubrovnik boulevards into a 500-million-euro UMP, dubbed "Zagreb Manhattan." The area is currently occupied by the Zagreb Fair—parts of which are protected as cultural monuments, the city Hippodrome, and a football complex (Figure 3). The project envisioned a mixed-use district with a blend of residential, commercial, cultural, and recreational facilities, with modern

Figure 3. The location for the proposed ZM project in Zagreb. Figure generated from Google Images and CNES, with own additions.

high-rise buildings, contemporary architectural landmarks, and leisure spaces to create a dynamic and visually striking new urban neighbourhood.

Advocates of the project from the major's cabinet emphasized its potential to stimulate economic growth, create job opportunities, and elevate Zagreb's international status as an attractive destination for business and tourism (Vladisavljevic, 2020). However, its implementation required conversion of the land via amendments to Zagreb's Master Plan, for which major Bandić strongly advocated, in addition to other investor-friendly conditions for project implementation. Some opponents argued that the project favoured private developers' interests over the well-being and needs of local communities, bringing upon charges of corruption and illegality (Babić, 2020). This was inspired by some large-scale public spending of the major's cabinet that previously came under scrutiny (Šimić Banović, 2019), particularly after the disputed Memorandum of Understanding was finally published in September 2019. After months of pressure from independent media and opposition councillors, a document whose contents were kept secret by the city leaders revealed that the allegedly non-binding memorandum indeed contained some binding articles (Nezirović, 2020). In addition, the document also provided some risk minimizations for the investor, for instance, in case the project failed the investor could "sue the City of Zagreb…for compensation for all costs Eagle Hills have incurred in preparing the project" (Vladisavljevic, 2020).

As a result of many speculations, members of national professional associations argued that democratic oversight of the project was not adequate (Vladisavljevic, 2019). According to them, ZM "would destroy the location of the Hippodrome and the Zagreb Fair" (Vladisavljevic, 2019) and could irreparably damage the capital's delicate urban fabric (Prtorić, 2019), including green spaces (Vladisavljevic, 2019). Mayor Bandić's strong advocacy for the gleaming ZM was characterized as another opportunity for speculation (Prtorić,

2019). Finally, professional associations also called for the postponement of the decision on amendments to Zagreb's Master Plan due to several procedural errors, non-compliance with democratic procedures, and an absence of public discussions about the project. Several civil organizations and NGOs, such as Right to the City, Green Action, Zagreb is Calling You, and Siget, finally organized the protest against changes to the Master Plan that would enable the construction of the "Zagreb Waterfront"—as the activists called it to emphasize its striking resemblance with the UMP in Serbia (Indikator, 2019).

The changes to the plan were finally dropped after a dramatic session of the assembly and increasing public pressure (Croatiaweek, 2020). Although the ZM implementation became uncertain following these events (Nezirović, 2020), mayor Bandić repeated that he would not give up on the plan (Vladisavljevic, 2020) and continued to highlight the economic potential of the project. However, critics further emphasized the need for a more participatory and transparent approach to urban planning, ensuring that the outcomes align with the broader interests and aspirations of the city's residents. The ZM initiative finally became obsolete after the political shift in the city administration of Zagreb, when the citizens' associations took over the credit for stopping the project. They reminded the public that the initiative would have privatized a large area of the city for the benefit of a private company, which would be to the detriment of the entire community (Janković, 2022).

4.3. The NSW: Citizens Against the BW Scenario

The latest of the three UMPs in focus was announced in 2019 when the then-mayor of Novi Sad Miloš Vučević (SNS) presented a capital investment of half a billion euros (Komarčević, 2020). The NSW project envisaged an expansion of the city along the left Danube coast, in the area of the old shipyard and the navy barracks, amid the green areas of Kamenička Ada and Šodroš (Figure 4)—previously long considered for declaration as a nature reserve (Ranocchiari, 2022).

Figure 4. The location for the proposed NSW project in Novi Sad. Figure generated from Google Maxar Technologies and CNES, with own additions.

The proponents of the project viewed it as a crucial opportunity for the urban development of Novi Sad through the revitalization of its underutilized land, which should enhance the city's economic potential and improve the overall urban landscape (Janković, 2022; Ranocchiari, 2022). They anticipate that its development will attract tourists and investors, stimulating job creation and economic growth. However, considering that the area at the same time holds crucial importance for the preservation of the ecosystem and defence against floods, civic associations and activists argued that NSW is a speculative move that will destroy one of the last green areas of the capital of Vojvodina (Ranocchiari, 2022). The concerns on the issues of its transparency and public participation were expressed, due to a lack of adequate involvement of local communities and civil society organizations, and by limiting their ability to influence the project's design and impact (Komarčević, 2020). Finally, the activists also highlighted that behind the alleged decentralization of the urban centre, investors are allowed to expand even further through direct negotiations with the city (Krstić, 2022).

The project was also criticized by the professional public, which in 2014 submitted nearly 2,000 objections to the City Assembly before the amendment of the Master Plan (Komarčević, 2020). According to the assessment of the Association of Architects of Novi Sad, the changes in the Master Plan to enable the implementation of the NSW project "did not meet the necessary expectations" (Krstić, 2022), suggesting that it should be completely revised (Krstić, 2022; Ranocchiari, 2022). However, the Institute for Urbanism of the City of Novi Sad, in charge of its drafting, justified the plan with the predictions of rapid urban population growth in the following years, characterizing it as "adaptable, inclusive and changeable," and "based on sustainable development" (Ranocchiari, 2022). After the City's Planning Commission in a secret session rejected almost all of the 12,000 objections to the plan, local organizations and citizens' associations openly invited citizens to demonstrations. During the session when the new plan was adopted by a large majority of city councillors, the situation escalated and the protesters clashed with the police (Janković, 2022). Ironically, just one day after the incident, the organizers of the ECoC 2022 invited the public to the Danube Sea program, which aims to raise citizens' awareness of environmental problems by "connecting art and ecology" (Subašić, 2022).

Despite the contestations, the changes were adopted in 2022, enabling the implementation of a new neighbourhood with luxurious residential high-rise, commercial spaces, and recreational facilities (Figure 5). To realize the project, the Novi Sad company Uni-Galens became the holder of the right to use land by purchasing the old shipyard at this location (Simeunović Simeun, 2022). Furthermore, the plan also foresees an extensive reconstruction of the city's road network, including the construction of a new bridge to connect the city centre with a new ring road. The construction of the bridge began after the ratification of an agreement between Serbia and China in 2020, according to which the project should be financed and implemented by the Chinese company CRBC (eKapija, 2020). Despite unresolved legal controversies, the excavators of the company started to prepare the ground, although the investor still did not obtain building permission. The construction works were temporarily stopped by the group of organized protestors, while the authorities later described the incident as a 'procedural error' that happened before the adoption of the Master Plan (Ranocchiari, 2022).

Although the implementation of NSW is currently put on hold and remains uncertain, it already shows a strong resemblance to the authoritarian scenario observed in Belgrade—this time, however, orchestrated by the investments from China that hold a strong influence on the Serbian authorities. An evidence of the

Figure 5. Visualisation of the NSW project. Source: VIA Inženjering d.o.o. (2019, p. 2).

government coupling with the investor is an incident when the public company Waters of Vojvodina based in Novi Sad suddenly changed its opinion on the plan from negative to positive, after an unexpected change in its management structure (Ranocchiari, 2022; Simeunović Simeun, 2022). Another incident occurred when the leading research institution in Serbia, Jaroslav Černi, gave a positive opinion on the plan—only after changes in its ownership structure (Ranocchiari, 2022).

5. Autocratic Urbanism: A Regional Trend or a Test for Young Democracies?

The large-scale waterfront redevelopment initiatives in the analysed cities demonstrate some remarkable similarities (Table 2). Evident is a strong reliance of the national political elites on foreign investments through mobilizing UMPs with outstanding visibility and great transformative potential. Mobilization of flagships and prominent architecture thereby aims to create spectacular imagery and ensure public acceptance, which ultimately serves to streamline public debates and approval processes (Andersen & Røe, 2016). In Belgrade, this trend advanced towards new forms of public-private partnerships that showcase the confluence of state-led regulatory intervention and neoliberal principles, emphasizing the attraction of foreign investment and stimulation of economic growth (Bialuschewski, 2018). However, the lack of transparency, limited public consultation, and a top-down approach classify this project as an embodiment of extreme autocratic decision-making (Basta & Petrović, 2019; Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2018). Similar patterns could be observed in other cases as well. The ZM project promises to create an iconic skyline of an emerging global city, hoping to attract international investments and establish Zagreb as a significant European city—only to demonstrate comparable characteristics of decision-making driven by autocratic neoliberalism that prioritizes private interests (see Šimić Banović, 2019). Following the disputations against BW, and even after the annulation of the ZM project due to significant public contestations, the emerging NSW initiative in the second-largest Serbian city mirrors the same planning pattern (Table 2).

Table 2. The main characteristics of the analysed waterfront redevelopments.

Project title	BW	ZM	NSW
Announced (year)	2012	2019	2020
Investor	Republic of Serbia in partnership with Eagle Hills, a real estate investment and development company headquartered in Abu Dhabi (UAE) with a global reach. Known for its upscale projects, Eagle Hills has established a presence in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The company specializes in diverse developments, including luxury residences, hotels, and mixed-use communities.	City of Zagreb in partnership with Eagle Hills, the same international company that implements the UMP in Belgrade.	City of Novi Sad in partnership with the local construction company Uni-Galens. Republic of Serbia in partnership with the Chinese company CRBC China Road and Bridge Corporation, a major state-owned construction and engineering company based in Beijing (China). CRBC is a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company, one of the largest engineering and construction companies globally.
Project description	Shopping mall, residential buildings, and office space.	Residential buildings, office space, shopping centres, and catering facilities	Up to 20 residential-commercial buildings, 2,299 residential units, and a dock for boats
Area/surface	90 hectares of land; announced expansion to the neighbouring land About one million square meters, with ca. 6,000 apartments	110 hectares of land About one million square metres	21 hectares of land 39.600 square meters
The total value of the project	Originally estimated at 3.5 billion euros	Up to 500 million euros	About 400 million euros
Public benefits	Promenades, new streets and public spaces, playgrounds, and parks. More recently a museum was announced, as well as a children's theatre and an international school.	Promenades, new streets, and public spaces.	Promenades, new streets, and public spaces.
Proponents	President of the Republic, national government	Mayor, local government	Mayor, local government, national government
Government interventions	Changes to the planning documents, special legal status, secret dealing, prioritization of investors' interests, illegal demolitions, limited public consultation	Intended changes to the planning documents, secret dealing, prioritization of investors' interests, limited public consultation	Changes to the planning documents, secret dealing, prioritization of investors' interests, illegal demolitions, limited public consultation

Table 2. (Cont.) The main characteristics of the analysed waterfront redevelopments.

Project title	BW	ZM	NSW
Opponents	Civic sector, professional associations, independent media	Civic sector, professional associations, independent media	Civic sector, professional associations, independent media
Opponents' activities	Public debates, protests, political engagement	Public debates, protests	Public debates, protests
Current status	Under implementation since 2015. In 2023 the company bought the land of the neighbouring Belgrade Fair.	Annulled in 2020	Uncertain

Another major observation considers the response of local and national civil and expert organizations. Contrary to contestations in Belgrade that resulted from the prioritization of the interests of private investors and the ruling elite over the needs and aspirations of local communities, the BW project has been smoothly implemented since 2015. The apparent inability of the young civil sector in Serbia to influence the project's implementation became later a warning sign and an incentive for the citizens and experts from the region to take a more active part in urban planning and development. While proponents of the ZM project kept on highlighting its enormous economic potential, civic organizations from Zagreb actively questioned the transparency and inclusivity of the decision-making process, establishing regional exchange channels, and openly drawing parallels with the BW project from the same developer (Indikator, 2019). More recently, the alleged transformation of the waterfront area of Novi Sad to boost economic development and drive modernization was also criticized in its pursuit of neoliberal urban growth over the lack of transparency, public participation, and meaningful exchange with civil society organizations. As a result, although the implementation of the BW project follows stable dynamics, the fates of similar initiatives in Zagreb or Novi Sad remain highly uncertain.

Finally, UMPs to revitalize waterfront areas in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Zagreb are strongly characterized by the involvement of powerful international investors, coupled with a strong political lead that promotes a general lack of transparency and meaningful public participation. The projects commonly rely on market-oriented urban development and a rhetoric of necessary foreign investments to stimulate economic growth but at the expense of social and environmental considerations, and with critical impacts on social equity, cultural heritage, and natural environment. As a result, they are increasingly perceived as a tool for providing benefits to political and economic elites at the expense of public interest. The restriction of citizens' influence on planning decisions further leads to corruption charges and other public concerns that challenge already low levels of citizen trust in democratic political institutions in the countries of the region.

6. Conclusions

The large-scale waterfront redevelopment initiatives in Serbia and Croatia commonly demonstrate a trend where authoritarian governance and neoliberal economic policies converge to drive UMPs that raise concerns about transparency, inclusivity, sustainability, and the prioritization of private interests over public welfare. These projects have implications on social justice, cohesion, and community identity, while their emphasis on modernization and market-driven development overlooks the importance of conserving unique

locational assets. Their implementation as private-public partnerships recalls a scheme in which politicians demonstrate reliance on their privileges to expropriate public resources, leaving behind risks and significant debts (Horvat, 2017; Šimić Banović, 2019). In this respect, analysed initiatives show similarities to other autocratic development initiatives in the region—in particular the revamp of the North Macedonian capital Skopje by the controversial UMP Skopje 2014. This massive urban redevelopment was entirely conceived, funded, and implemented by the national government, contrary to the public criticism that emphasized a general lack of transparency, participation, and legally deficient procedures, in addition to the political elites being accused of overspending public funds and even engaging in money laundering (Čamprag, 2018). However, in addition to the obvious inability of political elites in the region to advocate for the public interest, an equally concerning phenomenon is the rising power of international real estate development companies to tailor the conditions for government support, minimize risks, and gain contractual benefits to their own goals. As a result, national governments in the region desperately relying on neoliberal economic policies due to their urgent need for foreign capital made the fragile ex-Yugoslavian urban landscape a new playground for powerful real estate developers. Furthermore, the pursuit of non-transparent, large-scale waterfront regenerations with utmost visibility in capital cities of the region only threatens to domesticate extreme manifestation forms of autocratic urbanism and further erode democratic accountability and governance of public goods and the commons.

Despite some striking similarities in the way large-scale waterfront regeneration initiatives have been conceived and promoted across the region, the fact that they have in some cases failed to be implemented calls for further investigation into this phenomenon. Considering that contradictory neoliberal urban development policies are on the rise globally, citizens have gradually become aware of its enormous negative effects on existing environmental, social, and cultural values, leading to less just and equitable outcomes. An evident increase in civic activism against the harmful outcomes of such developments is also apparent in the ex-Yugoslavian region. The emerging contestations oppose a long legacy of various types of plunder legalized or justified in the countries of the region through a variety of arrangements, in which the public interest was commonly not protected (Horvat, 2017). Reduction of public spaces, privatization of public goods, and aggravation of social inequalities in the cities of the region led a variety of groups and individuals to take action toward more inclusive and just planning outcomes. The more recent scenarios when it comes to investor-friendly redevelopments reveal new dynamics of civic engagement and regional networking. Therefore, despite the legacy of autocratic planning that still challenges the fragile young democracies of ex-Yugoslavian countries, the ongoing consolidation of civil society promises an alternative for the more effective representation of public interest in such endeavours.

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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The Continuous Reproduction of Contradictions in the Urban Development of New Belgrade's Central Area

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Abstract

The initial source for the continuous reproduction of contradictions in the central area of New Belgrade's urban development was the mismatch between the dynamics of political and economic reforms and the static urban planning system that has been banded to the most progressive but rigid functionalist ideals that could not adapt to the emergent pace of these reforms. Consequently, during the socialist and post-socialist periods, the central area of New Belgrade grew irregularly by developing contradictory fragments rather than totality. The inconsistency of the socialist authorities in completing the capital city according to the urban plan despite political imperatives has continued with the post-socialist governing tendencies towards irregularity, privatization, and commercialization of urban development. A series of individual, short-term, and profitable urban projects that have opposed the socialist urban structure, have reused inherited socialist urban infrastructure as a fertile ground for their growth. More than presenting a new insight into the history of urban development of the central area of New Belgrade, this study uses it as the prime case to disclose the unsustainability of the urban planning system during the socialist past and post-socialist present. An alternative urban planning system would embrace the challenges of the continuous reproduction of contradiction by affirming an institutional network of platforms for collaboration among citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers.

Keywords

New Belgrade; platforms for collaboration; post-socialism; socialism; urban development; urban planning systems

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1. Introduction

In late January 2021, the Serbian government dedicated the status of spatial, cultural, and historical heritage to the central area of New Belgrade. It was a surprising decision by politicians who favored the revival of national culture and the influx of international capital. They officially recognized the modernist urban development of socialist Yugoslavia as a cultural asset, despite the notorious reputations of all (modern architecture, socialism, and Yugoslavia) in contemporary political and cultural discourse. In addition to these contradictions, the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the City of Belgrade, which has proposed to the government to protect the central area of New Belgrade, has stated that "the three axials out of nine blocks of the central area have to be excluded from the heritage since they have never been completed according to the original urban plan made at the end of the fifties" (Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the City of Belgrade, 2021). However, it is evident that other than the incompleteness of these three blocks, there were unplanned changes in all nine blocks. The entire central area of New Belgrade resembles a heterogeneous assembly of planned and unplanned fragments rather than a uniform product of the urban planning system.

This latest incongruity continues to reproduce the contradictions that have followed the urban development of the central area of New Belgrade since the beginning. New Belgrade has been a prime political project, envisioned to represent the best image of the new socialist state. Its development has always depended on the political conditions, and they have been permanently changing following the dynamics of political and economic reforms in socialist Yugoslavia. On the other side, modernist urban planning, linked to the most progressive but rigid functionalist ideals represented by the static visions of the long-term plan, has not been adapted to the emerging pace of these reforms. The inconsistency between the emergent political system and the rigid urban planning system has become the permanent source of the continuous reproduction of contradictions in urban development.

The reproduction of contradictions that occurred in socialism, despite rigorous administration, followed the rise of market-oriented tendencies imposed by the original "self-management" socialist system in former Yugoslavia. Yugoslavian political leadership introduced self-management in the late 1950s to resolve the economic contradiction between a controlled and a free market economy that was a source of the country's lagging after WWII. The shift towards market management has gradually enlarged the country's wealth but weakened the emancipatory role of urban planning (Mrduljas & Kulic, 2012). Powerful socialist construction companies, who projected their competitive strategies on the territorial divisions of the city, took key roles in urban development. They split the central area of New Belgrade and developed it according to their profit goals, formally framing it as public interest.

The inconsistency between the urban planning system and the political system survived the destruction of socialism, but the reproduction of contradictions in the urban development of the central area of New Belgrade continued. The political transition that began in the 1990s exacerbated the already established divisions of the socialist period. The post-socialist urban policy that supported profit-oriented private urban developments and the withdrawal of public institutions finally set aside the original plan of the central area of New Belgrade, while continuing to reuse socialist infrastructure as fertile ground (Waley, 2011).

Although having opposed ideological premises, post-socialism has not suppressed socialism in practice and instead used it for its growth. That could be because both socialism and post-socialism are transitional processes. According to Marxist theorists, socialism is a slow transition from capitalism to communism during which all inherited contradictions, such as the ones between political autocracy and democracy, distributive and market economy, top-down and bottom-up management, traditional and modern culture, nationalism and internationalism, demand gradual resolutions. Post-socialism represents an accelerated transition from socialism to capitalism—a "shock therapy," as named by American neoliberal economists (Harvey, 2007), during which the political authorities radicalize the reproduction of contradictions to boost the change. In the case of former Yugoslavia, that led to deadly conflicts. Following up on the contradictory manifestations of the transitional processes, I assume the general contradiction between socialism and post-socialism is one of the milestones rather than an exclusive historical turnover.

The ideological divergence between Marxism and neoliberalism has long been recognized. However, both frameworks, in their ways, have critiqued the role of the state as a political agency. Empirical realities reveal a more nuanced picture. Contrary to their initial claims, the state has significantly strengthened, particularly during the socialist and post-socialist transitions. The power of state apparatus, which was established during socialism by development and control over the means of production, increased during post-socialism when it became the manager of the process of privatization of those means. Consequently, political and managerial elites who acquired privileges and wealth during socialism became the main beneficiaries of the post-socialist transition.

Aside from the theory of transition, my research was triggered by the simple observation of the inconsistency between the original urban plan for the central area of New Belgrade and the map of its current reality. To explain the inconsistency, I studied a series of master urban plans for New Belgrade and detailed urban plans for its central area—which are archived in the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade and published in various academic papers—and crossed them with the findings about the relationship between urban planning and political, economic, social, and cultural movements in former Yugoslavia, that are presented in the research project Unfinished Modernization (Mrduljas & Kulic, 2012).

As a participant in that research project, I had a chance to do hour-long interviews with three important protagonists of the urban planning of New Belgrade from the beginning to the present time: the first one planned the original traffic system of New Belgrade in the 1950s and 1960s, the second one participated in the planning and realization of some detailed urban plans for various blocks in New Belgrade in the 1970s and 1980s, and the third one was managing the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade in the 2000s. They provided personal testimonies and unwritten facts from their professional archives about the urban development practice in New Belgrade. My records from these interviews have been crosschecked with newspaper and internet articles and proven by the claims from the academic papers by other researchers who studied the urban development of New Belgrade.

The study of the transformation of the actors involved in the urban development of New Belgrade during the socialist and post-socialist period, presented in the first section, reflects the global neoliberal paradigm of urban development to New Belgrade's post-socialist practice. It is based on the theoretical framework given by Harvey (2007), Waley (2011), and Szelenyi (1996), and social studies done by academics from Belgrade University.

The backward history presented in the second section aims to confuse the seductiveness of the upward historical narrative to highlight the crucial argument behind the narrative—the continuous reproduction of contradiction in each fragment of history as a product of mismatched political and urban planning systems.

The third and concluding section speculates on an alternative urban planning system, based on the empirical learnings from the community projects for urban transformations of the neglected neighborhood in Belgrade that I initiated in 2010. Theoretical frameworks for these projects are the studies of commons and methodologies of social action research and user-centered analysis.

Despite standard historical and empirical methodologies applied, more than presenting a new insight into the history of the urban development of the central area of New Belgrade, this study uses it as a prime case to disclose the unsustainability of the urban planning system that has not recognized emergency of political, social, economic, and cultural agencies in the process of urban development. Alternative open-ended urban planning systems that could embrace the challenges of the continuous reproduction of contradiction should affirm an institutionalized network of platforms for collaboration among these agencies.

2. Casting Post-Socialist Urbanity

Socialism in former Yugoslavia lasted on a belief that the centralized political organization could overcome private interests in the pursuit of universal humanist ideals (equality, unity, and liberty). The breakdown of former Yugoslavia and the proceeding regression toward capitalism brutally shortened the illusion of everlasting prosperity. During the post-socialist transition, political authorities stripped down the concept of collective well-being and left citizens alone to find ways to survive the collapse of the institutional system, the commodification of public services, privatizations of the industries, deregulation of the market competition, and imposed globalization that glorified individual wealth and luxury.

The application of the neoliberal urban development policy within the context of the post-socialist transition has brought about significant economic transformations. This policy prioritizes privatization, market competition, and the commodification of urban spaces. Consequently, post-socialist urban development has become closely associated with economic growth driven by private investments that rely on profit made by sustained consumer demand. Following the post-socialist transition, socialist urbanity underwent a paradigmatic reversal "from an urban space shaped by the public institutions with a focus on public interest to an urban space shaped by unleashed private economic interests" (Topalovic, 2012, p. 170).

The stimulation of consumption necessitates strategic marketing maneuvers, linking basic needs to the belief that an influx of new products in the market will lead to prosperity for all. This marketing approach, often devoid of ethical considerations, is bolstered by political propaganda. As a result, a new social environment emerges in the post-socialist landscape—one where the culture of consumption supersedes the previously celebrated collective well-being of socialist societies. Instead, individual success in market competition becomes the prevailing norm, accompanied by an imperative to assert narcissistic dominance over others.

Post-socialist urban development serves as the fertile ground for the materialization and profitability of this newly established culture of consumption. This phenomenon manifests in various ways, including privatizations of public resources, enclosures, and spatial segregation within urban areas. Additionally, the

commodification of urban land and real estate speculation further reinforces this trend. Consequently, existing urban resources are aggressively exploited, leading to disintegrated urban growth.

In the visual fabric of post-socialist cities, the culture of consumption materializes through a seemingly haphazard collection of glossy buildings strategically positioned in prime locations. These new buildings that appeared in the form of oversized shopping malls, designers' hotels, gated condominiums, expensive storages, and fancy office towers vie for dominance in the cityscape by projecting an alluring image to attract consumers. Consequently, urban spaces transform into illuminated spectacles, catering to the masses' desire for consumption. City centers metamorphose into sprawling shopping malls and historical theme parks, while new commercial zones emerge on the outskirts (Hirt, 2008).

Sandwiched between these vibrant poles lies a vast expanse—the largest urban space—often overlooked and left to languish in gradual decay. These neglected areas are the very neighborhoods where most citizens reside, their lives obscured behind crumbling facades. The predicament faced by these citizens is multifaceted. On one hand, they grapple with the relentless pace of aggressive urban development—in exchange for this rapid transformation that erodes the essence of their city, they are offered commercial spectacles—gleaming structures that vie for attention in the real estate market. On the other hand, institutional negligence compounds their plight, leaving them feeling powerless and marginalized.

In response, their frustration simmers into a form of collective rebellion. The destruction of urban spaces becomes their raw unfiltered expression—a visceral outcry against the forces that marginalized them. Walls are defaced, public spaces vandalized, and the very fabric of the city scarred. This brutal reaction is born out of desperation—a desperate attempt to reclaim agency in a city that is taken away. Yet, within this destructive energy lies a glimmer of possibility that can transform it into a constructive zeal—one that fuels an alternative development model that entails revitalizing neglected spaces, empowering communities, and reimagining urban spaces as shared commons.

The transformation of destructive energy into constructive zeal is not merely an academic exercise but an enduring pledge—one that holds the moral imperative of a more equitable, resilient, and vibrant urban future. Confrontation with post-socialist urban disintegration must start by understanding it as the result of the corrupted urban development practice in which real-estate business companies use public institutions to support their private profit-making agendas. The hierarchy in the process "begins with the developer and moves down to the authorities, and then to the urban planners just for the sake of administrating a planning amendment" (Topalovic, 2011, p. 204). Political authorities are always keen on meeting developers' demands and tend to adjust urban regulations to follow their profit expectations. Moreover, they celebrate private investments in urban development as their own success in generating a country's wealth and national progress.

Besides political benefits, these investments created a financial mechanism for converting the public budget into private companies, usually controlled by the leading party members or donors. Political authorities involved in such trading set up the construction tenders in advance for developers who agree to allocate provisions into their personal funds. In this way, the post-socialist political elite establishes its original public–private partnership. The features of this corrupted system are, on one side, the use of authoritarian power mechanisms, such as top-down communication, and, on the other side, the abuse of governing

functions in public companies with accompanying “money laundry procedures” (Vujovic & Petrovic, 2007, p. 366).

Although outside of business partnerships between urban developers and political authorities, the urban planning system became corrupted through the processes of indiscriminate commodification and commercialization of planning procedures. During socialism, urban planning was a professional practice with rigid protocols set up to conduct public interests. In practice, it usually happened that political authorities denied the coherency of urban plans by introducing unplanned changes (D. Manojlovic, interview, April 2010). From the planning perspective, these political interventions were always arbitrary, but urban planners were aware that they could not do anything without political support.

The post-socialist transition radicalized inherited contradictions of the socialist urban development practice. The urban planning system has contributed to its lagging behind the rapid transformation of the post-socialist political system by keeping the socialist model of rigid apparatus, self-impressed with its own visions and order. This has directly contributed to its inability to adapt to the contingencies of the post-socialist urban development that transformed the urban planning public role into an administrative service for private urban development companies. Unscrupulous political authorities together with the managerial system that ran the construction industry downgraded it to a procedure for verifying financial speculations on the deregulated real estate market. Urban planners’ efforts to keep the status of the professional elite while detached from public interest has resulted in their “loss of control on urban development as the constitutive subject and the purpose of their profession” (Topalovic, 2011, p. 204).

The citizens’ capacity to influence urban development was also contradictory in socialism: on one side, the socialist ideology that claimed social equality oppressed the potential diversity of citizens’ interests, but on the other side, it highlighted “citizens’ rights” as their fundamental agency in the “self-management” decision-making protocols. In the socialist urban planning system, these rights take the form of “public hearings” at the end of the planning process. In practice, chances to change urban plans during these public hearings were minimal—urban planners would always provide general bureaucratic responses to citizens’ amendments (Krstic, 2018). Detached from the decision-making and demotivated to participate in further public hearings, citizens’ interests were increasingly moving to the private sphere where they started to invest in their personal prosperity. A market-orientated socialist economy that contributed to the growing standards offered them enough consuming goods and soft loans to meet their dreams of a better life. At the same time, socialist political authorities started to threaten citizens’ engagement to protect their privileges and wealth. Consequently, citizens found peace inside their own homes and left the decision-making protocols to political authorities.

Citizens who were not interested in participating in decision-making processes showed early signs of a lost belief in the proclaimed socialist values. This way, societal integrity was winding down much before the collapse of socialism (Szelenyi, 1996). When authorities finally dismantled the founding socialist dream, citizens became an easy prey for the post-socialist business predators, whose tempting calls to consume more than they need with never enough resources to pay the costs trapped them in the world of neverending desire for the new products on the market. Loans offered as a speed lane to instant satisfaction turned out to be an instrument of post-socialist slavery. Political authorities contributed to enslavement by using strategies to confuse citizens so that they stop believing in anything but politicians who pretend to

know it all. By doing this, political authorities managed to disable citizens' capacity to interpret, think, and make decisions about their future.

Post-socialist urban development is, in fact, a massive urban transformation that is not happening for the sake of the citizens' well-being, but under the pressure of a free-market competition to attract more consumers. A radical reversal of post-socialist urban development signifies an important shift in the history of urbanity—the disappearance of citizenship that has been determining the development of human settlements since ancient times.

3. Backcasting Unforeseen Changes

Urban development of the central area of New Belgrade serves as an ideal case study for understanding post-socialist and socialist contradictions in urban development practice. The central area of New Belgrade represents the heart of the modernist city built from scratch after WWII, on the uninhabited territory spreading over a marchland between the rivers Sava and Danube, across the old city center of Belgrade. The location for the development of the new city had to imply a radical break with the past, a political and spatial "tabula rasa" (Blagojevic, 2007). During the long-term and still incomplete construction works, its urban plan underwent continuous revisions. Unforeseen changes that were reshaping the central area of New Belgrade produced an unplanned heterogeneity made of interrupted attempts to create comprehensive urbanity.

The lasting efforts to reshape the central area of New Belgrade belong to the period of post-socialist transition after political changes in the 2000s. The Master Urban Plan for Belgrade 2021 designated a top priority to the transformation of the central area of New Belgrade into a commercial hub—the idea was that its quality infrastructure and large residential community would easily attract private developers (M. Ferencak, interview, April 2010). The main developers involved were business clusters formed during the 1990s—most of them were direct successors of the socialist managerial elites that got wealthy during the uncontrolled privatization while the state was collapsing. Being unscrupulous, they showed no sense of commitment to New Belgrade's socialist premises. Their urban development agenda relied on "maximum public facilitation—public land, public funding, procedural shortcuts, combined with minimum public control over the development—programming, site design, site development" (Topalovic, 2011, p. 204). Contradictory, the precondition for the success of such a development system is the socialist's technical infrastructure upon which the new buildings were parasitizing.

This post-socialist version of the parasitizing "plug-in city" appeared firstly in the form of a massive small-scale informal urban intervention following the rise of the grey economy that exchanged the collapsing state economy during the war in Yugoslavia and UN sanctions in the 1990s. Unregulated individual building interventions produced innovation in every urban domain—from housing production to commerce. The series of informal attachments that complemented missing amenities appeared as building fragments plugged into the existing urban structure and buildings. In the central area of New Belgrade line of shops sprung up on the empty ground floors of the modernist residential buildings, new apartments appeared on their flat rooftops using them as convenient plots, and a cluster of kiosks occupied the empty green spaces among buildings and along the wide boulevards (Prokopijevic, 2014).

The informal building flood owed its potency to the powerless institutional urban planning system that had been marginalized at the beginning of the 1980s by the political decision to stop its institutional financing. Following Yugoslavian constitutional changes and the proceeding business legislation from the mid-1970s, urban planning jobs were delegated to professional market-orientated companies. Supported by the new investment banks, powerful socialist construction companies started to establish their urban planning departments to place urban development under their control (D. Manojlovic, interview, April 2010). They divided the central area of New Belgrade and started to develop it in parts, according to their financial interests.

Even the untouchable unity of the unbuilt axis of the central area was broken after that. Its gradual colonization began with the development of the downscaled residential block near the New Belgrade railway station and proceeded toward the Palace of Federation at the head of the axis. In the next move, city authorities suddenly decided to build a huge sports arena in the central block of the axis, to host proceedings and later postpone the World Basketball Championship 1994. This massive sarcophagus, whose finishing had been delayed for 20 years due to the wars in the 1990s, buried the ambitions to make a city center open to public activities and instead offered a public spectacle. It was not the first act, but it was a massive declaration of the end of the socialist era and the beginning of post-socialism.

Such urban interventions that did not show any respect to the modernist heritage were based on the professional argument of the ambitious study for the reconstruction of the central area of New Belgrade, that was proposed by the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, financed by the City Government, and supported by the intellectual authority of the Serbian Academy of Science and Art (Perovic, 1985). Starting with the widely established post-modernist critique, which among other things attacks the inflexibility of New Belgrade's block concept, the lack of articulation of large green spaces, the uniformity of urban fabric, and the social and economic problems caused by the divisions of urban functions, the study argued that the monumental buildings and open spaces of the central area of New Belgrade are leading to the loss of the human scale and an urbanity without vitality. The study identified a framework for a different process of urban development in the return to historical urban forms (Topalovic, 2011). What followed was in stark contrast to the initial romantic vision. Urban planners merely juxtaposed the fragments of a quasi-historical city with the fragments of the modernist city wherever there was space left, no matter if it was an unfinished block or an unused space between the roads and the buildings.

These large-scale interventions were possible because most of the central area of New Belgrade was unbuilt due to the delays in infrastructure development due to insufficient public financing. The major shift in infrastructure development that was made only in three years, at the end of the 1960s, was possible due to the manipulations of the public budget aside from regular procedures (D. Manojlovic, interview, April 2010). During this short period, the Belgrade Airport, which was situated next to the central area of New Belgrade, was moved further away from the city; the railway tracks, that were diagonally cutting the central area, were shifted to the direction defined by the urban plan 15 years before; and the Third Boulevard of the central area together with the new bridge over Sava River was transformed into a transcontinental highway (Glavicki, 1983). Peaceful residential neighborhoods of the central area of New Belgrade that were suddenly cut by the heavy traffic reflected the newest unplanned contradiction between New Belgrade's local and global status.

Two years after being finished, these large infrastructural works were confirmed by the Master Urban Plan for Belgrade 2000. The sad destiny of that plan was that only a few years after its inauguration, most of its developing goals were compromised due to the Yugoslavian constitutional changes. Its major revision had to be done already at the beginning of the 1980s to register unplanned urban interventions (D. Manojlovic, interview, April 2010). The breakdown of the Master Urban Plan for Belgrade 2000 shows that political authorities in socialism never fully comprehended urban plans as ultimate resolutions but rather as a list of opportunities.

The most significant outcome of the emergent urban development practice of the socialist political authorities was the Congress Center Sava which was erected in only one year under the highest patronage of the Yugoslav State. It is not only that it was made aside from any urban plan, but it also ignored all the plans previously done. Moreover, the Sava Center with its additions (the largest Concert Hall in Belgrade and the Hotel Intercontinental) could attract thousands visitors, becoming a new bussiness landmark for the socialist managerial elite, who started to build their companies' headquarters in the neighborhood. In a short period, the wasteland next to the central area of New Belgrade was occupied with luxurious office buildings and hotels. A program that was originally planned to be developed along the main axis of the central area of New Belgrade shifted aside a few hundred meters away while the main axis stayed undeveloped.

The rigid urban planning system that could not adapt to the pace of political emergencies was the reason for the continuous changes in the urban plans for New Belgrade during its construction. The 1940s General Urban Plan for Belgrade interpreted New Belgrade's functionalist zoning division of housing, work, leisure, and traffic that were subordinated to the central axis with trading, cultural, and governmental facilities focused on the Palace of Federation set up on the head of the axis (Stojanovic, 1975). This way, the contradiction between the modernist open-plan and socialist eclectic formalism was laid in its founding scheme. By that time, the high priority to provide residential facilities had overcome ideological demand, which led to the situation where the development of the main axis and attaching boulevards were extensively delayed and indefinitely postponed (B. Jovin, interview, April 2010).

The first delay in planning New Belgrade happened only a year after the General Urban Plan for Belgrade was adopted due to the political split with the Soviet Union. The split reflected not only an economic crisis that caused major delays in a country's post-war development but also a political emergency to formulate a new ideological paradigm that was later named Yugoslav "self-management socialism." Discussions about a new cultural model that had to reflect an ideological shift culminated in the mid-1950s when leading intellectuals and artists, members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, declared a local version of international modernism as the most appropriate representational form for Yugoslav society. A new model began to emerge, mixing elements from the West and the East into a particularly Yugoslav form of what was named "socialist modernism" (Kulic, 2014).

Following the change of cultural model, competition for the urban plan for the central area of New Belgrade was issued in 1959 (Stojanovic, 1975). The Detailed Urban Plan for the Central Area of New Belgrade that was developed according to the winning proposal was finally set up at the beginning of the 1960s, while the constructions were already ongoing and one of the blocks was finished and inhabited according to the loose regulations from the General Urban Plan for Belgrade.

The Detailed Urban Plan for the Central Area of New Belgrade followed the traffic scheme made of four longitudinal boulevards and four transversals that were determined in the General Urban Plan for Belgrade. This traffic scheme formed nine blocks of the central area—three central blocks, 400m × 400m each, with central functions that were spanned along the axis connecting the future New Belgrade Railway Station and the, already completed, Palace of Federation, and other six residential blocks organized around both side of the axis, 400m × 600m each, that were planned for 5,000 residents each. Since the central area of New Belgrade was imagined to represent the power of the new socialist state, residential zones had to uphold the monumentality of a capital city. Groups of residential towers, 20 stores high, were set up at the corners; 250 meters long and 10 stores high residential slabs were set up along the four boulevards; while the middle parts of the blocks were reserved for lower and more discrete four stores of housing clusters (Petricic, 1975).

The size of the blocks in the central area of Belgrade was linked to the size of the local community, as defined in the socialist self-management territorial organization. There had been further articulated careful design of public amenities inside the blocks, including kindergartens, primary schools, playgrounds, parks, medical facilities, supermarkets, stores, craftsmen’s shops, and so forth. They were connected by a variety of pedestrian promenades surrounded by artificial topography, landscaping, and public art. Spaces for cultural, social, and political gatherings in each block were assembled in a special complex—the local community center, a new building typology within the housing production (Topalovic, 2011).

Building standards for various indoor and outdoor spaces were regulated by quantitative norms, presented in the form of an analog parametric system that was always the constitutive chapter of each urban plan. Although restrictive, these norms served as a keeper of social justice and collective well-being in the newly built residential neighborhoods. Following the overall growth of the social standards, the building standards were gradually upgraded (Krstic, 2018). The improvement of the building standards, innovations in the organization of the apartments, changes in architectural styles, and advancement in construction technology, together with long delays in the development, reflected in the diversities among the blocks, which had not been foreseen by the original drawings of the Detailed Urban Plan for the central area of New Belgrade.

For ideological purposes, socialist political authorities insisted that the development of New Belgrade started after WWII, while the fact is that the first urban plan for the urban development across the Sava River had been presented much before the war, by the end of the 1920s. The only significant constructions from that time were the “chain bridge” over the Sava River, which was destroyed during WWII and then rebuilt as the “beam bridge” leaned on the preserved supporting pillars of the old bridge, and the “Belgrade Fairground” opened in 1937. for Belgrade’s First International Technical Exposition. In a contradictory turn, shortly after the start of WWII this complex that was celebrating technical progress was turned into a Gestapo extermination camp, that was hardly demolished by Alliance forces in their bombardment campaigns during the war and never fully rebuilt after the war due to more urgent constructions in the neighborhood. However, one of the preserved fairground’s pavilions was reused by the Directory for the Planning and the Developing of New Belgrade for its operative headquarters.

Even the major buildings of the political institution of socialist Yugoslavia in New Belgrade that were built with the ambition to last forever could not avoid emergent changes. The construction of the main one among these buildings—the Palace of Federation, located at the head of the axis of the central area of New Belgrade, started in 1947 before the central area was planned in detail (Kulić, 2014). Its construction was

then prolonged until the end of the 1950s due to the split with the Soviet Union. Following up on it, the monumental original "Stalinist" facade of the Palace of Federation needed to be modernized while its voluminous body that had been already built could not be changed. A practical and elegant solution for the modernist "face-lifting" replaced the originally designed facade. Since that time, the largest Yugoslavian state building in Belgrade, currently named the Palace of Serbia, has become too large for the downsized Serbian political structure. It is semi-used as an office building for the anonymous departments of various state ministries and as a vintage background for the rear international political ceremonies.

A few years after the interventions in the Palace of Federation, on the sandy field between the Palace of Federation and the rebuilt bridge that was connecting the central area of New Belgrade with the old city center, the Headquarters of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was raised. Confirming the latest political and cultural tendencies of socialist modernism, the main building of the leading ideological force took the image of the most updated Western office building (Kulić, 2014)—a monolith tower wrapped in a curtain glass facade with an aluminum frame. Standing alone in the wasteland next to the future central area of New Belgrade this building instantly became a new urban landmark. Many years after, during the collapse of Yugoslavia it was damaged by the NATO missiles and then sold as a ruin to the private developer who reconstructed it. The building was shortened by three floors, fixed with the newest reflecting glass curtain facade, and converted into a rental office space. Instead of an oval assembly hall in front of it, that was originally designed but never built, a large shopping mall and the twin office tower were added to it as if they wanted to stamp its corporate origin.

In the 1960s, between the Palace of Federation and the Headquarters of the Communist Party, construction of an avant-garde project for the building of the Museum of the History of Socialist Revolution in Yugoslavia started. It was imagined as an institution for keeping "the true story about us" for the upcoming generations. The construction of the Museum was stopped soon after and never continued beyond the huge concrete basement and the platform above it. The abandoned construction site today is telling a different story than expected—its dark and humid underground space has become an informal shelter for homeless citizens, losers of the post-socialist transition. This unfinished building symbolizes the interrupted dreams of the socialist society and the emergent nightmares of the post-socialist society, that demands daily confrontation with these emergencies.

4. Instead of a Conclusion: Forecasting an Alternative Future

Although failed as the original planning vision, the central area of New Belgrade is highly respected by its citizens (Petrovic, 2008). Incompleteness and heterogeneity of its urban space are not an important issue for them since their spatial experience is fragmentized and identified with the block where they live. It is connected to the fact that the central area was slowly built, block by block, in front of their eyes. Since they have grown up together in the city and socialized with those who share the same living experiences, they have become the most persistent deniers of the critics of socialist and post-socialist urbanity. Socialist urbanity was the one that made their living environment comfortable—flexible apartments, diversified residential buildings surrounded by aged greenery, efficient traffic system, social equilibrium, and riverbanks accessible to all (Dragutinovic & Pottgiesser, 2021). Post-socialism complemented them with business developments, shopping malls, and a multiplicity of missing services. Changes in urban development policy did not bother them since their influence on these changes had been successfully suspended from the beginning.

In addition, citizens of the central area of New Belgrade profited financially from the post-socialist transition. During socialism, their apartments were owned by the companies who were investing in the construction using the special company fund for housing their employees who then got the status of permanent tenants. The crisis in the 1990s allowed them to privatize these apartments from their bankrupting companies for a privileged sum. The planned transformation of the central area from a residential settlement into a commercial hub after the 2000s immensely increased the property value of these apartments.

What citizens of the central area of New Belgrade perceive as a problem is the marginalization of public institutions that reflects in a slow but continual decay of public spaces (Dragutinovic & Nikezic, 2020). These spaces were made during socialism, following the norms of collective well-being, and they are too large today to be maintained by the weak post-socialist communal institutions. The great commercial potential of these spaces, on the other side, is used by the political authorities to attract private developers who tend to appropriate and exploit them. Recent conflicts caused by the reckless appropriation of the public space in New Belgrade show that the only line of defense left is self-organized citizens' resistance. The resistance gets citizens together and by getting together it gives impetus to the regeneration of the lost communal values—such as solidarity, empathy, and collaboration (Bobic, 2014). Defense of the public space thus becomes an opportunity for reclaiming a lost sense of community.

Against such opportunity, political authorities apply a spectrum of threats for controlling social behavior developed by the state security and proven in the marketing industry, such as seducing, discrediting, faking, confusing, distracting, escalating, polarizing, bullying, and oppressing. In the best scenario, such long-term treatments can develop immunity of self-organized citizens who will then upscale local defense of the public space into a long-lasting fight for the "right to the city" (Harvey, 2007).

The "right to the city" in post-socialism is a utopian discourse that starts with the use of defended public spaces as places for boosting community exchange. When working persistently, these places stimulate citizens to get together and propose alternatives for the maintenance and development of their neighborhoods (Stavrides, 2016). By this time, self-organized groups of citizens can become so powerful that they can change the dominating urban development practice by demanding collaboration among citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers. Unimaginable collaboration among confronted actors offers a chance for everyone to thrive—citizens to participate in the protocols that address the urban future, urban planners to mediate collaborative processes, authorities to manage public interest, and developers to practice human-centered development. They can all work together for the good of all.

Initial capital for the collaboration among citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers lies in the self-organized citizens' groups that are ready to evolve into the development of the "platform for collaboration." "Platforms for collaboration" are urban agencies that encourage confronted actors to join and contribute their skills as equal participants in the societal field. Building by building, street by street, block by block, a series of proposals for urban interventions that are coordinated by the local "platforms for collaboration" can unfold an ongoing urban development process in which bottom-up initiatives meet top-down frameworks. It is an uneasy confrontation of contradictory interests, competencies, and responsibilities, who struggle to get along and eventually manage to find ways to agree about viable proposals.

An updated urban planning system the will no longer aim for success in any vision of a new urban order but for the institutionalization of the "platforms for collaboration." Its systematic support can help local "platforms for collaboration" to further evolve into the institutional network of places distributed within each neighborhood for citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers to meet, talk, plan, and negotiate on how to make the city together. Besides practical outcomes in the form of common proposals for urban development, an institutional network of "platforms for collaboration" can gradually revitalize mutual trust and contribute to the reintegration of the community at large (Levitas, 2013).

Built upon the institutionalized network of "platforms of collaboration," the alternative future of the central area of New Belgrade is imagined as an ongoing series of step-by-step urban transformations. In the best scenario, authorities will play the role of the catalyst in promoting collaboration that will be coordinated by urban planners, whereby citizens will commit based on self-organized groups that are supported by developers who will find their interest in the incremental constructions. Their collaboration will produce a variety of proposals that correspond to the citizens' needs, demands, and resources. Together these proposals will trace the urban development that recognizes the continuous reproduction of contradictions as an opportunity for overlapping and merging confronted interests. The emergent urban structure will become the present form of expression for all future potentials.

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ARTICLE

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Orchestration of Markets and Bureaucratic Knowledge Production in the Moscow Transportation Reform

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Abstract

This article examines the role of bureaucracy in the process of reforming Moscow's transportation system. With reliance on the intellectual history of neoliberalism, the concept of "orchestration," an institutionalist economics, and an empirical case study, I argue that a market embodies itself in the form of bureaucracy. The agency in the provision of norms and regulations, calculations and forecasts, orders of economic exchange, and knowledge production concentrates in the hands of bureaucrats regardless of their formal attachment to state or private entities. Bureaucrats define fundamental issues of how markets should function; they design and control the system of money redistribution. The case of dismantling Moscow's trolleybus system provides fruitful data on the agency of bureaucracy in transportation reform under the label of implementing "best practice" scenarios favourable to a neoliberal toolkit.

Keywords

bureaucracy; Moscow; neoliberalism; transportation reform; trolleybus

1. Introduction

In the course of the last 10 years, Moscow has changed significantly. Huge financial resources reshaped the space in a similar manner to "best practices" seen worldwide. Such changes were particularly notable in the field of urban transportation. Restorations, adjustments, major infrastructure projects, and new and improved services were also accompanied by questionable tendencies. The reforms included dismantling the world's largest trolleybus system, contrary to the economistic arguments underlying this decision.

This article addresses the gap in the political economy of transportation by paying special attention to bureaucracy, its agency, influence on knowledge production, and ability to drive changes in a specific way.

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With attention to the “Veblen-Ayres” dichotomy, the framing of bureaucracy suggests a technological institute in its means, but a ceremonial one in its ends (De Gregori & Thompson, 1993). Essentially, bureaucracy shapes and controls the system of money redistribution by imposing ordinances and regulations for the market economy. The understanding of markets relies on the critical epistemology of neoliberalism (Beddeleem, 2020; Mirowski, 2009; Nick-Khah, 2017). It goes beyond a neoclassical stance towards the market as a universal mechanism of goods allocation via mediation of prices. Markets are information processors, and market relationships imply profit-seeking behaviour as a ruling principle for social life—not only economics as such. Monopolisation and depoliticisation of knowledge seem to be an empirical consequence of such a stance (Davies, 2018). These aspects are brought together by the concept of orchestration (Rindzevičiūtė, 2023). This suggests an analysis of knowledge production not only in terms of its epistemological specificity but as a multi-layered process with a number of participants. In systems with a variety of actors, communication between them must have a bureaucratic design sustained by clear definition on the redistribution of resources. Orchestration helps to analyse the system of neoliberal knowledge production together with decision-making processes. The analysis of Moscow’s transportation reforms supports the thesis that the market embodies itself in the form of bureaucracy.

At first glance, such an argument might seem controversial, because bureaucracies are usually perceived as being diametric to markets (Graeber, 2016). However, there is an extensive literature highlighting the merging between state and private entities (Bruff & Tansel, 2020; Cahill et al., 2018), and a long-standing critique from an institutionalist economics perspective on “corporate” means of governmentality favourable for market relationships—usually at the expense of real production (Galbraith, 1967; Veblen, 1923). There are also similarities between Veblen’s and Polanyi’s views on the predatory nature of capitalism, which correspond to each other not only in the light of the statute of the natural world (Luz & Fernandez, 2023) but suggest a similar view on the contribution of the state in shaping how business should be conducted. In short, bureaucracy represents an applied level of functioning of a market economy, in which the normativity and security of exchange co-create each other via paperwork and legal violence.

Bureaucracy functions as a system for distributing money, and ultimately shapes the direction of development (or stagnation) by allocating (or not) funds in specific spheres. Hence, lobbying is the adjustment of such a system to favour a particular company or industry. In other words, bureaucracies create demand, and in many cases celebrate the opportunity to satisfy such demand themselves. The argument does not claim general validity, but addresses only the specific case of Moscow’s transportation reforms since 2012. An empirical study shows how the import of “best practices” shaped the agenda for change, and how high-ranking bureaucrats first promoted a particular idea and then contributed to delivering the required goods and services. The presented research on the agency of change in transportation reform contributes to the existing literature on Moscow and the neoliberal production of space (Büdenbender & Zupan, 2017; Chertkovskaya & Paulsson, 2022; Golubchikov & Phelps, 2011; Trubina, 2020), and also aims to contribute to the discussion on mobility transformations (Nikolaeva et al., 2019; Schwanen, 2019). In the case of Moscow, the scope of transformations was shaped by the import of “best practices” namely substantial improvement of public transport services, pedestrianization of urban space, and highway construction. Such best practices were presumed to already be proven abroad, thereby circumventing a need to justify their effectiveness. Simultaneously, knowledge about the reforms was monopolised by directly subordinated scientific entities. A specific line of funding from the city budget financed scientific collection and analysis of transportation data but the knowledge was restricted in access.

The empirical study relies on annual reports published by the Moscow government, on budget execution, performance of transport strategy implementation, and transport company reports. Data on rolling stock purchases were also analysed. Media reports also provided valuable data sources. In addition, 20 online interviews were conducted with employees of transport companies, experts, municipal deputies, journalists, and bureaucrats.

The article is organised as follows: Section 2 aims to construct theoretical bridges linking neoliberal epistemology, orchestration, definitions of bureaucracy, and transportation. The argument is illustrated by a short introduction to the theory of traffic flow and cost–benefit analysis. Section 3 provides three empirical contradictions on the process of dismantling Moscow's trolleybus system, which invite speculation beyond exclusively economistic explanations. Scrutiny of the case shows how Moscow bureaucracy reorganises the distribution of transportation reform funds, helping to explain why the world's former largest trolleybus system received nothing from an enormous transportation budget.

2. Orchestration of Markets

2.1. Epistemology of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is not only a political project evident in "variegated" forms in different parts of the world (Peck et al., 2018); it is also a form of epistemological thought. The following argumentation relies on two contributions from critical analysis of the epistemology of neoliberal thought, based on the writings of the most prominent members of the Mont Pèlerin Society, a group of intellectuals who made significant contributions to the neoliberal project.

Firstly, a main feature of neoliberalism is the idea of a market as an "information processor" (Mirowski, 2009). The market is regarded as having a transcendent epistemological superiority unavailable to any individual mind, and therefore only the market is able to approximate "truth." Market relationships are deemed the most efficient and horizontal mechanism of generating valuable knowledge. Therefore, the economy is considered unmanageable by any governmental agency, and external efforts are subject to inefficiency, regardless of any scientific tools that might be available. The neoliberal epistemological stance postulates the uncertainty and immanent weakness of any human mind in comparison to the principles of the production of knowledge through market relationships (Mirowski, 2013).

Secondly, science becomes a "marketplace of ideas" (Nick-Khah, 2017) together with expertise and consultancy. It is therefore not only a way of organising research activities but a ruling principle for establishing objectivity. According to a neoliberal stance, "the rationality of science and the effectiveness of the market for goods and services were due to the same organisational principles" (Nick-Khah, 2017, p. 38). In a simplistic view, the marketplace of ideas implies that, for researchers, profit means a rational scientific outcome. As a consequence, market-favourable forms of science reject an egalitarian approach and provoke the emergence of "academic elites" in the process of knowledge production serving the interests of "patrons."

Neoliberal knowledge therefore has an internal distinction. Firstly, there is a basic assumption of market superiority that remains unquestioned. Later, this setting was termed "market fundamentalism," when even a Nobel Laureate in economics criticised the "religious" belief in markets (Stiglitz, 2009). Secondly, there is also

a "hegemonical" but "plural" knowledge (Plehwe & Schmelzer, 2015). "The neoliberal argument about the superiority of a market economy was predicated upon an epistemology which distinguished between spheres of lawful exact knowledge, and spheres where precise knowledge was impossible because it remained dispersed, tacit, and opaque" (Beddeleem, 2020, p. 33). This uncertainty is observable only at the level of competition between different scientific entities in their efforts to generate "truth" through entrepreneurial mechanisms of profit-seeking. This influenced the emergence of a variety of think tanks, expert, and consultant networks, as well as the reformation of universities. Many such entities successfully applied scientific methods to research and consulting services in ways compatible with neoliberalism.

Such an approach to science suggested the establishment of particular bureaucratic structures. Egle Rindzevičiūtė (2023, p. 7) introduces the concept of "orchestration" in epistemological research on forecasting in the USSR; the term "describes the process through which scientific knowledge, social order, and political government are co-produced through the creation of data-gathering apparatuses, design of new research objects and subjects, and enactment of new models order, both behavioural and institutional." The embeddedness of an expertise in the decision-making process is impossible without a specific bureaucratic ordinance. This is true not only in the USSR case, but for all governmental models if they demand scientific support. In other words, the demand for scientific scrutiny, administration, and decision-making was routinised through legislation, educational programmes, and governance itself. David Graeber (2016) argues that the growth of bureaucracy occurs under the motto of managing markets. Schematisation as a main characteristic of bureaucratic knowledge aims to eliminate or at least reduce uncertainty. This stance unites neoliberal epistemology and the bureaucrats' offers.

2.2. Transportation

Transportation provides a good example of how bureaucracy shapes the process of knowledge production. Infrastructural projects and service provision rely on forecasts of traffic and payback of investments. The justification for a highway system in the USA in the 1930s and 1950s suggested the introduction of empirical surveys, economic analysis, and eventually traffic forecasting to the governance of transportation projects (Seely, 1987). The field was organised around the application of methods from natural sciences that gave rise to mathematical theories of traffic flow (Kühne, 2011). Achievements in creating a so-called transportation science owed much to "generous financial support" from automobile manufacturers and airline companies (Miser, 1967, p. 51). This was a foundational step for the "predict and provide" principle, which dominated transportation policy in recent decades, under which projected demand is to be met by infrastructural provision (Owens, 1995).

Cost–benefit analysis is one of the most popular methods of assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of investment options (Jiang & Marggraf, 2021) and is well established is transportation projects (Mackie et al., 2014). It helps to forecast potential surpluses generated relative to the investment cost of infrastructure or service improvements and allows estimation of various parameters during a specified timeframe. The variables selected for cost–benefit analysis depend on the statistics and methods available for collecting and analysing data, and can therefore differ between locations and projects.

Cost–benefit analysis has been widely criticised (Beukers et al., 2012; Mouter, 2018), as has transportation science generally, namely in the application of traffic flow theory to modelling transportation flows

(Flyvbjerg et al., 2005; Kerner, 2013). Regardless of shortcomings and uncertainties, both approaches are strongly embedded in the decision-making process, at least in Western countries. Consequently, traffic and finance forecasts become an inevitable part of "best practice" decision-making, with one particular method monopolising the field of expertise, and creating inequalities in the availability of arguments in negotiations around projects.

The dominance of the "predict and provide" principle shows how negotiations between different interest groups were displaced by justifications from engineers and neoclassical economists (Brown, 2006). Experts, together with bureaucrats, orchestrated a technocratic approach to governance in transportation (Jessop, 2014). In that sense, technocracy means the addition of scientific support to legislation. Together with a marketplace of ideas, it correlates well with the argument that "power shifts further into networks of governance, audit and management, which operate outside the space designated as 'political' and 'democratic'" (Davies, 2018, p. 280). Such networks suggest specific bureaucratic relationships for decision-making and execution, established by norms and regulations, informal rules, and juridical laws—and, most importantly, not only design but coordinate the system of money redistribution. While an abstract "state" is in charge of organising abstract "markets," bureaucracy represents an applied level of such efforts, with practical implications for how business should be conducted. Market relationships have therefore become inherently bureaucratic.

2.3. Bureaucracy

In the case of Russia, during the turbulent 1990s, an authoritarian model was inherited. Subsequently, the distribution of resources and the prospects of further development have again concentrated in the hands of *apparatchiki*, high-level bureaucrats. In other words, in contemporary Russia, money does not give authority, but rather authority gives money (Ostrovsky, 2015). In a similar vein, Golubchikov and Phelps (2011, p. 434) argue for a "specific" but neoliberal "political-bureaucratic processes" in the "post-socialist local growth regime," while Kinossian and Morgan (2022, p. 655) show its evolution to "development strategies to serve the interests of the kleptocrat." Büdenbender and Zupan (2017) incorporate the spatial dimension, and argue for the difference in neoliberal policies imposed by different mayors in Moscow. Trubina (2020) follows the same empirical stance and focuses on uneven development as a consequence of a huge pedestrianisation project. In the field of transportation, Chertkovskaya and Paulsson (2022, p. 452) claim that the dismantling of Moscow's trolleybus system was intended to "fulfil objectives of urban growth and beautification." Consequently, the notion of bureaucratic contribution is already implicitly contained in the literature on Moscow's recent urban and transportation transformations. The difference is that it was not at the centre of previous analyses.

Building on the institutionalist "Veblen-Ayres dichotomy" on the distinction between technology and ceremony (De Gregori & Thompson, 1993), I propose the metaphor of bureaucracy as the infrastructure for transporting money. This differs from discussions in Marxist analysis, where an owner dominates in the process of setting an agenda, while bureaucracy has to serve its customer (Djilas, 1975; Mandel, 1992). It also goes beyond Max Weber's definition of an ideal type of rational management, free of favouritism and strictly bounded by rules (Weber, 1978). Reliance on the institutional framework supports Graeber's (2016) anthropological view on lopsided structures of imagination in hierarchically organised societies. Institutionalism also helps to shift the attention towards political economy—the way in which economic exchange is organised in the given historical and cultural context.

Ordinances and regulations pave the road between the origins of funds (namely the official budget) and its destination—namely infrastructures, vehicles, or services. The fact of funding shapes the field of bureaucratically framed responsibilities and determines the power available to holders of bureaucratic positions. Political issues are therefore interiorised within the hierarchical and multi-layered structure of governance, and policy becomes a discussion around the bureaucratic implementation of ideas. This leads to enormous control, such that solving transport-related problems becomes possible only at the bureaucratic level and by bureaucratic means. Interactions between different tiers suggest a set of ceremonial practices that inherently imply historical and cultural settings. Thereby, bureaucracy does not necessarily eliminate uncertainty. Instead, it facilitates it through regulation. Following the rules means the absence of questions. In that respect, bureaucracy is the technology of tackling uncertainty.

3. Moscow’s Transportation Reform

3.1. Introduction

During the 1990s, rapid expansion of private car ownership in Moscow influenced a classical car-oriented response by the city bureaucracy. Following the modest effectiveness of a new circular city highway opened in 2005, traffic congestion had become a major problem. A new mayor was appointed in 2010, who quickly took action. In 2011 a public debate took place, concerning a five-year strategy for developing Moscow’s transportation system (*Gosudarstevennaya programma goroda Moskvy “Razvitie transportnoy systemy”*; hereafter, GP). It was an ambitious plan to allocate more than one trillion roubles to transport infrastructure and services. In 10 years the city built kilometres of metro tunnels, rails, city highways, bus lanes, and sidewalks; renovated almost all public transport vehicles; introduced carsharing, an “Uber-ised” taxi service, a bike rental system, and a multi-modal single ticket; established paid parking together with “smart” hard- and software for counting flows of people and cars, as well as traffic rule violations; pedestrianised hundreds of streets and parks; and developed a new route network, introducing a new way of contracting private bus enterprises and life-cycle cost contracts (hereafter, LCC) for maintenance. Moscow indeed allocated enormous levels of funding compared with other Russian cities. High concentrations of industries and population allowed the city to fund projects from income taxes rather than loans. Federal money also supported various expenditures.

According to an investigative journalism report dedicated to the issue of budget execution in Moscow, in the course of 10 years, city bureaucracies implemented sophisticated techniques to allocate money flows in a particular manner (Proekt Media, 2020). Regardless of property ownership, the heads of contractor companies involved in this most costly of public projects were acquaintances, friends, or even relatives of the heads of public departments (Galaktionova et al., 2015; Golunov, 2015; Golunov & Deryabina, 2015; Golunov & Sunkina, 2014). The city hall organised so-called non-commercial entities, enabling them to bypass laws on public procurement (Proekt Media, 2020). Also, almost immediately after officially commencing implementation of the transport strategy, the head of the Department of Transportation (hereafter, Deptrans) was changed. The new departmental head was previously a shareholder in Transmashholding, a huge industrial facility manufacturing rolling stock and providing rail transportation services.

The distribution of money shows a very specific way of governing the transportation sector. The Department of Construction was assigned the largest budget share because it was tasked with

extending Metro (underground heavy rail) lines and road construction that together accounted for 70% of expenditure. The Department of Major Repairs pushed forward the extensive pedestrianisation project, receiving generous funding for its implementation, and was also responsible for highway and street maintenance. Paradoxically, Deptrans does not oversee transport infrastructure, but rather manages the system being constructed by other bureaucratic entities. Between 2012 and 2020 the annual share of Deptrans in the official budget for transport improvements never exceeded 7%. In reality, it received more because the purchase of Metro vehicles had another funding line separate from the budget for strategy implementation.

The two biggest expense items for Deptrans were vehicle updates and subsidies for its Metro and Mosgortrans (surface public transportation) subsidiaries. In 2014, the introduction of the LCC was piloted in the Metro, then steadily introduced to all urban public transport. Under this system, the producer must deliver a vehicle and maintain it for a specified period. Previous approach suggested that the operator company maintains vehicles. LCC reduces the budget of the subsidiary companies and transfers the money to the producer, but significantly increases the cost of the contract. In the course of the transportation reforms, numerous manufacturers bid for contracts. Ultimately, however, LCC contracts were awarded to Metrovagonmash (a long-established partner of Moscow Metro, owned by Transmashholding) which became the second-largest contractor for the city government, flanked by highway and construction companies (Proekt Media, 2020). During the transportation reforms the demand from Moscow fuelled the development of a company to produce a new, high-tech train model.

At the start of the reform, Mosgortrans had almost the same structure as in 1990. It was a huge entity, operating thousands of trams, trolleybuses, and diesel buses, facilities for fleet overhaul and maintenance of electrical equipment, educational facilities, and even a planning department. Under the reform process, the company steadily lost its power, influence, skills, as well as real estate assets, until in 2023 it only operated diesel and battery-electric buses (hereafter, e-buses). According to the abovementioned beneficiaries report, Mosgortrans "helped" bus producer KAMAZ to join the club of the Moscow government's largest contractors (Proekt Media, 2020). Since 2018, KAMAZ delivered more than 2,000 diesel buses and more than 1,000 e-buses. In 2023 Moscow had almost 1,400 e-buses in operation; this comprises the largest such fleet in Europe, and is a matter of municipal pride and the subject of PR campaigns. Official statements focused on substitution of old trolleybuses by new battery-based technology for buses. In 2012 Moscow had the world's largest trolleybus network, comprising almost 1,700 vehicles, 500 km of overhead wires, 89 routes, and numerous depots around the city. However, the trolleybus system was subsequently reduced to 400 vehicles on six routes, and operations ceased entirely in August 2020.

3.2. Three Controversies Concerning Trolleybus Dismantlement

In 2012, the delivery of new trolleybuses proceeded according to the five-year GP, under which more than 300 vehicles were renovated annually. In 2013, the head of Mosgortrans was changed, and fleet purchases subsequently stalled. De-jure, the transport operator tried to update the fleet. The company published numerous tenders, but de-facto no manufacturers applied: "For some reason they decided to have a trolleybus built in the unified bodyshell with a diesel bus. It was a questionable contract with unreal goals" (Automotive journalist).

In 2014, Transmashholding became the largest shareholder in a newly founded industrial venture, "Transportation Systems" (Proizvostvennoe Ob'edinenie "Transportnye systemy"; hereafter, PKTS). PKTS owned a patent on a low-floor tram bogie, but lacked industrial facilities. They built a new model in 2016 and two months later won a contract from Mosgortrans for 300 new low-floor trams. Also, shortly after the deal, the company invested in the development of a new trolleybus despite it being an entirely new field for them. According to interviews, a new trolleybus was produced to satisfy the demand of large cities. PKTS built a test vehicle in 2015 and serial production started five years later. Since the interests of Transmashholding were supported by the head of Deptrans, they wanted to meet the demand rather than close the trolleybus system.

In 2016, the head of Mosgortrans explained the delay in updating the trolleybus fleet by referencing the low quality of new vehicles and the high cost of operating the existing fleet, triggering a fierce public debate. A few days later, employees of an operator company published an open letter criticising the arguments. During the year, numerous protests and civil campaigns occurred, opposing the prospect of discontinuing the trolleybuses. Subsequently, in 2017, the city purchased 42 new vehicles: "Officials did it as a distraction and succeeded. We indeed calmed down after that" (Activist and former employee of Mosgortrans).

Protests in support of the trolleybuses started in 2016 after an official statement that their overhead wires spoiled the outlook of a city centre and should therefore be removed during the pedestrianisation projects. The second controversy surrounding the dismantlement is the inconsistency of activities related to overhead wires. Initial cuts occurred in 2014, after the renovation of two central streets. By 2016, the pedestrianisation project covered 52 streets, of which only some received new overhead wires and only some trolleybus routes were relaunched. The most mysterious example was the reinstatement of wires on the central ring road Sadovoe Koltso, together with a new and complex junction, but without restoration of a trolleybus service. The Department of Major Repairs was in charge of all bureaucratic procedures for funding allocation, planning, purchasing spare parts, contracting, and accepting the result related to the installation of overhead wires. This task was not exclusive to the responsible department; however, inconsistencies in this activity highlight the lack of confidence and unclear setting of tasks. The same uncertainty was observable at the level of Mosgortrans: "One year before the closure of the network, 50% of the overhead wires had been updated" (Former employee of Mosgortrans' infrastructure maintenance service).

The third controversy concerning loss of the trolleybuses was the absence of lobbying efforts from e-bus producers. In 2016, numerous manufacturers delivered e-buses to Moscow for testing:

> We tested lots of e-buses in different weather conditions. We had a clear understanding of what kind of vehicle it is. We calculated numbers and defined the niche for this transport in accordance with the technical conditions in Moscow. Our suggestions were not considered at all. (Former employee of Mosgortrans' operation department)

After testing e-buses, Mosgortrans developed a technical specification, and after numerous iterations only Russian LiAZ and KAMAZ diesel bus producers participated in the tender. Both producers had almost no experience with electrical transportation, and both had only a couple of test vehicles equipped with batteries. In early 2018, both manufacturers won identical contracts for the first 100 e-buses and 31 charging stations. Both had to maintain the fleet on the LCC basis. This was not a situation in which pre-existing, tested, and

developed technology was promoted through lobbying efforts, but rather the inverse situation in which the city insisted on a new vehicle and adjusted its vision to the abilities of selected manufacturers. None of the domestic trolleybus manufacturers joined the emerging market for providing e-buses.

A comparison between the industries reveals major differences. LiAZ is owned by an oligarch, and the state-owned military-oriented Rostech holds the largest share of KAMAZ, whereas trolleybus manufacturers are small entities owned by local industrial groups (except PKTS, owned by Transmashholding). The capacity of diesel bus factories was much higher than in the domestic trolleybus industry. Quality might indeed be an issue, and LCC obligations may be seen as too expensive to meet with the resources available to small companies (interview with transport journalist). Eventually, the life cycle cost per e-bus was 20% higher than a trolleybus across 12 years of operation (Frolov, 2020).

The three controversies summarised above highlight the limitations of an exclusively economistic justification for dismantling Moscow's trolleybuses. From the first view, the discontinuation of fleet renovation under the motto of poor quality started almost simultaneously with Transmashholding's efforts to develop a new vehicle. Then, the head of Mosgortrans publicly criticised the supposedly high cost of trolleybus operations, while his colleagues allocated funds for e-buses that proved significantly more expensive than the existing trolleybus system. Other bureaucratic entities, namely Mosgortrans and the Department of Major Repairs, put effort into renovating and reinstating overhead wires, only for the system to be reduced and then closed shortly after. Consequently, the contributions of Deptrans as well as the Department of Major Repairs in the process of discontinuation are questionable. Given the city's strong insistence on expanding the use of e-buses, it appears that the major lobbyist was the city administration. Furthermore, the status of the GP is also uncertain.

Strategic documents contain nothing on either the discontinuation of trolleybus services nor the introduction of e-buses, pedestrianisation projects, new routes, "smart" software, or carsharing. Some performance indicators were even rewritten numerous times in the course of the reforms. This is not a unique case of such biases in planning. For instance, plans from 1999 suggested extending the trolleybus network to each corner of the city, and in 2005 a new city ring road was opened but had not featured in the 1999 plans. Consequently, it appears that any vision framed in planning documents is not set in stone, and that subsequent actions do not necessarily reflect such plans, often resulting in rather short implementation processes.

Above all, in 2011, the office of the new mayor published the *Moscow Mayor's Comprehensive Plan for Solving Problems in the Moscow Transportation Hub* (*Kompleksnyi plan mera Moskvy po resheniyu problem Moskovskogo transpornogo uzla*) that proposed, amongst other measures, dismantling the trolleybus network in the city centre. Contrary to this statement, the GP published six months later proposed renewing the fleet by more than 300 vehicles per year. Therefore, the contribution of expertise to the process of knowledge production is also worth considering, after purely economistic arguments face the empirical challenge.

3.3. Bureaucratic Knowledge Production

At the start of the Moscow transportation reforms, the McKinsey & Company management consultancy contributed much to the knowledge of strategic issues among Deptrans and its subsidiaries. There are also numerous examples in which consultants left McKinsey to join the management of Deptrans. Some research

entities within Deptrans subsidiaries were then restored. A planning entity, Mostransproekt, joined the consultancy and planning services sector, while Centr Organisatzii Dorojnogo Dvijenia (Centre for Traffic Management) received substantial funding for traffic flow analysis, modelling, traffic violation control, and even road assistance services in the city. Under the reform, both entities significantly changed their structure, scope, and competences. Both also gathered much data that was not made available to the general public. Knowledge production was monopolised by the government, and only in very rare cases did public opponents find opportunities to discuss the performance of the reform. Other departments involved in delivering the transport reforms did the same. The Department of Major Repairs financed Strelka bureau for the development of a building code for pedestrianisation projects, while the Department of Construction supported its own scientific planning entity, called Institut Genplana (Moscow General Planning Research and Project Institute).

Furthermore, all performance metrics for the transportation system were represented primarily as percentage changes compared with previous years. In other words, exact numbers on traffic accidents, fleet renovations, average speeds, parking turnover, or even modal split were simply unavailable in official reports. Deptrans allocated funds to Mostransproekt for developing and testing autonomous driving technology (!) but did not fund the scrutiny of local issues. The budget spent trillions of roubles to solve road congestions but did not include assessment metrics. Planning and implementation of a new bus route network in the city centre took six months. A local politician (interview) stated that they spent three years negotiating with Deptrans for a new bus stop in the district. The construction sector is not an exemption. A good illustration is the Kalininsko–Solntsevskaya Metro line, which was extended by more than 30 km in the course of the reforms, but a 6-km long connection between the eastern and western parts is still absent.

Aside from subsidiary scientific entities, academic research centres also received research grants. They conducted empirical measurements of performance and also delivered knowledge about best practices. Following reassignment of the Moscow Urban Forum from its initial organisers to the city administration, it was promoted as the largest international conference on urbanisation issues, and delivered many fresh ideas in transportation and urban planning. The media also contributed substantially to the image of a technocratic city administration, purportedly recognised at the international level and well informed about recent trends: “Everything in Moscow is about PR” (transport journalist).

A former Deptrans project manager (during the interview he insisted that he was a project manager and not a bureaucrat or official) stated that surveys were conducted to justify prior decisions rather than to set the agenda for their work. The contribution of expertise mainly consisted of adjusting best practices to Moscow’s legal, administrative, and engineering specificities. This was intended to highlight measures that had already proven effective elsewhere. The set of solutions for solving traffic congestion is indeed a matter of bureaucratic reproduction. In other words, the Moscow transportation reform is an emulation of a “good” transportation policies observable in the biggest cities worldwide. Regardless of formal attachments to privately or publicly owned companies, the requirements identified for these policies were satisfied by acquaintances, friends, or even relatives of departmental bureaucrats. In the case of Deptrans, for instance, Transmashholding contributed to renovating rolling stock for Metro, tram, and heavy urban–suburban trains, and provided private bus and urban–suburban rail services. Funding from Moscow’s transportation budget fuelled technical developments and helped to expand to previously unavailable markets of diesel bus operation, as well as tram and trolleybus production.

Since expertise made little real contribution to the reform agenda, the decision-making process seemed to be short-term and rather voluntaristic in essence. Heads of departments in the city administration had to compete with each other for resources according to their areas of responsibility, and had to devise many pre-prepared suggestions concerning the subsequent implementations before meeting with each other. The pace and direction of the reform were thereby set during meetings in the mayor's conference room.

Formal and informal responsibilities enabled the mayor to play a key role in shaping the reform agenda. Ultimately, the mayor had the last word on investment decisions, by approving funding allocations to specific sectors. Simultaneously, the opposite tendency also occurred: some sectors were under-funded due to sabotage, technological aversion, or a lack of lobbying. Local pro-Western experts claimed that a trolleybus system was outdated, unpromising, doomed, and represented a Soviet (Blinkin & Vorobyev, 2016) form of urban transport, but the current Western focus on cycling infrastructure and light rail also received only modest funding. Such funding gaps reflect administrative responses within the bureaucracy, their internal analysis of efforts, and outcomes for the implementation of a specific technology. The mayor, however, did not play a neutral role, having both his own agenda and responding to those of his deputies. Moreover, the mayor had the greatest political weight in the negotiation processes, and was therefore able to progress almost all proposals that he found promising. The mayor's imagination was not limited by attachment to businesses that served the government. In that respect, the dismantling of the world's largest trolleybus system was a voluntaristic take by an individual whose primacy in a bureaucratic hierarchy allowed the exercise of almost unrestricted power:

> No one in the mayor's entourage has heard a clear reason for the decision. Only memoirs will bring light to the issue. Perhaps, at some point, they truly believed that e-buses could solve all problems, and—inspired by the idea—they stopped providing any explanations. (Head of an industrial enterprise)

4. Conclusion

Neoliberal orchestration of transportation in Moscow mainly comprises the set of governmental adjustments. All improvements and shortcomings in the course of the reform suggest the flow of funds towards a particular destination point. Expertise also received an additional "stop" in the system of redistributing transport funding, and had automatically become valuable. Experts were paid for their loyalty and for positive PR outcomes, but not for establishing an agenda during the discussion on local issues. In the case of Moscow, expert contributions did not shape a well-informed policy reflecting needs, but adjusted best practices to city's specificities. The need for analytical skills emerged, however, after fundamental decisions were already made. At the stage of setting the agenda, the scientific support—paradoxically—did not require scientific scrutiny. Consequently, the neoliberal orchestration of the transport system suggested mutual persuasion. One might deliver knowledge that is scientific in form but astrological in content (Rindzevičiūtė, 2023), while others pretend that it has value. This spectacle highlights that knowledge about transport is fundamentally bureaucratic.

Policy proposals (being taken from a "best practice" list) did not require justification, since their effectiveness was supposedly already demonstrated abroad. Subordinated "scientific elites" helped their "patrons" to form the list of available solutions. The agenda for reforming Moscow's transportation system was generated in bureaucratic circles, proposed by high-ranking officials in their competition for resources with each other. Thus,

a market relationship was shaped in the process of negotiations for change; and simultaneously, such meetings set the preliminary bureaucratic framework for implementation. Knowledge and information were thereby locked within the circles of bureaucrats who first defined the areas for investment, established the mechanisms of bureaucratic ordinance to finance them, and then delivered a supply to satisfy the demand. A "marketplace of ideas" could therefore even be very accurately located to the conference room of the mayor's office. In this process, the mayor represents the higher level of the "information processor" in having the last word in the negotiations around ideas, and had sufficient power to insist on his own agenda. His position in the hierarchy, and ceremonies accompanying it, allowed him almost unrestricted power.

In light of this observation, the discontinuation of the trolleybus system means the cessation of the constant money supply by the power of ceremonies: There was simply no option to say "NO." In the authoritarian context of the reform process, orchestration by voluntaristic decision-making is highly feasible. It allows rapid change, while blocking any unintended activity claimed by parties outside the bureaucracy.

The three controversies show the limitations of exclusively economistic explanations for the discontinuation of the trolleybus system, and bring attention to the politics of decision-making. Politics in that sense is a discussion concerning bureaucratic means of reaching a goal. Ceremonies around a particular position reflect the incumbent's personal power. The orchestration of Moscow's transportation reforms suggests redistribution of bureaucratically appropriated information and establishment of a hierarchy of responsibilities and power that streamline (or block) flows of funding in particular directions. Since the market is the information processor, the only agent that managed the information in the Moscow transportation system was the bureaucracy. The case shows how experts helped to depoliticise knowledge, strengthen the power of bureaucracies to shape agendas, and set the pace of reforms; how high-ranking bureaucrats established and controlled the system of money redistribution by first generating demand and then satisfying it with the help of business associates, friends, and relatives; and how accompanying ceremonies allow almost unrestricted power in pushing forward any favoured ideas.

Transportation improvements in Moscow under neoliberal conditions suggested specific choices without a diversity of options. Orchestration of the market has led to planning that—paradoxically—takes over the emancipatory claim of the brightest thinkers of the Mont Pèlerin Society, and erases the distinction between political, economic, and bureaucratic.

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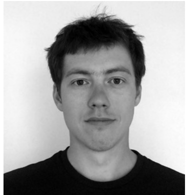

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ARTICLE

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Transforming Public Spaces in Post-Socialist China's Danwei Neighbourhoods: The Third Dormitory of the Party Committee of Shandong Province

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Abstract

The urban residential pattern in China experienced two significant transitions during the second half of the 20th century. The first happened in the 1960s, based on the Soviet model, when a large-scale community model was built led by government enterprises and institutions under a planned economy; the second was in 1998 when the real estate market-led socialised community model emerged after the reform of commercial housing. The former is characterised by the integration of supervisory units, service units, and property owners: Residents enjoy the right to use the residences and supporting services provided by their affiliated institutions, while for the latter case, supervisory units, service units, and property owners are separate. New conflicts have been found in Danwei neighbourhoods with the housing commercialisation reform. This research focuses on the Third Dormitory of the Party Committee of Shandong Province as a case study to analyse the transformation of public space in the Danwei neighbourhood during the post-socialist era. Through archival research, interviews, and observation, this research has found that two forces that celebrate marketisation by the new residents and resist marketisation by the original residents coexist in the Third Dormitory. Unregulated spatial practices have resulted from the incomplete control of the owners of public space by the provincial government office. This research offers an example of public space transformations in Danwei neighbourhoods, which have undergone incomplete marketisation. The reflections on the Third Dormitory provide references for future neighbourhood management and policy-making.

Keywords

China; economic transition; neighbourhood public space; post-socialism; property marketisation; spatial transformation

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1. Introduction

Residence patterns in China have undergone two phases of change during the second half of the 20th century. In the first phase, the large-scale construction of work units started in the 1960s, following the Soviet model. In the second phase, clusters of housing estates led by the real estate market emerged after the reform of commercial housing (Fei, 2012). A work unit (Danwei) is a type of social unit in China which refers to most enterprises, institutions, or government organs during the planned economy era (Lu, 2006). Work units also own, manage, and provide services for housing estates constructed by the work units. The residents have the right to live in the housing estates and use the services provided by work units, and the work units manage them due to their relations or their immediate families' ties to these work units. The spatial structures of the housing estates and resource allocation methods produced by the patterns of the first phase have encountered a series of challenges since the launch of housing commercialisation reform. On the premise of keeping the basic building layout unchanged, new needs and conflicts emerged because housing estate management gradually transformed into a market-oriented pattern.

The market reform of the urban living environment in China has been uneven. Research on the changes in China's living environment before and after the reform has focused primarily on first tier and new first tier cities. These studies have often centred on compounds associated with production, research, and educational work units (M. Zhang et al., 2021). This research focuses on "micro districts," which refers to self-contained residential districts typically covering an area of 75–125 acres and accommodating a population ranging from 5,000 to 15,000 (Bater, 1980, as cited in Lu, 2006, p. 35; Sawers, 1978, as cited in Lu, 2006, p. 35). This study diverges from the typical focus by examining a residential district originally built during the planned economy period in the second tier.

In the selected area, the planned economy characteristics were retained; the marketisation of the living environment and the transition of the residential district from complete collective ownership to private ownership have not been completed. The research aims to gain insights into the impact of neoliberalism on China's real estate reform process. Specifically, it seeks to identify the principal challenges encountered during the reform of residential district development.

1.1. Research Context

This research is a case study of the Third Dormitory of the Party Committee of Shandong Province (TDPCSP). It is situated in the city of Jinan, a second tier city in China. As the capital city of Shandong Province, Jinan is the headquarters of the Shandong Provincial Government Offices. Since the 1950s, multiple public welfare housing communities have been built for provincial government offices. The property rights of the houses and supporting facilities belong to the work unit, and residents can select the houses and supporting facilities according to their positions in the work units. TDPCSP was first built in the 1960s, divided into two courtyards with Wei Yi Road as the boundary. By the 1990s, 15 residential buildings were built in different periods (Figure 1).

The research site occupies an area smaller than a typical neighbourhood. This smaller size results from the smaller workforce within party and government administrative bodies compared to typical enterprises and institutions. During the planned economy era, it was more convenient to establish residential communities

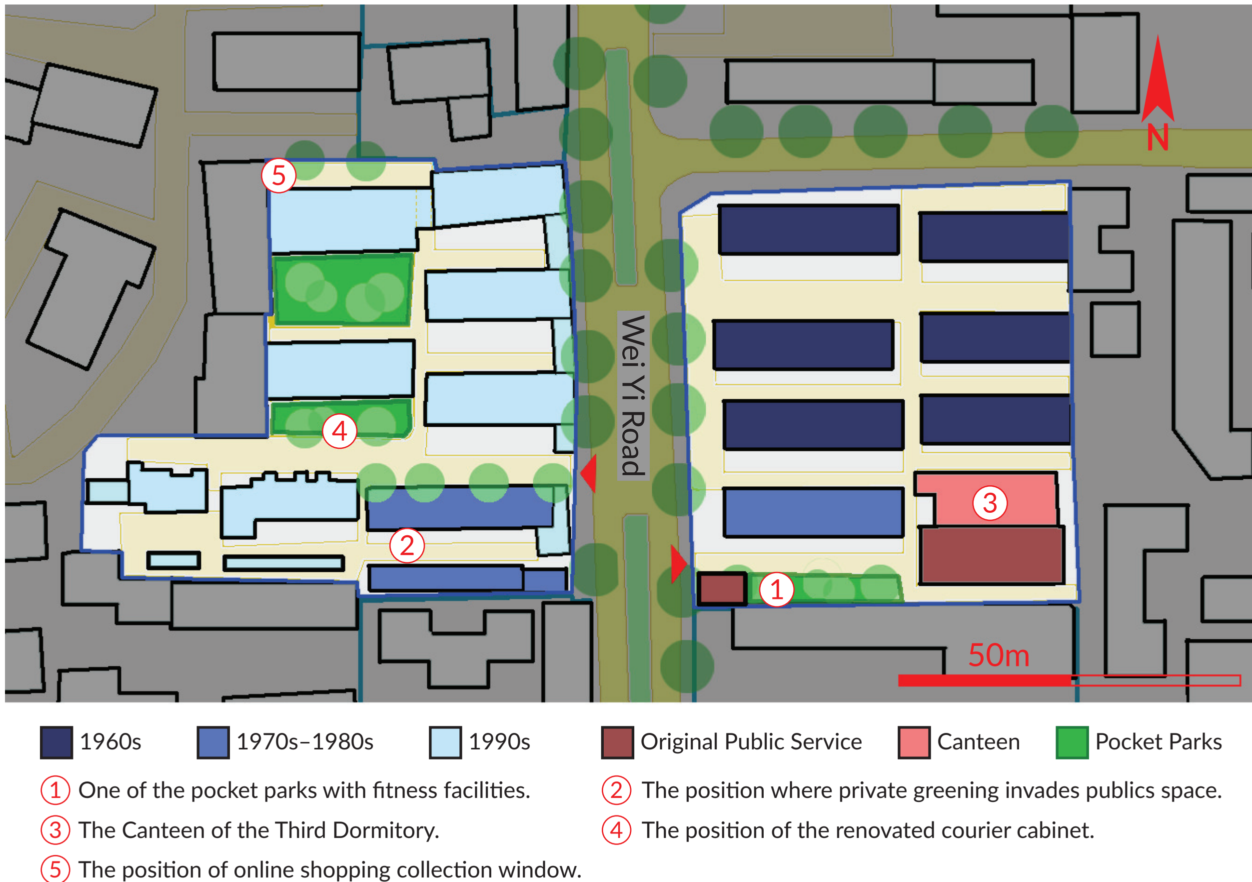

Figure 1. Residential area plan.

characterised by single property ownership and streamlined management. Consequently, the ownership structure of public spaces within this context was relatively less influenced by market dynamics at the policy level. Policy changes primarily focused on advancing housing property rights and property services reforms without introducing further policies aimed at market-oriented sales or leasing of spaces and land within the community. Furthermore, due to the community's smaller scale, residential buildings and public space planning were used efficiently from the outset. As a result, there was insufficient room for large-scale reconstruction, and only small-scale changes were made.

In 1997, Shandong Province launched a housing monetisation reform plan (Shandong Provincial People's Government, 1997). TDPCSP also completed housing monetisation and marketisation reforms in 2001 (Shandong Provincial Government Housing Committee, 2001). From 2001 to 2010, the original management and service subjects, the Party Committee and work unit, successively reduced and cancelled their service functions. In 2014, socialised property services were introduced, and from 2020, the renovation and updating of residential areas were fully integrated with the municipal management system of Jinan. Usually, in the planned economy era in residential areas of other units and provincial government agencies, residents are subordinate to their respective work units, and various public services are directly provided by their respective units. In the marketisation of community property rights and management systems, the reform of property rights of residential houses and public spaces in residential areas of general enterprises and public institutions is carried out simultaneously. The marketisation of property rights of public spaces in residential

areas accompanies housing privatisation (M. Zhang et al., 2021). However, the privatisation and market-oriented reform of residential property rights of TDPCSP did not drive the reform of public space property rights in residential areas. In the era of the market economy, provincial government agencies that should have withdrawn from community service functions did not give up public space property rights, including community roads and public facilities, and only trusted them to conduct service functions by signing agreements with third party service companies. Also, employees of the original provincial government agencies have transferred their private property rights through the market. As a result, multiple groups, including provincial government agencies, newly introduced municipal services and market-oriented property services, residents who were employees of the original provincial government agencies, and new residents entering the community through the market, all play important roles in the transformation of public space in the residential area (Figure 2). The incompleteness of this property rights reform is a common phenomenon in the residential areas of Shandong's provincial government offices; it has resulted in conflicts between the remaining characteristics of a planned economy and the residents' need for commercial services. These conflicts led to the transformation of public space.

To summarise, this research attempts to understand the transformation of public space within a residential area constructed during the planned economy era. It examines how these spaces evolved due to market economy reforms and shifts in housing property rights managed by multiple parties. Conflicts have emerged between the residents and management parties. By unveiling the transformation of public space in residential areas, this research attempts to answer the following research question: How did the negotiation of the multiple parts induce the transformation of the public space within the Chinese Danwei neighbourhood during the post-socialist period in North China? By answering this question, it is possible to

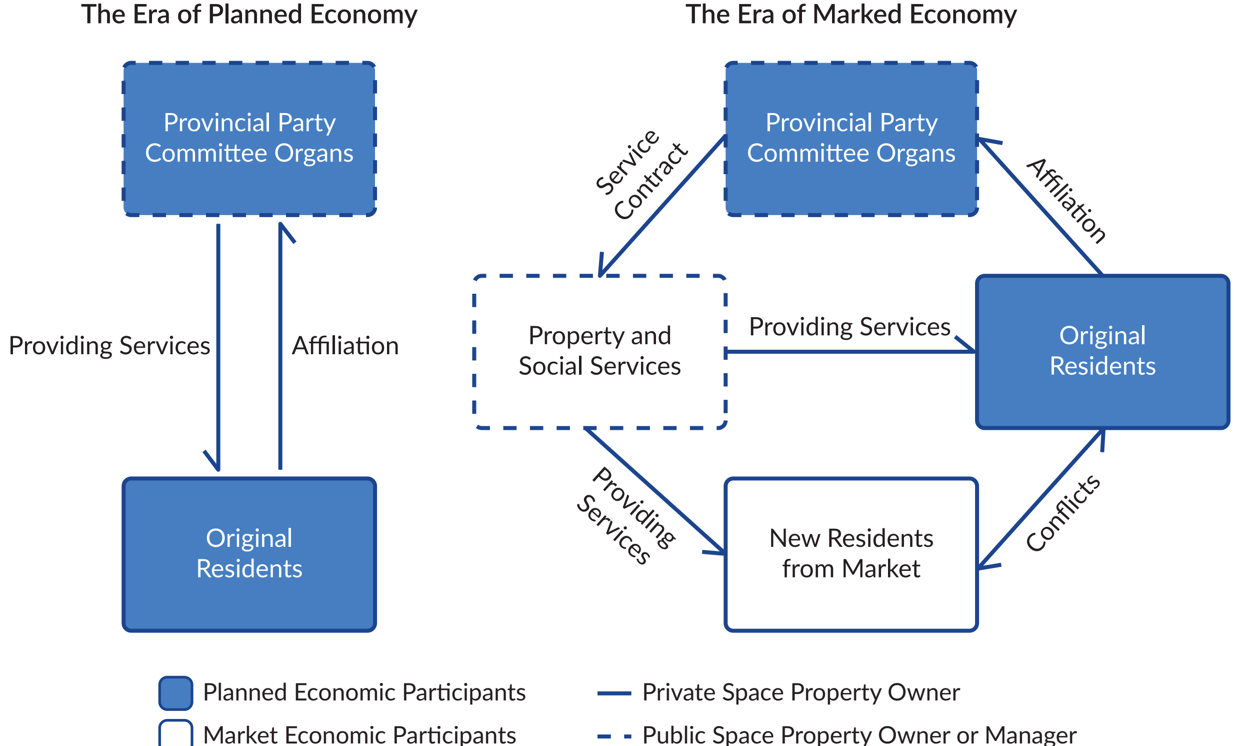

Figure 2. Relations between main participants before and after the marketisation of the residential area.

understand better the development of Chinese neighbourhoods, distinct from cases in Western and Central Eastern Europe.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Neoliberalism and Post-Socialism

According to Harvey (2007, p. 2), neoliberalism is “a theory of political, economic practices” related to private property rights and free markets. Anthropologists understand neoliberalism from two perspectives: “As a structural force that affects people’s life chances and as an ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities” (Ganti, 2014, p. 89). Similarly, Madra and Adaman (2014) think that depoliticisation through economisation is a common feature of various neoliberal approaches. Based on competition, neoliberalism tends to lead to socio-spatial polarisation and the involvement of global actors such as the World Bank (Larner, 2003). In terms of China, whether the Chinese political economy is neoliberal remains a common research question; the economy in China is considered a mixed economy with some attempts at neoliberal reforms rather than the complete application of neoliberalism (Weber, 2018).

In contrast, post-socialism is a form of society (Chelcea & Druţă, 2016). Traditionally, post-socialism is a spatio-temporal concept: It refers to the transition in privatisation, marketisation, and democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989/1991 (Tuvikene, 2016). Capitalism and democracy are inevitable results of post-socialism (Pickles, 2010). One significant change in these post-socialist cities is that they returned to the capitalist system’s economic relations (Ferenčuhová & Gentile, 2017). The urban planning of post-socialist cities experienced the transition from state-led to market-led (Tuvikene, 2016). However, Tuvikene (2016) argues that the post-socialism concept should not be restricted by a specific period or region; rather, it should be regarded as a condition that has induced city changes. This is because both socialist and post-socialist cities might share some elements, so it is difficult to divide the socialist and post-socialist cities (Tuvikene, 2016). Discussions on cities’ transformation are opened and enlarged by regarding post-socialism as a condition. The term “post-socialism” itself means catching up with the Western world (Tuvikene, 2016). More specifically, studies on the post-socialist world tend to regard the Western world as dominant but underestimate the special histories and geographies of the post-socialist countries, treating them as states that need to catch up with the Western world. As a result, Western knowledge has received more attention in the field of knowledge production than the local knowledge garnered from post-socialist countries (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008; Timár, 2004).

On the one hand, regarding the special incomplete neoliberalism and its social effectivity in China, the research on TDPCSP offers a detailed example to investigate the spatial transformation under the social changes. On the other, the investigation on TDPCSP supplements our knowledge of the transforming public space of the Chinese Danwei neighbourhood in the post-socialist countries.

2.2. Transformation of the Chinese Danwei Neighbourhood

The transformation of Chinese residential communities in the post-socialist era has been a complex process, marked by significant changes in their spatial and social characteristics. The reform of housing property rights has played an important role in transforming residential communities. China’s urban housing system

has undergone significant reform from allocating housing to obtaining housing through the market; marketisation and commercialisation are the goals of the transition (Meng et al., 2004). Homeownership in China includes full, partial, and minor ownership with different security and liquidity (Cheng et al., 2016). TDPCSP is a typical community that has undergone housing reform but is different to communities where the whole area is commercialised, in which the public space of TDPCSP still belongs to the provincial government agencies.

M. Zhang et al. (2021) focus on property rights redistribution and disordered spatial use to show how the vaguely defined institutional and proprietary order can result in messy spatial outcomes. They suggest that a new contract should be considered to regulate the spatial use of residents and property management companies (M. Zhang et al., 2021). Although it is currently in the post-socialist era, as can be seen in the above cases, many changes are happening in the Danwei communities; Wang (2022) has found that the continuing presence of Danwei still plays an important role in community governance. Neighbourhoods and work units both provide an essential basis for social support and urban governance (Wang, 2022).

From a different perspective, C. Zhang and Chai (2014) present the spatial changes from gated to un-gated Danwei communities to demonstrate that the Chinese community's spatial transformation is unique and different from the spatial changes in Central and East European countries. Similarly, Wielander (2023) also focuses on the walls of Chinese Danwei, but her approach is to read the changes on the walls and understand the changes in Chinese society through these changes. It is inspiring that Wielander (2023) thinks the walls play a role in physical and social boundaries, as the walls differentiate people inside and outside the Danwei regarding welfare and citizenship rights.

Overall, the Danwei neighbourhoods play an important part in Chinese cities regarding their social influence because of the different social welfare and rights of people inside and outside the Danwei. The Danwei neighbourhoods are also important because they still occupy a large area of the Chinese urban space (Wang, 2022). However, the transformation of property rights and land use rights needs to be revised, resulting in many unregulated space-use behaviours. So, it is important—a matter of urgency—to understand the conflicts of power relations in the transformation process. The case of the TDPCSP provides an opportunity to reveal the interactions of multiple parts behind the spatial changes.

2.3. Public Space in China

It has been widely reported that "public space" in the Chinese context is relatively special. Qian (2019) thinks that it cannot be regarded as a place of civic agency separate from the state; rather, public space in China tends to be influenced by state rationales and elites. Similarly, Flock and Breitung (2016, p. 167) state that public space is usually used to demonstrate the success of the reform, with descriptions such as "spiritual civilisation" and "harmonious society." Miao (2011) argues that public space in China tends to ignore actual civic life but functions instead as a tool to satisfy the goals of the government, investors, and designers. Ho (2020) critically assesses the discourse within the academic community concerning the definition of public space, highlighting its predominant focus on the function design of the official space. The allocation and utilisation of public space, according to Ho (2020), Deng et al. (2015), and Hagenbjörk (2011), are primarily dictated by urban authorities and professionals in a top-down manner.

3. Methodology

The research question was contextualised within the Chinese public space of residential neighbourhoods by exploring existing studies on the effects of planned economy models and market-oriented reforms on urban residential communities.

Case studies have been instrumental in examining issues within Chinese communities. Chung (2021) and Q. Zhang (2020) focused on the impact of redevelopment and sustainability, respectively. Liu and He (2017) delved into socio-spatial differentiation and the heterogeneity of poor neighbourhoods, while Forrest and Yip (2007) explored social interactions and changing tendencies within these areas. Gao et al. (2019) and Jayne and Leung (2014) took a different approach, investigating the impact of the neighbourhood environment on the health and well-being of older Chinese immigrants and the role of embodied urban geographies in understanding urban life in China.

Drawing on George and Bennett's (2005) insights, the effectiveness of case studies in assessing causative processes, fostering new hypotheses, achieving high conceptual validity, and addressing causal complexity in specific instances was acknowledged. For example, Chung (2021) specifically used state-led neighbourhood redevelopment in Guangzhou as a case study to illustrate the relationship between spatial change and state intervention in social and economic processes in China. From a similar perspective to linked changes in space and society, this research selected TDPCSP as a case study due to its significance in representing transitions in urban residential patterns.

This study distinguishes itself from a line of studies in China's first-tier international cities by choosing a case study representative of typical second tier cities in North China—a Danwei residential neighbourhood. This case is situated amid the change process in a socialist community under the impact of a market economy, contributing a wealth of detail and data to the study. Through ongoing data collection and collation by the researcher, who has lived in the community for over 30 years, a comprehensive case study is provided to inform other studies.

Initially, we procured archival data, documents, and records from the local Archive Centre and the Government Affairs Disclosure website, seeking information related to the historical development of the community. The collected documents underwent organisation and digitisation. Between October 2021 and July 2023, we conducted in-depth interviews with 35 long-term residents, three representatives from the owners' committee, two property managers, two real estate managers, and two relevant stakeholders who were former participants in the policy-making process of the housing reform policy under study.

During the interviews, we focused on obtaining supplemental pre-2018 details related to the community property rights reform and community space utilisation from the residents. Our goal was to understand the primary demands and contradictions concerning residents' current utilisation of community public space in both new and old communities. We also sought insights from the owners' committee representatives to comprehend the evolution of the commissioning relationship between property owners and the Shandong Provincial Committee (Danwei originally owned the property). Additionally, we aimed to understand the challenges encountered in community management and the principles guiding their resolution from the property managers. Insights into the current demand and supply situation of community housing in the

property market, turnover rates, and the impact of the property market on community space utilisation were gathered from the real estate managers. Participants in the policy-making process obtained information about crucial points in the history of the 1997–2003 housing ownership reform relevant to our community. These interviews provided qualitative data on their experiences and perceptions of the transitions.

Residing within the neighbourhood, the leading researcher conducted systematic observations. His observations commenced in 1998, utilising his life experiences as initial observation data. When the research formally began, observations occurred twice daily—once in the morning and once in the evening—from 2018 to 2023. The areas observed included the community entrance, internal roads, parking lots, public green spaces, spaces in front of houses, express delivery locations, commercial group-buying windows, and the community canteen. Statistics on the number of people using the space per unit of time, the distribution of space usage during the observation period, and the development and upgrade of space facilities were documented. 1,200 photographs were taken, complemented by 200 video recordings, and 800 research notes were compiled. The documentation aimed to capture changes in the spatial layout of the community and the service milieu over three decades, with strict adherence to ethical considerations related to the confidentiality and consent of interviewees to ensure responsible data use.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes and patterns in the narratives of residents and stakeholders. The research identified correlations between observed changes in spatial layout and the service milieu, shifts in supervisory and service units, and property ownership. These findings were subsequently compared with broader cases identified in the literature review.

4. Three Key Findings

4.1. The Reform of Housing Property Rights and the Phenomenon of Spatial Differentiation

The construction of public residential areas in the planned economy era was gradual, as shown in Figure 1. The construction period of public housing in the same residential area reached several decades. Among them were brick and concrete residential buildings constructed from the 1960s to the 1980s. Although these buildings are significantly different from buildings constructed in the 1990s, the composition of residents during this period was relatively homogeneous and conflicts in public space utilisation were not prominent. This was because, before the 1997 housing reform, all residents or their direct family members in the same residential building belonged to the same institution or department in the same unit. The application and management of construction were carried out according to the internal departments of the institution. In this case, the neighbourhood relationship of residents was an extension of the working relationship, and the distribution of interests, conflicts, and disputes could be coordinated and handled by the work units in accordance with corresponding rules and regulations.

Since 1997, the policies introduced by the Shandong Provincial Government have paved the way for the privatisation of residential property rights in provincial government agencies. Since then, the People's Government of Shandong Province have successively launched a series of policies and notices to improve the housing reform of provincial government agencies. The Management Measures for the Listing and Trading of Public Housing Purchased by Provincial Government Offices in Shandong Province issued in 2003 clearly defined and recognised the secondary sales and rental behaviour of public housing listed by

provincial government offices after the monetisation reform. Community housing in China, as represented by the subjects of this study, has been reformed to take on the characteristics of privatisation and marketisation characteristic of neoliberalism. However, the policies that have driven this change have still been initiated from the top down.

In addition, TDPCSP is located near the office of the government. It enjoys the best educational resources in Jinan: It is in the school district of kindergartens and primary schools with high education quality and within the 15-minute walking circle of first class middle and high schools in Shandong Province. Since 2003, the market supply and demand of residential properties in this community has shown high growth. Although the identities of people who could buy the flats in TDPCSP are limited as employees and close relatives of state-owned offices, enterprises, and institutions, there is a lack of actual restriction on their identities. Especially since the marketisation of property services in 2015, with the intervention of socialised housing intermediary companies, residents within the community are no longer limited to provincial government staff or their close relatives, and the composition of resident identity has become increasingly complex. New residents who enter through market transactions no longer have a subordinate relationship with the residential area's original provincial government supervisory unit.

The housing property rights policy has led to the privatisation reform of public-owned housing constructed in the planned economy era and made housing enter the market. Based on housing quality, age, and school district, the market revalued the residential buildings. As a result, residents of different economic statuses and social classes are selected. The houses that can smoothly enter the real estate market for trading are mainly residential buildings built after the 1990s, which are relatively new and suitable for modern life. The interviews to the properties found that new residents are mostly driven by school-aged children going to school to purchase houses. After the children graduated from school, almost all houses were re-listed for trading, with sufficient market liquidity. However, other houses in the same community are relatively old and inconvenient to use, and the proportion of new immigrants was generally less than 30%. This housing market mobility with neoliberal characteristics still stems from the mismatch between the value and price of housing brought about by the unbalanced allocation of public resources in society during the planned economy era.

According to the leading author's observation, the marketisation of housing property rights has led to conflicts between the original residents of old houses that the market and the new residents with high requirements for quaity of requirements for quality of life have not favoured. According to Li and Huang (2006), the influx of new residents can lead to a two-tier urban society. These conflicts mainly erupt in the public space area at the intersection of old houses built before the 1990s and homes built after the 1990s, reflected in the ownership of public space use rights and their spatial use methods. New residents who settle in through real estate market transactions generally belong to the middle class, and the proportion of private car ownership, its requirements for residential quality, and the public attributes of community public spaces are relatively high. This is mainly reflected in the increased frequency of housing decoration and the demand for community parking and leisure space. At the same time, elderly housing owners who find it difficult to enter the real estate trading market are mainly middle-aged and retired cadres from former provincial government agencies. They generally have high requirements for community privacy, noise control, and the daily use of public spaces. The noise pollution caused by decoration and the changes in the quality and utilisation of public space caused by the driving and parking of motor vehicles within the community have become the focal points of conflicts between the two. The phenomenon of residents occupying public space to park scrapped motor vehicles,

placing private greenery, stacking personal belongings, and even setting up private roadblocks is common in surrounding communities and streets centred around old residential buildings. The above phenomenon originates from the conditions where former residents, mainly employees of provincial government agencies, used public space and private space property rights to integrate and have unclear boundaries in the planned economy era. By occupying public space near one's residence, the old residents attempted to preserve these space rights inconsistent with the market-oriented private space property rights.

Meanwhile, the public space in TDPCSP is mainly roads, and the space for third-party management agencies, such as property management, to coordinate conflicts is limited. Thus, these conflicts cannot be resolved entirely in a short period. Only after the renovation project of old residential areas launched in Jinan in 2020 was the problem of private occupation of public space in residential areas partly solved. The resistance to the privatisation and marketisation of community housing thus also comes from the original residents of the community who are deeply tied to the workplace of the planned economy and whose vested interests are infringed upon by the neoliberal character of community change.

The changes in the Provincial Party Committee's three dormitories in the post-socialist era, represented by the privatisation and marketisation of housing, have evident neoliberal characteristics. However, whether it is in the policy sources of change, the role of public resources in rediscovering the value of housing, or the resistance of the original residents based on the defence of their vested interests, neoliberal influences in community change are inevitably subject to various kinds of resistance.

4.2. Changes in Supervisory Units and Community Renovation

From 1997 to 2020, the completion of the housing property rights reform in TDPCSP brought about the diversification of community residents' identities and promoted the transfer of responsibilities. At the same time, the property rights of public roads, public gardens, and welfare supporting facilities in residential areas still belong to the Shandong Provincial Government when the document was completed in 2023, and nominally also belong to the provincial government's management. The reform of public space property rights in residential areas has lagged. This contradiction between the ownership and use rights of public space has become a significant feature of the market-oriented impact faced by provincial government units in residential areas with a strong characteristic of the planned economy era.

Before the 1997 housing reform, the management department for TDPCSP was the Shandong Provincial Government Affairs Management Bureau, and it managed all affairs of the community. After the housing reform in 2001, this unified management model was limited to managing public space property rights and daily maintenance of community facilities. Various elements related to the residents' lives were gradually integrated into the municipal management. Although this process did not involve the direct participation of the market, the shift of part of the management power from the workplace to the society is still an important mark of the post-socialist period that distinguishes it from the era of the planned economy.

Since 2015, Jinan has renovated many pocket parks and fitness squares with public welfare attributes in the campaign to create a healthy and civilised city. During this period, TDPCSP was also renovated and upgraded with some greenery and additions according to municipal standards (pocket park with fitness facilities in Figure 1; Figure 3). The public space of municipal-led residential areas had spatial characteristics

similar to that of urban streets public spaces, such as concentrated layout, small scale, and open boundaries. However, because the property rights of the public space in the residential area still belonged to the provincial government, and the residential area was still under closed management, the upgraded community pocket park added by the municipal department was only used by internal personnel in the community. The usage efficiency was much lower than the pocket park connecting the municipal streets. Attributing property rights to public spaces has become a major resistance to integrating community spaces into the city.

Since 2020, the city of Jinan has implemented renovation measures for old residential areas (The Departments of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of Jinan, 2020), enhancing the internal road accessibility, wall decoration, and lighting in these areas. This has effectively levelled the differentiated spatial quality and transportation convenience based on the varying construction years of residential buildings. The initiative positively contributes to integrating the internal space of residential areas into the urban space (Figure 4). Preceding the housing reform, the management department of the residential area, where residents worked, resulted in unclear boundaries between private and public spaces, with residents occupying much of the public space. Post housing reform, the municipal-led community renovation project cleared private facilities and items from public spaces, establishing clearer boundaries between public spaces owned by work unit collectives and privately owned spaces with distinct property rights (private greening invading public space in Figure 1; Figure 5). Since then, the municipal sector's involvement in community management and spatial remediation has replaced the work unit's role. Although the situation cannot be completely described as neoliberalism, it reveals the characteristics of neoliberalism.

4.3. Marketisation of Supporting Services and Logical Reset of Residential Space

Since 2003, because of the urbanisation process in China, the proportion of the Chinese economy's service industry has been increasing yearly (P. Zhang & Nan, 2018). In the planned economy era, various supporting services such as catering, health, education, entertainment, and so on provided by work units have emerged

Figure 3. Pocket Park with fitness facilities.

Figure 4. Before (a) and after (b) renovation.

Figure 5. Private greening invading public space.

as more market-oriented alternatives in the development process of cities. At the same time, various work units in the planned economy era have successively reduced or cancelled the welfare mentioned above services based on their new positioning and economic benefits changes in the market economy environment (Lu, 2006), so the changes have affected the use of public spaces in residential areas. This has provided the possibility and necessity for introducing market-oriented property services into the residential areas of provincial government agencies.

The welfare housing community, formerly owned by the Shandong Provincial Government, operates within a planned economy framework. Despite the gradual elimination of most welfare services, the community's marketization process exhibits a prolonged duration and minimal changes in the facility property rights compared to other residential areas tied to production, scientific research, or educational units. This stability arises from the provincial government's unified management of public space and facility property rights. Preceding the 1997 housing reform, the community boasted a comprehensive set of welfare-oriented service facilities, including a collective cafeteria, bathhouse, barber salon, theatre, milk station, snack bar,

and drinking hot water station. These facilities, planned and constructed uniformly by provincial authorities, held property rights.

Post the 2001 housing reform, facilities like bathhouses, theatres, milk stations, snack bars, and hot water stations were discontinued due to high market maturity and operating costs. In 2019, hot water services for bathing were halted, and public canteens were outsourced, primarily catering to provincial government office staff. The government reclaimed all supporting service building facilities except the public cafeteria for functions unrelated to residents' daily lives, such as offices and storage. This shift in social services development accompanied workplaces' gradual relinquishment of service functions, easing the financial burden and creating space for market intervention to optimise service functions. The social attributes of affiliated or adjacent public spaces linked to these service facilities were also lost (the canteen of the Third Dormitory in Figure 1; Figure 6).

As welfare facilities in residential areas face elimination, residents' demand for property services is shifting towards third party providers in the market. Since 2015, the Shandong Provincial Government Service Centre has implemented market-oriented property management by introducing property companies through social bidding. The property owner's provincial government reclaimed the original welfare facilities space for alternative purposes. Property services have made minor adjustments to the internal public space of the community within the existing road system. The original centralised garbage collection station was replaced with multiple collection points along community roads and residential buildings, maintained regularly by property management personnel. This has enhanced hygiene levels near the original garbage collection station. Parcel and takeaway food collection points, initially near the residential area entrance, were prone to issues like lost packages. The introduction of third party delivery cabinets in the community garden temporarily resolved these problems (Figure 7). Market-driven property services have notably increased the efficiency of public space utilisation, offering the community a more diverse and flexible range of services by opening up the market to third party providers.

Figure 6. The Canteen of the Third Residential Area.

Figure 7. Before (a) and after (b) the renovation of the courier cabinet.

Figure 8. Online shopping collection window.

In 2016, the rise of the domestic internet economy introduced community group buying services, a platform offering fresh food information and shopping services. However, the TDPCSP did not adopt these services because government work units retain property rights over public spaces. The small scale of TDPCSP also made group buying services less profitable. Nonetheless, during the Covid-19 pandemic, intermittent closures significantly affected residents' lives. The Leshan Street Community, an adjacent residential area, opened a service window at the boundary buildings, connecting TDPCSP to third-party group buying services (Figure 8). This window, maintained since then, is positioned at the end of the internal road, enhancing public interaction and altering the community's spatial structure, reducing publicness from the entrance to the inner part (online shopping collection window in Figure 1).

In short, the marketisation of TDPCSP's community services has allowed former workplaces to relinquish their service functions and space for market-based services to intervene in the community. However, this has not affected the rights of work units to public space and public facilities, and the influence of neoliberalism in community public space has only touched on the right of use, with no impact on ownership.

5. Discussion

5.1. Characteristics of Community Spatial Transformation in Post-Socialist China

C. Zhang and Chai (2014) argue that China's community spatial transformation in the post-socialist era differs from the phenomenon of community decline in Eastern Europe. The evolution of communities in China's post-socialist era, represented by the studies of C. Zhang and Chai (2014) and Wang (2022), presents two different outcomes. The former research shows that urban public resources are fully integrated into communities under market economy conditions after the decline of community-owned units. The original community management system based on units is gradually giving way to urban authorities represented by neighbourhood committees. The latter shows an entirely different evolutionary model from neoliberalism. The work units still possessed high-quality social resources and strengthened their management and services to the community. Thus, the socialist spatial characteristics of the community remained.

The TDPCSP in the post-socialist period is affected by marketisation through the redistribution of social resources and by resistance to marketisation by the provincial government office. This ambiguity of its position has led to the process of evolution from socialism to post-socialism, and it is an important sample for the study of the evolution of the processes and mechanisms by which social change with neoliberal overtones affects this type of community.

5.2. The Dynamics of Community Transformation in China

The transformation of Chinese communities under the influence of the market economy came later than in Central and Eastern European countries. The privatisation of housing property rights created the conditions for houses to present their value in the market. The socialist era's living pattern was that people working in the same working unit lived in the same area. This pattern was gradually replaced by the pattern that people with the same consumption capacity and social class live in the same areas. This change provided an opportunity to change the work unit led neighbourhoods produced during the socialist era (M. Zhang et al., 2021).

In addition, with the rapid development of the marketisation process in China (P. Zhang & Nan, 2018), the services originally provided by work units have been divided and provided by different organisations. Services that were unsuitable for the market economy were cancelled, while social resources, including schools, hospitals, and public transport hubs, have endowed the nearby neighbourhoods with market values that were not presented during the socialist era. These changes have further accelerated the process of integrating these neighbourhoods into the marketised areas and reflecting a clear neoliberal bias.

As presented above, TDPCSP completed the housing property rights reform and became eligible for sales. As the TDPCSP own high-quality educational resources, the flat prices are higher than average in the city of Jinan, and the flats have high market liquidity. The high flat prices and market liquidity induced constant changes in residents in the neighbourhood.

5.3. Governance of Communal Public Space in the Chinese Context

Public space in the Chinese context tends to be produced top-down (Qian, 2019). The logic of spatial production can also be found in Danwei neighbourhoods, such as TDPCSP. Although the marketisation of

home ownership and public social resources has brought new residents and the new residents brought new needs to the neighbourhood, the management institutions are still usually the urban authorities (Bray, 2005). The study by Chung (2021) argues that the Chinese government constantly involves itself in socio-economic development, and as a result, the country's spatial transformation and the changes in social classes are inconsistent.

In the case of TDPCSP, the property owner is the highest level Party Committee in Shandong Province. Although the Party Committee does not directly manage the neighbourhood, it is still influential in the management of the neighbourhood. The functions of the Party Committee include decisions on closing the neighbourhood, renovating facilities, and choosing property management companies. This management model suggests that in the evolution of China's post-socialist communities represented by the TDPCSP, the former workplace, which still plays the role of a management agency, is the leading actor resisting the neoliberalisation of the community and that the legitimacy of this tendency to resist comes from the workplace's property rights over the community's public space and its ancillary facilities that have not yet been privatised and marketised.

6. Conclusion

Since the late 20th century, housing property marketisation has been critical in the Chinese economic transition. During this process, neighbourhood services were also commercialised, and the high-end services unsuitable for some communities have been cancelled while some new services have emerged. This is a result of the redistribution of resources in the market economy.

This research has presented and analysed how public spaces within the neighbourhood have changed under the transition of the economy in a governmental Danwei neighbourhood. This research reflects power relations from three perspectives: (a) the diversification of urban housing property ownership causing spatial differentiation, (b) the changes of management subject causing the renewal of community public space, and (c) the market management mechanism influencing the proposition of residential supporting spaces. Due to the special status of provincial government units, the affiliated residential areas built during the planned economy era have been relatively sluggish in market-oriented reform due to the top-down policy reform. This case study explained Chinese communities' incomplete transition to neoliberalism during the post-socialist period. However, new demands and services generated in a bottom-up way during housing market-oriented reform in residential areas continued to develop. The fundamental reasons for the various community conflicts are the unchanged public space property rights caused by this policy lag and the changes in public space utilisation caused by the promotion of practice.

In this research, the provincial office still owns and functions as the management of the public space in TDPCSP; at the same time, the emergence of the market economy has brought new residents to the Danwei neighbourhood. With different identities, purposes, and spatial appropriation habits from the original residents, the residential dynamics reformed by the original and incoming residents have produced public spaces with new characteristics. The phenomena indicate the question: How have the community public spaces been made and changed during the economic transition? In the case of the Communist Party Committee Dormitory, the usage rights of public spaces have remained unclear, which has caused disorder in the appropriation of these spaces. The management of community public spaces has been separated from

the unified ownership-management body of the Danwei to the social service and property services. The induced services partially meet the needs of residents. However, the conflicts between the inconsistency of the ownership and management remain. Although the remaining original residents prefer that all the residents are from the same work unit, the arrival of new residents brought by the market economy is inevitable. How to balance the needs of the closure and opening of the neighbourhood should be considered, and it can provide solutions for Chinese neighbourhood development which differ from those adopted in Western or Central Eastern European cities.

In China, the distribution of market-oriented residential residents and supporting service facilities is less influenced by race and religion. Still, it is largely influenced by the location and resources of the city, resulting in a phenomenon of income and class-based differentiation (Sun & Wu, 2009). In the planned economy era, workplaces and courtyards attempted to achieve residential equity by allocating flats to people from particular working units. In residential areas like TDPCSP, during the market economy reform, the interests and powers of multiple parts intertwined in the process. Conflicts inevitably emerged due to the lagging reform of public space property rights. However, these conflicts did not hinder the new management, new services, and new residents, who constantly changed the community's public space. TDPCSP provides an ideal example to investigate the communities under the conflicts of reflecting neoliberal market economy tendencies vs. resisting neoliberal planned economy elements. Although limited in the number of cases examined, this constraint allows for a detailed and thorough examination of the selected case. This research offers an example to understand the role of neoliberalism during the spatial transformation and can contribute to future policy-making on the marketisation reforms of similar communities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Decentralization in Ukraine: Reorganizing Core–Periphery Relations?

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Abstract

This article seeks to determine whether (and how) Ukraine's Decentralization Reform is reorganizing core-periphery relations. Involving a profound rescaling and reterritorialization of the nation-state, the reform is widely considered one of the most transformational policies of the three decades of the country's independence and is credited with fostering local self-governance and motivating resistance in the war with Russia. However, such emancipatory ideals promoted by Western institutions and reflected in urbanist literature are contradicted by ongoing economic restructuring—austerity, privatization, and deregulation—where the devolvement of responsibility has placed Ukrainian localities into the competitive environment of place entrepreneurialism. The article outlines how the Decentralization Reform's attempts to address uneven geographical development are instead reproducing unevenness across local, national, and global scales and advancing the (re)production of neoliberal capitalist space. The global philanthropic project of rebuilding Ukrainian cities in the face of imperial war is intensifying this dynamic, making Ukrainian (sub)urban space an important site for exploring alternatives within and beyond the post-Soviet condition.

Keywords

core–periphery relations; decentralization; place entrepreneurialism; Ukraine; uneven geographical development

1. Introduction

Decentralization is a key topic in the study of urban transformations and state–society relations in the former Soviet bloc. As an ideal widely promoted by international development organizations, it emphasizes the need for local self-governance in political, administrative, and fiscal processes to correct spatial inequality arising

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from the dismantlement of a redistributive state. In practice, decentralization reforms have contributed to a significant rescaling of the nation-state that re-implicated (sub)urban space in the transition from centrally planned to neoliberal market economies in new ways.

In its early years, at least, the Soviet Union tried (but failed) to abolish disparities between the city and the countryside (Crawford, 2022), leaving behind inherited landscapes of inequality after its collapse. Today, the neoliberalized, rescaled nation-state no longer even attempts to address such uneven geographical development. Rather, it (re)produces the crises necessary for global capitalist accumulation to continue and prevail over the local scale (Brenner, 2004; Harvey, 1989; N. Smith, 2002). Place entrepreneurialism, which emphasizes making localities more attractive for external investment in a coercive environment of inter-urban competition rather than developing redistributive projects to improve living conditions (Harvey, 1989), has become the dominant spatial strategy in post-Soviet space. Related urban civic boosterism legitimizes austerity in the name of decentralization and is linked to the differentiated paths post-Soviet cities and their respective nations will walk to the promised European, Western future.

This argumentative essay seeks to determine whether (and how) Ukraine's Decentralization Reform is reorganizing core–periphery relations. It does so through analysis of academic and grey literature on the reform. The productive processes of the reform implementation are foregrounded over cultural aspects (e.g., issues of local identity). Therefore, to examine this transformation of statehood within the geographies of contemporary capitalism, I draw on Marxist geographical theories of uneven development (Harvey, 1982/2018; N. Smith, 1984/2008) and the new political economy of scale (Brenner, 2004; Swyngedouw, 1997), which understands scales of organization and action as social constructs and processes with interconnections and interdependencies. Sensitive to the discussions about where the Eastern European experience fits within the urban theory of the "Global Northwest" and the "Global Southeast" (Bernt et al., 2015; Ferenčuhová & Gentile, 2016; Müller, 2019; Tuvikene, 2016; Yiftachel, 2006), this investigation thinks relationally and comparatively in/of common struggles of the urban question (Hae & Song, 2019; Kipfer, 2022). I also loosely draw from Golubchikov's (2017) "urbanization of transition," which is concerned with the ideological aspects of "post-socialist" urban transformations and their global implications. At heart, the article is inspired by an insistence that studies from the periphery are necessary for understanding the core (Keil, 2018; Soja, 1989/2011).

The article begins by delving into the intersecting concepts of decentralization, uneven geographical development, and place entrepreneurialism, setting the stage for a brief history of Ukraine's Decentralization Reform. It then organizes the Ukrainian Decentralization Reform's socio-spatial consequences into three interlocking scales. The first captures the relationship between the city and countryside, including suburbanization as the globally dominant capitalist production of space, empirically demonstrated in "post-socialist" contexts (Hirt, 2006; Stanilov & Sykora, 2014) like Ukraine (Gnatiuk, 2017). The second scale considers the reorganization of governance between the local and national levels to address Ukraine's "regional problem." The third scale examines Ukrainian urban space and its global positionality, that is, in relation to Europe and the West and in the geopolitical context of imperial war and dynamic rebuilding processes. Throughout, I demonstrate how the Decentralization Reform's political, administrative, and fiscal processes centered on place entrepreneurialism have contradictorily centralized power and capital in all of these interlocking scales of territorialization.

2. Decentralizing Post-Soviet Space and Uneven Geographical Development

The sharp turn towards neoliberal free-market policy has inevitably led to dramatic socio-economic and spatial outcomes across post-Soviet space. This historical context offers unique insights into class formation and inequality associated with capitalist urban development (Cybriwsky, 2016; Ghodsee & Orenstein, 2021; Lancione, 2022; Logan, 2019), state-society relations and governance (Baća, 2021; Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2021; Rekhviashvili, 2022; Vorbrugg, 2015), and questions of welfare and social reproduction (Cook, 2011; Lyubchenko, 2023; A. Smith, 2007). Decentralization of power, the devolving of state economic and spatial planning to local authorities (under laws of "local self-governance"), has been a major factor alongside the transfer of land ownership from the state to private hands (Hirt & Kovachev, 2015; Stanilov & Sykora, 2014). Like neoliberal restructuring elsewhere, the process has not been matched with a transfer of institutional and financial capacities. The additional lack of local-level expertise in addressing the spatial needs of a radically changing society, including the introduction of inter-urban/regional competition, has led to ad hoc approval of private developments and, overall, highly fragmented patterns of development (Stanilov & Sykora, 2014).

Observations of various processes of decentralization in the post-Soviet context reinforce the connection made between the capitalist production of space and suburbanization (Hirt, 2006; Stanilov & Sykora, 2014), a global phenomenon motivated by the pursuit of the expanded reproduction of capital (Ekers et al., 2015). Subsumed under "planetary urbanization" (Brenner & Schmid, 2011/2014), the post-Soviet city is part of an increasingly worldwide condition, where spaces beyond what is traditionally understood as the city core or suburban periphery have become integral parts of the urban fabric. Gentrification as a "global urban strategy" (N. Smith, 2002), the consummate expression of neoliberal urbanism, plays a pivotal role in replacing the state's earlier functions of social reproduction with the production of the financialized real estate sector.

Indeed, in the contemporary moment of neoliberalization, urban and regional policy has rescaled and transformed the state from a managerial intermediary to promoting territorial competitiveness, or place entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). This also redefined and, in fact, inverted the national state's role as mediator of uneven geographical development: "It is no longer capital that is to be molded into the (territorially integrated) geography of state space, but state space that is to be molded into the (territorially differentiated) geography of capital" (Brenner, 2004, p. 16). Therefore, the task of state spatial intervention (national, regional, local) is no longer to alleviate but to intensify uneven geographical development in order to strengthen place-based assets for global competition. The spatial unevenness is produced through the contradictory development of capitalism: the simultaneous dialectical tendencies of differentiation (i.e., the social construction of borders, scales, or "spatial fixity") and equalization (i.e., the universalization of the wage–labor relation, expressed most clearly by the market and circulation process; Harvey, 1982/2018; N. Smith, 1984/2008; Soja, 1989/2011). Thus, to overcome economic crises or the consequences of spatial fixity, capital "jumps" to new places, as the two tendencies will never reconcile. A form of spatial fix, place entrepreneurialism is developed through various projects and initiatives to attract mobile capital. In practice, it entails market-friendly policies of deregulation, such as lower business taxes, investment into the aesthetic of the built environment, and branding a local identity. Its centerpiece is the public-private partnership, where the public takes on risk for the benefit of the private sector (Harvey, 1989).

In post-Soviet decentralization processes, such competitiveness has become necessary for regions and localities forced to replace earlier universal state investment arrangements. Importantly, the politically

seductive aspect of place entrepreneurialism is that it suggests an increase in local autonomy. For instance, the reduction in state spending often correlates with a rise in civic boosterism that attempts to privately fill gaps under the guise of communality (Harvey, 1997). Suggested notions of collaboration and cooperation among public actors, businesses, residents, and other localities are contradicted by the requirements of inter-urban competition to continue the circulation and accumulation of capital.

3. Decentralizing Ukraine

In the 1990s (i.e., the chaotic "shock therapy" period), decentralization reforms were a contentious issue in Ukraine, largely due to the threat they posed to regional powers. There were concerns that unrestrained regional power would lead to separatism in the Eastern Donbas region and Crimea (Leitch, 2016). In 1994, the Association of Ukrainian Cities was established by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to eventually become the most powerful NGO and lobby representing and advocating for the interests of Ukrainian local governance (Platforma, 2023). The Association of Ukrainian Cities was empowered by the 1996 Constitution and 1997 State Law on Local Self-Government. It also collaborated with the World Bank, USAID, and the UK's Department for International Development to support the 2000 Budget Code Reform (i.e., fiscal decentralization), which demarcated 176 cities of oblast (regional) significance (COSs), based largely on the legacy of Soviet territorialization. These urban centers enjoyed closer relationships with the national government through an increased share of tax revenue and, subsequently, saw the related development of local elite patronage networks (Leitch, 2016). According to the 2014–2020 State Regional Development Strategy, regional disparities were also heightened (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2014a).

The country's official Decentralization Reform took hold in 2014 with the adoption of the Concept of the Reform of Local Government and Territorial Organization of Power (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014a) following the pro-European "Maidan" nationalist protests centered in the capital, Kyiv. That year also saw the Russian annexation of Crimea, which catalyzed a war with Russian-backed separatists in the Eastern Donbas region—a key turning point in Ukraine's history. In light of this, the "self-organization" of Maidan protestors (Channell-Justice, 2022) served as inspiration for establishing a national project of decentralization. Its new rationales and priorities went beyond getting closer to Europe and the West to also include resisting the insurgent Donbas and Russian demands for federalization. By weakening oblast (regional) and rayon (subregional) powers, the reform was positioned as a means of preserving national territorial integrity. Thus, from the outset, decentralization in post-Soviet Ukraine was directly linked to the ultimate expression of uneven geographical development—war (Lenin, 1917/2021; N. Smith, 1984/2008). The weight of Ukraine's position as a borderland between imperialisms (Ishchenko & Yurchenko, 2019) was placed on the local level of governance under the guise of "empowerment."

In a broad sense, the Decentralization Reform has entailed a public-private partnership between the state and Western donors and NGOs (e.g., USAID, EU's Ukraine–Local Empowerment, Accountability and Development Programme, and the UN Development Programme). Its strategic aims have included social and economic development to address inadequate infrastructure through "competitiveness" (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2014b)—place entrepreneurialism. This has been achieved through a profound rescaling and simultaneous reterritorialization of governance, guided by laws such as the Law on Cooperation of Territorial Communities (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014b) and the Law on Voluntary

Amalgamation of Territorial Communities (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2015). Amalgamated territorial communities (ATCs) were created based on the COS model—Approximately 12,000 villages were re-formed into 1,469 ATCs over two stages. The first stage (2014–2019) involved amalgamation through "voluntary association" with incentives (i.e., 60% of income tax revenue and bonus subsidies from the national government). Government-controlled agricultural land was also transferred from rayons to ATCs. Villages that did not voluntarily join amalgamations were denied benefits and lost 25% of their income tax revenue. The second stage saw the forced amalgamation of the remaining localities (approximately one-third of all ATCs) and the consolidation of 490 rayons into 136 larger ones (Piddubnyi et al., 2022).

In the plethora of Ukrainian scholarship supporting the reform, decentralization is often understood to entail a reconfiguration of the state, not a linear retreat or expansion. As defined by Skrypniuk (2015, p. 23):

> Decentralization is a form of democracy that enables the preservation of the state and its institutions while allowing for the expansion of local self-governance. It activates the population to ensure their own needs and interests and broadens the sphere of the state's influence on society. This replaces state influence with self-regulating mechanisms produced by society itself, and by reducing state spending as well as taxation for the maintenance of the state apparatus.

In this definition, the increase in local self-governance also correlates with the reduction of state spending, typical of neoliberal restructuring. Proponents such as Chepel (2015) looked to the experiences of other European countries, including Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Poland, Czechia, Estonia, and France, to cite benefits of decentralization, such as "the removal of excessive obstacles to business and entrepreneurship," a "transparent investment climate," "financial independence," and the ability to "more effectively address issues locally" (pp. 38–39).

Today, Ukraine's Decentralization Reform is widely celebrated for its reallocation of public resources to empower local governance and withstand crises. It is also credited with fostering the horizontal voluntarism that has offered invaluable wartime resistance to the brutal Russian invasion, which began in February 2022 (Brik & Brick Murtazashvili, 2022; Movchan, 2022; Romanova, 2022; Romanova & Umland, 2023). Decentralization and local self-governance have also taken center stage in discourses on rebuilding damaged cities and villages and how this largely private effort can be institutionalized to further reshape state-society relations (Dulko, 2023; OECD, 2022; Ukrainian Urban Forum, 2023).

Critique of the implementation of decentralization largely remains sympathetic to the cause, normally advocating for stronger regulatory mechanisms to avoid misinterpretation of the reform (cf. Chepel, 2015; Dudley, 2019). However, recent studies reveal deeper issues. Bader's (2020) investigation, for example, exposes how local elites have exploited the reform to further personal or special interests at the expense of the public good. Dolan-Evans (2023) extends this argument, suggesting that decentralization processes in politics, administration, and finance contribute to increased inequalities and empower oligarchic influence, complicating the idea of a grassroots rebuilding effort.

Despite these challenges, advocates like Romanova and Umland (2023) argue that decentralization's overarching promise, especially in the context of the Russian invasion, lies in the active reorganization of core-periphery relations. This perspective finds support in recent Ukrainian urbanist literature, which sees

the Decentralization Reform—specifically local self-governance and public–private–community cooperation—as necessary for just urban development, resisting the control of private developers and promoting Ukrainian-led planning over global influences (Dronova et al., 2021; Hrynkevych et al., 2021; Nesterenko, 2022; Ro3kvit Urban Coalition for Ukraine, 2023). However, Ukrainian urban studies' largely post-structural approach (presumably to reject Marxism and its Soviet associations, a position shaped by the current geopolitical conjuncture) sidesteps crucial political-economic insights: neoliberal spatial production of state rescaling and the (re)production of uneven geographical development. In an important exception, Fedoriv and Nazarenko (2021) draw on the former theoretical perspective to conclude that the reform is exacerbating inter-urban competition and, thus, inequality. Building on this analytical note, the present discussion focuses on how state rescaling is interrelated with uneven geographical development.

The remainder of this article is rooted in the question of whether decentralization is even possible when implemented by the nation-state and powerful international institutions. The emancipatory ideal of local self-governance is hardly represented in the ongoing neoliberal restructuring for privatization, austerity, and deregulation typical of the post-Soviet experience, as seen in Ukraine (Yurchenko, 2018) and accelerated through war (Ishchenko, 2022; Korotaev, 2022). Another fundamental tension exists between these ideals and the (re)centralizing mechanism of martial law enacted since the 2022 Russian invasion. The historical-materialist perspective maintains that it is impossible to address spatial inequality between city and country without the abolition of private property and thus changing the mode of production (Engels, n.d.; Lefebvre, 1977/2003; Marx & Engels, 1848/2002). This argument, along with the state's tendency for appropriating local self-governance into its ideology (Lefebvre, 1977/2003), therefore points to the need for critical scrutiny of decentralization reforms in the production of post-Soviet space.

4. The (Sub)Urban Question

The Decentralization Reform's rescaling and reterritorialization appear to have strengthened cities—particularly COSs established by the preceding Association-of-Ukrainian-Cities-led reforms—at the expense of their suburban and rural peripheries. While these cities enjoyed a closer relationship with the national government, they were also made responsible for economic development, meaning a locality's success was based on increasing its local tax base, rather than on national or regional social programs. This typical neoliberal devolvement mechanism increased volatility and competition between localities. Meanwhile, ongoing privatization and deregulation efforts pushed by an alliance of transnational capital and NGOs created local elite patronage networks of rent-seeking and clientelism (Leitch, 2016; Yurchenko, 2018).

Over nearly three decades of national independence, sharp socio-economic differences emerged between city cores and the rest of the territory. This was driven by wide-scale social stratification, private land use, and a profit-seeking real estate sector (Gnatiuk, 2017). The Decentralization Reform of 2014 failed to question the structures underpinning such inequality; instead, it replicated the problematic COS model for newly formed ATCs. Decentralization was supposed to stamp out "corruption" by devolving funding and responsibilities; allegedly, elite patronage would crumble under increased local accountability (Dudley, 2019). However, there is little evidence that this has happened. Admittedly, the previous Soviet "matryoshka doll" system left villages with few resources to spend on infrastructure maintenance and repairs. Yet, under the new, rescaled model, oligarchs could siphon off the increased funding flows through privately contracted infrastructure projects, effectively reconsolidating their power (Bader, 2020; Dolan-Evans, 2023; Dudley, 2019).

The so-called voluntary formation of ATCs was itself highly uneven. The national government's incentives contradicted the "bottom-up" character of decentralization, and while the ATC decision-making process was technically open to village councils and citizen groups, it was dominated by the heads of central municipalities (many with established ties to oligarchs). This resulted in a remarkable 77% of newly elected ATC leaders being former heads of the ATC's central municipality (Bader, 2020). Clearly, the peripheries did not have equal power and resources during the ATC formation (cf. Chepel, 2015), and the amalgamations did not result in the redistribution of resources and infrastructure from the ATC center to the surrounding combined communities.

The main beneficiaries of the Decentralization Reform were COSs, as their financial revenues soared to the highest per capita among all tiers of local government (Dudley, 2019). The contradictory centralizing aspect of the reform is evidenced by the fact that income taxes are paid based on place of employment, not residence; therefore, most revenue goes to the major cities (COSs) where most companies are registered (Romanova & Umland, 2023). This flawed allocation system has inevitably fed into the increased inter-urban competition characterized by place entrepreneurialism.

The plethora of literature promoting decentralization in Ukraine as local empowerment rarely discusses the deeply unpopular enforced amalgamation (after the "voluntary" period) of ATCs in 2020–2021 ("The opinion of citizens about the Decentralization Reform," 2020). Dolan-Evans (2023) offers unique insights from the frontlines of the conflict in Donbas, where often overlooked resistance to ATCs took place. Some villages feared the reconcentration of socio-economic benefits to administrative centers and the loss of key public infrastructure. The ATC amalgamations indeed created so-called redundancies, leading to significant austerity cuts to social services, education, and healthcare and the closures of facilities affecting tens of thousands of public sector jobs, largely held by women (Dolan-Evans, 2023). The new ATCs are unequipped to serve their populations and the condensed services are now located farther away for some, increasing what Ryabchuk's (2023) similar study in Donbas identified as "infrastructural vulnerability."

Just prior to the full-scale Russian invasion, national state subsidies were discontinued to ATCs (Romanova & Umland, 2023), furthering their reliance on local tax bases and volatile private investment instead of sufficient public investment. Making localities compete for tax revenue has been further complicated by ongoing depopulation exacerbated by war.

5. The Regional Problem

The Decentralization Reform's effects on the relationship between the city and the countryside have implications for the nation-state and its territoriality. From its inception, the reform was tied to the question of oblast (regional) power. The stakes were heightened after the pro-European Maidan protests of 2014 and the ensuing Russian annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas. This conflict can be broadly understood as warring between Ukraine's political and capitalist factions of the Russian-aligned East and Western-aligned West, with the latter gaining ground (Yurchenko, 2018). In other words, the threat to national territorial integrity was a key impetus for rescaling and reterritorializing local governance. While there were suggestions to eliminate the regional scale of territorialization, the Decentralization Reform actually played a crucial role in the Minsk Agreement process, which proposed a temporary autonomy grant for Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

Mezentsev and Mezentsev (2022) present an (uncritical) comparison of liberated cities as developing, entrepreneurial, bright, Ukrainian, and future-oriented. In contrast, occupied cities were seen as declining, dull, Russian, backwards-thinking, and nostalgic for a Soviet past. The localities experiencing a decline in the peripheries of liberated cities—thus deviating from Mezentsev and Mezentsev's (2022) central framework—are less explored. Cities liberated by Ukraine in the early stages of the conflict were empowered through decentralization and amalgamation. This process created new centralities. For example, Kramatorsk, a COS, became the administrative center of Donetsk Oblast in Eastern Ukraine; it replaced the currently-occupied Donetsk, which was once a burgeoning central industrial hub for the Eastern Ukrainian capital.

According to proponents, bringing "ATCs closer to the center" (Romanova & Umland, 2023, p. 376) strengthened Ukraine's territorial integrity. Furthermore, local-level responsibility was seen as essential for Ukrainian resistance during the full-scale war with Russia (Brik & Brick Murtazashvili, 2022; Movchan, 2022; Romanova, 2022; Romanova & Umland, 2023). After all, the independence of local communities helped resist the Russian takeover, which assumed that occupying the regional administrations would force surrenders (Movchan, 2022). However, these claims of increased political legitimacy, solidarity, and community pride are not unique to the Decentralization Reform—"self-organization" in response to an existential threat would likely have occurred regardless. For example, a law enacted just before the Russian invasion allowed municipalities to directly support the military through financial contributions, form territorial defense and paramilitary units, and cooperate with national/regional military administrations (Romanova, 2022). Such claims also completely sidestep the fundamental contradiction between decentralization and martial law: Why should a supposedly decentralized society support something as centralized as national military control? What relevance does national territorial integrity ultimately have to the stated goal of local self-governance?

The falling profit rates of Russian capitalist factions have driven a violent pursuit of new rent-seeking opportunities (Ishchenko, 2023). Russia is thus playing a key role in the creative destruction process integral to uneven development by destroying lives, homes, public infrastructure, and (privatized) resources. While Western and national resources have poured into the defense effort, the IMF-indebted Ukrainian government has doubled down on deregulation, privatization, and austerity measures during the war (Ishchenko, 2022; Korotaev, 2022), increasing the necessity of Western NGOs in the delivery of basic needs and assistance in shaping local governance strategies (Ryabchuk, 2023).

The declining eastern ATC peripheries present a stark contrast to the gentrifying, militarily protected, (re)centralized Kyiv. Even Kyiv's suburban peripheries—globally celebrated for protecting the capital (i.e., the nation)—have already been 60% rebuilt by largely private philanthropic efforts since the brief but brutal occupation in 2022 (Lutaj, 2023). Western Ukrainian cities, also seen as models of decentralized urban governance (see e.g., Nesterenko, 2022), have seen rents increase by 96–225% to capitalize on the active depopulation and decline of eastern cities (Liasheva, 2022; "Orenda zhytla pid chas vijny," 2022). The local has been reoriented to strengthen the nation-state's territoriality by weakening the regional. Thus, Ukraine's eastern regions and their urban peripheries bear the brunt and pay the price for Ukraine's westward outlook and "Europeanization."

6. A Globalized Project

The Decentralization Reform's exacerbation of spatial inequality produced a global–local predicament that speaks to Ukraine's position on the global stage, specifically its Europeanization and Western integration. While there is no official link between the Decentralization Reform and the EU, it was widely understood to be a key prerequisite for EU accession. This understanding was previously reflected in Ukraine's 1997 ratification of the European Charter on Local Self-Government, which instructs that "powers should be exercised on a level as close to the citizen as possible" (Dudley, 2019, p. 12). The so-called "grassroots Europeanization of Ukraine" (Romanova & Umland, 2023, p. 385) has been characterized by the governance of Western institutions and NGOs. For instance, Dolan-Evans (2023) demonstrates how IMF conditionalities (e.g., austerity) are indirectly satisfied by the reform; the supposedly bottom-up domestic initiative centered around "competitiveness" is recast as an imposition by Western institutions who have made decentralization a major focus of their missions (e.g., USAID, the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency, Germany's Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit—the latter under EU-funded Ukraine–Local Empowerment, Accountability and Development Programme).

The violent effects of neoliberalization and war have driven fragmented and technocratic third-sector governance, narrowing the possibilities for livelihood and political engagement, especially in frontline Eastern Ukrainian communities (Ryabchuk, 2023). Romanova and Umland (2023, p. 376) also note a "widening expectation–capability gap" among ATCs, so significant support from external international donors is necessary. These places are transformed into beneficiaries. War-making as state-building and centralization parallels the phenomenon of war-making and third-sector development; "a humanitarian economy…feeds off war, a defense-humanitarian industrial complex" (Ryabchuk, 2023, p. 54). These programs advance the neoliberal responsibilization of people in conflict-affected areas to "naturaliz[e] the dominance of the capitalist economy and entrepreneurial subjectivity" (Svytich, 2023, p. 2). In these complex alliances—"conglomerates of relationships" akin to public–private partnerships—all actors (regardless of "non-profit" status) support a neoliberal economic agenda (Svytich, 2023, p. 7). For example, the funding that moves through the USAID's Economic Resilience Activity project ultimately benefits US corporations (Svytich, 2023).

The rescaling of the state, along with deregulation and place entrepreneurialism, facilitated an influx of global capital to local areas (Brenner, 2004; Harvey, 1989; N. Smith, 2002). The urban scale is a key site of neoliberalization: It is embedded in the global circuits of capital in a reproduction of global geopolitics. The patron (Ukraine) in a philanthropic relationship is not "empowered" by the donor (West). Rather, rescaled urban governance makes the local dependent on the global/international and reproduces neoliberal ideology that serves the West, troubling the notion that the Decentralization Reform is bringing Ukraine closer to the (imperial) core.

Ukrainian localities, devastated by the ongoing Russian attack, will need to rebuild destroyed housing and public infrastructure. However, the massive displacement of both people and economic activity will create more distortions in the allocation of tax share, local governments' main source of revenue. Furthermore, the roles, responsibilities, and finances of local governments have been upended by martial law, making it difficult to allocate aid for resettlement and reconstruction (Levitas, 2022). Western governments and multilateral donors (e.g., the US, the EU, and the World Bank) have developed ambitious reconstruction

plans for Ukraine, foregrounding the contradictions between international influence and the intended local, Ukrainian-led rebuilding. Another key tension is the concept of "cooperation"—with international groups and with other localities—as ATCs compete for scarce resources (Dulko, 2023). This globalized creative-destructive rebuilding process seeks to reorganize the core–periphery relation itself.

7. Conclusions

In Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries, urbanists emphasize a need for local self-governance and public participation to resist "corrupt" urban development and to rebuild Ukrainian homes and infrastructure. These emancipatory ideals stand in contrast to the violent economic restructuring that has placed Ukrainian localities and citizens into extremely precarious positions, only exacerbated by war. Unlike historical anti-imperial movements, this popularized nationalist struggle does not call for a strong public sector but involves the devolvement of responsibility to the local level, ultimately creating opportunities for transnational capital (Ishchenko, 2022, 2023).

Thus far, Ukrainian urban studies have largely rejected political-economic analyses (to detrimental effect). Therefore, this article drew on Marxist geographical theories to consider whether Ukraine's Decentralization Reform is actually reorganizing core–periphery relations. It outlined how attempts to address uneven geographical development instead reproduced unevenness and advanced the (re)production of post-Soviet neoliberal capitalist space. Decentralization strengthened the centers of power while peripheralizing others in a profound rescaling and reterritorialization of governance. Specifically, cities (COSs) were empowered at the expense of their suburban and rural peripheries. These newly strengthened cities reproduced the centrality of the nation-state and its territoriality, at the expense of the southeastern regions now embroiled in a full-scale war. Ukraine has also been peripheralized on the global stage; its cities are strategic sites for the reproduction of neoliberal space to empower the West in an uneven patron–donor relationship.

Ukraine's Decentralization Reform exemplifies Golubchikov's (2017) understanding of "post-socialist" transition as conditioned by urban experiences and vice versa. Cities are collectively interwoven into a global ideological totality that extends and solidifies the triumph of neoliberal capitalism over state socialism. In this process, place entrepreneurialism disguised as an increase in local autonomy creates inter-urban competition to continue the circulation and accumulation of capital.

Urban scholarship must not position Ukraine's Decentralization Reform outside the power of spatial relations, as if inter-urban and spatial competition are non-existent or irrelevant (Harvey, 1989, p. 15). Because the key characteristic of capitalism is its tendency towards political and economic centralization, there is no such thing as decentralization until the mode of production, including (philanthropic) social relations, is fully transformed (Davies, 2011). The complex, multi-scalar "decentralized" process of rebuilding Ukrainian cities in the face of imperial war is likely to intensify the reorganization of core-periphery relations, from the local scale to the global. In other words, Ukraine's Decentralization Reform has geopolitical implications for the world (Romanova & Umland, 2023). This also makes Ukrainian (sub)urban space an important site for exploring alternatives within and beyond the post-Soviet condition.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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(Post-)Socialist Housing and Aging in Neoliberal Riga

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Abstract

This article contends that envisioning the future of housing planning in post-socialist cities necessitates the acknowledgment of a pressing reality: Many societies are undergoing rapid aging and depopulation. Latvia's capital city of Riga, the focal point of this study, stands at the forefront of these global trends. However, due to entrenched neoliberal practices that idealize youthful, robust, and entrepreneurial residents, considerations of aging are conspicuously absent from urban planning visions. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the capital city between 2021 and 2023, this article establishes a link between urban lived experiences while aging and the intersecting dynamics of housing. The critical analysis is informed by data derived from observations, conversations, media sources, official discourses, and perspectives gathered through expert interviews. Ultimately, this article advances an agenda aimed at urging people to think about more hopeful futures for aging in cities, an issue of paramount significance in the post-socialist societies of the 21st century.

Keywords

age-friendly cities; aging cities; Latvia; post-socialist societies; Riga; urban ethnography

1. Introduction

> —Hello, how are you?
> —Aija, darling, we are freezing!
> —What is the matter?
> —The central heating still has not been switched on in our building.

When I spoke on the phone with Anita (pseudonym), a 77-year-old resident of Riga, she was nestled under blankets in her bed on this late October evening in 2023. The acquisition of a spacious pre-war apartment

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in the heart of Riga marked a pinnacle in her life during the 1990s. It symbolized her newfound sense of freedom: She was living well in the renewed independence of Latvia. Through a combination of privatization certificates and cash, she managed to make the purchase. The apartment had formerly served as a communal space for multiple families; it was dilapidated and even featured makeshift toilet facilities in some corners of the rooms. In the prime of her midlife, she undertook extensive renovations and lived contentedly for many years. However, the current situation was different; Anita felt the chill as the Riga municipality had yet to initiate central heating despite the dropping temperatures. One of the inhabitants of the large building had passed away back in 2017. Due to disputes among overseas relatives, the flat could not be sold, leading to a mounting debt for central heating. This debt burden affected all the other residents, as the municipality insisted that they collectively cover the deceased's arrears if they wished to maintain a warm household. Anita felt a sense of hopelessness, punctuated by fits of sneezing and coughing, contemplating the necessity to sell the spacious flat and relocate from Riga to sustain the quality of life she needed at this stage of her life.

Anita's situation is not unique. Many others have already departed. Hence, I set the atmosphere of an aging and depopulating city, a figure of the aging person, who could be imagined by the state as an ideal aging resident due to her resources and options, and the reality of housing for aging people. Riga is currently grappling with population decline; numerous individuals are struggling to meet the costs of heating and other utility bills, and they bear the brunt of others' debts, even though they have paid their own dues. Staircases and thresholds in both pre-war buildings and apartment blocks constructed during the Soviet era are becoming progressively challenging obstacles for elderly residents striving to maintain a good quality of life. This demographic trend is mirrored across Latvia, where the aging process is unfolding at a rapid pace.

Against this backdrop, I pose a critical question in this article: How do people envision the future of housing in Riga and its impact on aging well? With its diverse array of architectural heritage, ranging from opulent pre-Second-World-War buildings in the city center to more modest apartment houses and private properties in the outskirts, as well as densely packed Soviet-era apartment blocks in the suburbs (known as *mikrorajoni*), Riga presents a complex and multifaceted context for addressing this question.

The article unfolds as follows: Firstly, I present aging and housing trends in Riga. I further scrutinize the prevailing approaches to post-socialist cities and then delineate the diversity and inequalities within current housing in Riga, taking into account the realities of aging and depopulation. This analysis provides insight into the evolving nature of the city and its implications for so-called age-friendly urban environments. Subsequently, I delve into the theoretical and policy concept of an age-friendly city, keeping in mind that, in practice, official discourses have yet to fully embrace this notion in Latvia, and I unpack the reasons behind this. To progress and introduce a new perspective on the experience of aging within Riga's housing landscape, I draw on Imrie's (2021) extensive body of work, which astutely exposes how architects predominantly cater to able-bodied individuals. I provide a methodological note and justification for why I have chosen to set the atmosphere of aging and housing through a narrative approach and options considered by the key protagonist—a middle-class aging woman living in the city center. The aging body in this article presents a case of how architects and planners do not consider the aging population. This is complemented by data from various ethnographic sources, interwoven with Anita's reflections. In conclusion, I present key considerations for advancing more optimistic visions for aging in Riga and other post-socialist cities.

2. Riga: Diversity and Inequality of Housing

The following two sections will present discourses around Riga's and wider post-Soviet housing evolution, the influence of neoliberal management policies, and their resulting impact on the aging population. Riga has undergone significant transformation since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. This period witnessed the city grappling with the legacies of its Soviet past while simultaneously navigating the challenges and opportunities of transitioning to a market-oriented economy, which Latvia did in alignment with neoliberal principles, significantly shaping Riga's development. Neoliberal policies entailed privatization, deregulation, and reduced state intervention in economic affairs. This approach is evident in the urban development of Riga. The post-Soviet period in Riga witnessed a distinct shift in architectural styles and urban planning principles. While the rigid, utilitarian designs of Soviet-era architecture are gradually giving way to a more diverse and cosmopolitan architectural landscape in Riga, new buildings are not as prevalent. Riga's city center, especially, is characterized by early 20th-century architecture. There has been a resurgence of interest in Riga's rich historical architecture, particularly its well-preserved Art Nouveau heritage and Old Town. This renewed appreciation for architectural heritage aligns with global trends in urban development that emphasize the importance of preserving cultural legacies. Dense suburbs retain elements of Soviet architecture, but they also incorporate contemporary, international architectural trends. In the suburbs of Riga, certain approaches aim to improve public spaces for the benefit of local inhabitants. However, there are also approaches that tend to isolate new developments and their residents from the surrounding territory (Treija et al., 2018). Like many post-socialist cities, Riga grapples with challenges related to suburbanization, frequently experiencing traffic congestion due to commuters traveling to and from these suburban areas around the city (cf. Sýkora & Stanilov, 2014).

The median age of Latvia's inhabitants was 42.8 years in 2023. According to age distribution in Riga, some of the oldest populations currently reside in Āgenskalns, Bolderāja, Brasa, Dārzciems, Dzirciems, and Iļģuciems (Apkaimes, 2023). In most areas, demographic aging will become even more pronounced in 10 years, as the currently middle-aged begin to experience aging. According to the Ministry of Economics (2022) and the Ministry of Welfare (2021), Riga has witnessed a decline of approximately 300,000 inhabitants since the 1990s. At its peak, Riga, along with its outskirts, boasted nearly a million inhabitants before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Presently, the population hovers around 600,000 (CSB, 2024). However, demographic projections do not paint an optimistic picture for the future. While immigration could potentially alter the demographics positively, policies and negative attitudes towards migration presently hinder such a shift.

Latvia has been undergoing a steady increase in the proportion of elderly individuals within its population. Currently, residents aged 45 and older comprise 46% of Riga's residents (CSB, 2024). Eurostat (2021) projections indicate that, by 2050, Latvia is anticipated to have a significantly higher percentage of individuals aged 65 and older, increasing from roughly 20% in 2021 to approximately 31% in 2050. Alongside the well-known challenges in healthcare and strains on pension systems, this demographic shift also presents significant challenges for urban dwellings. A dwindling urban population can have economic repercussions, including diminished tax revenues, reduced consumer spending, and slower economic growth. This, in turn, impacts local businesses and services. Emigration, especially among the young and skilled, has been a major contributor to depopulation in Latvia (Krišjāne et al., 2023). In 2023, the average pension in Latvia was €578 before tax (VSAA, 2024). Whilst the average pension has increased rather steeply in the past few years, as the article demonstrates below, pensions are usually not enough to rent a good quality or

new apartment, which could feature architectural qualities necessary for aging well. Before I turn to the proposed novel narrative on housing options and aging in a city, I want to scrutinize contextual discourses of post-socialist urban trends.

3. Aging in Post-Socialist Cities in Academic Discourse

Over the past three decades, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to post-socialist cities. Prevailing areas of investigation have centered around the social and spatial structures of cities and their transformation, closely followed by inquiries into urban planning and management, as well as trends in suburbanization (Kubeš, 2013). Persistent issues continue to define post-socialist cities, including the enduring legacies of central planning and land allocation (Borén & Gentile, 2007). The privatization of housing has been pivotal in reshaping the socio-economic landscape. As argued by Pichler-Milanovich (2001), a decade after the collapse of socialist systems in Central and Eastern Europe, instead of converging, the housing market indicated what he termed a "policy collapse." This argument assumes even greater significance within the central focus of this article, which examines subjectivities and limited opportunities for aging well in a city. Frost (2018) contends that there is a pressing need to formulate a new conceptual framework for comprehending the diverse processes of urbanization in post-socialist cities. One aspect of this that begs for further research is aging in cities. However, there are a few examples (though, on Bulgaria, see Iossifova, 2020) where the glaring reality of rapid aging in post-socialist cities has been brought to academic attention. Iossifova (2020), a social researcher and an architect, is a welcome pioneer in demonstrating that Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, presents real and difficult challenges for individuals, the city, and the state in the context of rapid depopulation, old-age poverty, loneliness, and, importantly, architectural heritage from socialism, which does not meet the needs of an aging population. Taking a step towards the core theme of this article—the subjectivities of aging well and how housing relates to this—let us now turn our attention to a trend that has not yet permeated Riga's official vision in 2023, but may do so soon: age-friendly cities.

4. Towards the Idea of the "Age-Friendly City"

The aspirations and needs of older individuals have emerged as a significant focal point for both social and public policy concerns globally. The policy discourse of "age-friendly cities" emphasizes that current research endeavors must grapple with the intricate dynamics of cities, which serve as complex arenas where commercial, social, and political interests intersect and sometimes conflict with the needs of aging people (Biggs et al., 2000; Buffel et al., 2012; Green, 2013; World Health Organization, 2002, 2007a, 2007b). In this context, city planning assumes a pivotal role in establishing a socio-spatial foundation that fosters age-friendly communities (Buffel et al., 2018). Additionally, the extant literature on age-friendly cities underscores the pivotal role of social participation and engagement in the success of interventions. Hence, subjectivities and the actual lived experience are valuable in this new discourse. The predominant focus in the literature revolves around person-centered approaches. As proposed by advocates of the idea of age-friendly cities, it is imperative that future research places greater emphasis on interventions that center on the environment and on formulating a comprehensive framework that integrates both person- and environment-centric approaches to healthy aging (Hong et al., 2023).

Notably, the concept of age-friendly cities within post-socialist contexts raises pertinent inquiries regarding how governmental bodies, municipalities, and other entities vested with power and decision-making authority

uphold principles of democracy and equity for all citizens, including the aging population. The inquiry extends to the challenges faced by city governments in translating rhetorical commitments to fairness into tangible reductions of injustices within the urban environment, as well as the resistance encountered in response to unjust processes and practices in everyday life. This underscores the intrinsic link between justice and democracy in the broadest sense (in the case of Newcastle, UK, see Bell & Davoudi, 2016). I propose to argue that we can begin to move towards a more felt and humanistic discussion of age-friendly visions by initially confronting the uncomfortable reality and subjectivities of aging people. Imrie's (2003, 2012, 2021) research has been at the forefront in demonstrating the idea that cities are built and planned according to a particular normative image of the body: fit, able-bodied, mobile, etc. His research turns on the fact that disability is often not "built into" the urban fabric. I want to raise comparable questions regarding the construction of apartment blocks, city environments, and everyday utility supplies, such as heating, considering that the occupants of Riga buildings will increasingly be aging, and that considerable numbers of them already are. I will now turn to subjectivities and expert discourses to elicit experiences and dominant views of aging, neoliberal and ableist realities of Riga's housing, and future imaginations.

5. Methodological Considerations

The data for this article emanate from my ethnographic research conducted in Latvia from 2021 to 2023, during which I immersed myself in the lives, conversations, and experiences of the people of Riga. The lived experience of aging in the city is valuable. A person who is aging and has experienced the city's changes for many years demonstrates subjectivities that make them an expert in lived experience and needs. As explained above, Riga as a city does not have a fully-fledged policy or vision for rapid aging, which is already underway in the city and across the whole country. In the contexts of aging and emigration, the dominant discourses are clearly neoliberal: People themselves must care for their future and should not rely much on state support.

The data presented in this article come from my ongoing research, titled "Returning Home? Making and Imagining Aging Futures," funded by the University of Eastern Finland. I began the research by immersing myself in Riga's atmosphere, conducting numerous conversations with aging residents, analyzing media discourses, and carrying out expert interviews with planners, developers, and experts on the built environment. I set the atmosphere through the narration and considerations of Anita. She can represent an ideal figure in neoliberal dominant discourses as she and her spouse are owners of a flat, and with their average pensions can support themselves. However, with increasing utility costs, they sometimes rely on extra support from their adult children abroad. Using a central figure in telling the story of a particular phenomenon is not a new approach in social sciences. However, it is novel in more traditionally oriented urban planning research. Methodological literature maintains that it is the judgment and choice of the researcher as to how the data are presented when pursuing the research question and setting the scene for qualitative research. A key narrative through one person is a valid academic and intellectual approach (Berger, 2013; Tracy, 2020; Young & Casey, 2019).

Employing a narrative approach (Levy & Hollan, 1998), I relay the visions and frustrations of Anita to paint a larger, yet intimately felt and challenging, tableau of aging in a post-socialist city. I align the narrative with the ethos in aging studies, which says that mature subjectivity matters to understanding lived experience and illuminating planning and policy from the challenges bottom-up (Moulaert & Biggs, 2012). Anita's reflections on housing options while aging are embedded in broader research by collecting evidence of

discourses and housing realities through media analysis and observations in the city. I analyzed media digitally, using the Lursoft database, and selected articles on various print and digital platforms (Belz & Baumbach, 2010). The key search words were "aging" and "housing." I finally selected 48 articles, published over the past seven years, and analyzed the dominant narratives. These related to imaginations of housing dynamics and futures, rarely considering the reality of demographic aging, although they did reveal the prevailing atmosphere, for example in ideas of dilapidated (materially aging) housing and of price differences, showing the challenges people without neoliberal able bodies face in Riga face with housing (cf. Imrie 2021).

I paid attention to individuals' lived experiences, engaged in interviews with planners, developers, and consultants addressing planning and social issues, and scrutinized prevailing discourses and documents. Nine expert interviews took place after I gathered evidence from lived experience and media discourses. I approached these interviews as problem-centered, asking interviewees to reflect on housing and aging futures in the broad contexts of current planning challenges (Döringer, 2021). To safeguard privacy, all names, including those of development companies or planners, have been anonymized. The perspectives of planners, consultants, and developers hold significant weight, and I aim to decipher whether, and to what extent, demographic aging and depopulation are factored in as pivotal processes that will shape Riga's future.

In the remainder of the article, I will analyze Anita's subjectivities in relation to housing in the center and in Soviet-style block houses. Along with these, I will analyze broader discourses related to the aging of Soviet-style houses. Further, the discussion will continue about widespread discourses and practices of incremental renovation and how it relates to aging. Next, subjectivities and discourses around newly built apartments will be considered. I will conclude with key findings of these and other relevant options for aging well, including the looming challenge of social housing in Riga.

6. Subjectivities: Imagining Aging Well in Riga's Housing

This section discusses three options the main participants of this study mentioned in relation to aging and housing: staying in the center, living in a Soviet block house, or moving to a suburb. It is within the area of Art Nouveau and other early 20th-century buildings that Anita has resided for over 30 years. She desires to remain in the center, where she is most familiar with the surroundings, and where she regularly attends cultural events. However, the center exhibits various challenges. "It is becoming a dead zone," one of the developers said in the interview. What he meant was that stringent regulations on who and how can build and renovate in the city center, make it very difficult to build modern and affordable housing. "The regulations stipulate that large 20th-century apartments are protected and cannot be divided," the developer continued, echoing persistent bureaucratic challenges noted in urban planning literature (Borén & Gentile, 2007). Therefore, the center's renovated buildings are usually not affordable for aging people. With "dead zone" the developer meant several buildings in very central locations, that remain empty due to unsolved issues of ownership. Furthermore, the last financial crisis and depopulation trends have negatively affected retail businesses in the center. Anita regularly encounters these challenges in her life in Riga. She feels these changes along with her age, saying that she feels increasingly isolated in the center due to the diminishing availability of diverse services and shops. She misses her children and grandchildren, who reside abroad and assist in paying her high utility bills, which nearly doubled in 2022 due to energy price hikes.

Moving to a more distant Soviet-style *mikrorajon* is not a viable option for Anita. She lived in one during the Soviet era, and they evoke memories of that time that were not the happiest. "I recently visited a flat where we lived during the Soviet times. The ceiling was so low, I had already forgotten how it feels," she emphasized the difference between such housing and her current flat in the center. A friend of Anita sold her flat in the center years ago and moved into a *khrushchevka* in a suburb. Her friend was initially satisfied because she saved a lot of money from the deal, but, most importantly, she valued the better quality of life. The center was too loud, dusty, and lacked green space. Anita acknowledged these qualities in several conversations but still could not imagine herself moving into a *khrushchevka*. "There are way too many problems with leaking pipes, and non-paying neighbours, which increases your bills," Anita said, emphasizing the negative side of such housing.

When it comes to Soviet-style housing, it is, of course, more affordable. Among the Soviet-style blocks, the most expensive housing was in the 119th (typically five to nine floors) and 104th (12 floors) series of concrete buildings, where around 45 m^2 flats in satisfactory condition cost around €55,000–€60,000 in 2022. The cheapest flats were in the so-called *khrushchevka*, budget-type functional housing built during the era of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s. Slightly smaller floor space flats to be renovated there cost around €30,000–€45,000. Flats are still being sold even in houses which are 70% or more depreciated; a typical price for a square meter is €520 in such properties (Riekstiņa, 2023). This is relatively cheap compared to average prices across the various types of property in Riga, where housing prices can vary widely depending on factors such as location, size, condition, and amenities. In central districts like the Old Town and City Center, prices tend to be higher compared to outlying areas. As of 2021, the price per square meter in suburban areas could be around €1,500 to €2,500 per square meter. Anita would see living in such a building as a failure of all she achieved in independent Latvia. There is also an element of pride, as everywhere in the capitalist world, with your address in the prime spot in the center having symbolic value, even if the actual living conditions and heating disruptions make everyday life unpleasant.

Suburbanisation trends are strong in Riga and other post-socialist cities (Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2012; Kubeš, 2013). However, aging subjectivities and needs are rarely considered in motivations to move to these areas. Anita does not consider moving to a suburban area a viable option. She does not drive and does not have a community there. In terms of an aging population, the challenges of the suburbanization have received scant consideration thus far and are seldom regarded as a significant planning concern for the impending demographic shift. While the prevailing discourse in literature (e.g., Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2012) and my expert interviews often portrayed suburban dwellers as young, middle-class families, their connections to aging parents and their preferences (or lack thereof) for a multigenerational living are pertinent on spatial, social, and personal levels. Similarly, the provision of accessible healthcare and diverse social activities for the aging population has been largely overlooked in the imagination of urban planners and needs to be illuminated in future research.

7. Housing Ages Too: Focus on (Post-)Soviet Housing

Riga has to contend with more than just demographic aging; its housing stock is also rapidly aging. Therefore, this section makes a link between wider neoliberal ideas of self-sufficiency and the individualized choices and realities of the post-Soviet housing. According to some controversial viewpoints, put forth by the

developers of new housing I interviewed, approximately 30% of houses in Riga requires demolition. I encountered these ideas from investors during my research in Riga through interviews, media and document analysis. For instance, as part of a recent study, the Ministry of Economics (2022) commissioned an assessment of the stability of so-called series 467 houses (nine stories high, constructed in the 1970s and 1980s) primarily located in the suburbs of Ķengarags and Purvciems, both of which have relatively high proportions of aging people (Apkaimes, 2023). These houses typically feature vertical terraces, originally intended for drying laundry, which enhanced both everyday comfort and the architectural style of the houses. However, due to a lack of maintenance since their construction, these features have either collapsed or been removed (Gabre, 2020).

The assessment of this series of Soviet blockhouses, along with others, led to the conclusion that approximately 30% of housing is either at or past its expiration date (Ministry of Economics, 2022). "This is a significant emotional strain for inhabitants," an expert I interviewed said. It can be an additional negative factor for many who are also aging. Poor insulation can increase mold, pipelines are aging, and cracks in the walls can instill ontological insecurity. The expert linked such conditions to a form of "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011) with residents aware they are living in substandard buildings but lacking the capacity and resources to change the situation (Davies, 2022). A more brutal approach, suggested by investors, would be akin to what Moscow has already undertaken. In Moscow, hundreds of five-story residential buildings from a specific series of Soviet time houses were demolished in the 2010s. These houses were built between 1959 and 1962 and were deemed too unstable for renovation (Gunko et al., 2018). Whilst these practices and the discourses around potential expiration dates of Soviet housing are not directly linked to aging, they can give rise to effects that some less-able bodies and their livelihoods are not fit for the current neoliberal ethos of city life. Furthermore, these practices about built environment resemble divisive discourses about "Homo Sovieticus," unreflectively aplied to the older generation (cf. Tyszka, 2009). Anita too linked block house suburbs to memories of Soviet times' sociality.

One expert I interviewed said that a better approach would be to improve the environment as much as possible. However, some challenges would still remain, especially in relation to the lack of accessibility for people with reduced mobility (cf. Imrie, 2021). These kinder ideas echo the beliefs of Gunārs Asaris, the charismatic chief city architect of Riga during the Soviet period. He attempted to implement some elements of European capitalism, negotiating with construction companies to strategically plan developments to benefit city planning rather than haphazardly constructing concrete houses around factories (Adamaite, 2023). Most importantly, he believed that Riga's planners today "must be cautious and wise, avoiding the destruction of houses" (Lūsiņa, 2020, p. 3). He was adamant that "Riga does not have buildings that should be fully eliminated" (Lūsiņa, 2020, p. 3). Asaris was convinced that we "should not tear the pages out of [Riga's architectural] history" (Lūsiņa, 2020, p. 3). The more optimistic vision of careful renovation may be slow and potentially costly, but it could be more suitable for an aging Riga. "These flats are considerably more affordable, and certain series provide functionalities that aging individuals require, particularly those on the ground floor," an expert on housing development told me in the interview. He maintained that the move toward destruction is largely political and dictated by the desires of investors. While they provide efficient new housing and (almost) universally accessible design, their clientele consists of those who can afford to take out loans—a luxury that most aging people cannot afford.

The somewhat pitiful view of the Soviet-style suburbs is deeply ingrained in Riga today. In a media interview, Pēteris Ratas, the newly appointed chief architect of Riga in 2023, stated that *mikrorajoni* is a painful question. According to him, the environment in these suburbs, where half of the city dwellers live, is poor, unsupported, and noattractive (Jance, 2023). He linked these problems to the Soviet past, saying that the Soviet "mentality" created helpless indifference and irresponsibility for the common property. However, the reality is more complex; it is equally detrimental that current management systems from the city council and utility and central heating systems oppress human agency, as in Anita's case. Placing the responsibility on individuals' shoulders is the most typical neoliberal blame, which decreases the quality of everyday life in Riga. Coupled with bureaucracy, the strain on aging people should not be underestimated. However, the chief architect did express the vision that the city council needs to "humanize" the environment in these suburbs, improving accessibility, cultural life, and green spaces. "It is a complex question and will not be solved in a year or two," Ratas realistically warned. One of the neoliberal hurdles, compared to, for instance, East Germany, which has significantly increased the quality of life in such suburbs, is that the city owns very small land plots in these territories; hence, its leverage is severely limited. Therefore, the city aims to empower neighborhood communities (*apkaimes* in Latvian), hoping that activists in neighborhoods will take on the task of improvement "bottom-up"—a discourse I repeatedly heard from several planners and decision-makers I interviewed during the research. Ratas was equally concerned about Riga city center, which is losing inhabitants, services, and liveliness. The solution, in his vision, is the regeneration of the center—not new buildings but new energy, created by human creativity.

As noted, most sales happen in Soviet-style block houses due to affordability. But even if aging people buy a flat there (or their relatives buy one for them), these houses are usually energy inefficient and maintenance costs are significantly higher than in newly built apartments. Apart from this, several types of Soviet-era houses will soon reach their expiration dates, which can increase anxiety for residents. The result is that poorer people, who can afford these flats, pay a higher price in the long run due to utility bills and the uncertain futures of these buildings. Let us now explore where the thinking (or lack thereof) about aging happens in the newly built projects.

8. Incremental Renovation and New Apartments

The more hopeful and environmentally friendly approach would be to find ways to renovate and improve the existing buildings in Riga. Incremental renovation is a widespread practice in Riga, but it comes with many challenges for aging people. While renovating existing and deteriorating housing is crucial to improve the quality of life for urban residents, the lack of an overall philosophy and foresight can make it expensive and inefficient as life circumstances change. People usually undertake renovations when they are still strong and able-bodied (Imrie, 2003). As I observed in the suburb of Pārdaugava, where I conversed with families and aging people, renovations rarely consider the needs of soon-to-be-old bodies. Hence, vernacular architectures, especially in private housing and flats, often tend to overlook the fact that thresholds and staircases can soon become burdens as the body ages. However, the most important improvements must be made in common areas with common staircases, door sizes, and elevators in blockhouses. Studies have shown the significance of the residents' social status and the availability of state support, as exemplified in a recent analysis of housing renovation in Budapest and Vilnius (Szabó & Burneika, 2020). The reality in Riga is that renovated flats become affordable only for the economically wealthy minority. In 2023, the sales price can go up to €5,000 in renovated houses in the center, those which were built in the early 20th century.

Inflation reached 20.3% in 2022, while the price increase for construction jumped by 17.6%, compared to a year earlier (CSB, 2024). All these considerations make housing improvements or changing flats for better aging hardly possible for most of Riga's seniors.

Anita was considering a move to the suburb of Āgenskalns, which is relatively close to the city center, offers a green environment, and has some relatively affordable newly built apartments. If she sold her flat in the center, she could afford one with a relatively large floor space and still save money. Besides, her children would be willing to help. According to civil law (Republic of Latvia, 2023, Clause 188), in Latvia, children are obligated to take care of their parents, and this is culturally expected. This aligns with neoliberal thinking, where the responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the residents. While Anita is rather well-off with her property and her children's support, she is still in the minority compared to most aging people and their relatives, for whom a flat in a new house is out of reach. In 2022, new flats in Riga were sold for €1,600 per square meter in the economy class, with the more exclusive class selling for €3,200 and more. According to regulations, all new flats must meet energy efficiency standards; ever-increasing strict regulations stipulate AA+ energy standards for new houses. These standards lead to significant differences in energy bills. In the coldest months of 2022, Anita paid close to €900 per month for all utilities and heating her flat in the center of the city. A three-bedroom, approximately 55-m^2 new apartment would have heating costs three times cheaper per month. However, this is only the case if she or her children do not take a loan. With Euribor at a high, bank payments for such a flat reached €900 per month in 2023.

The investors and developers I interviewed did not have any specific vision related to aging people. Their sales pitch targeted "young families with children and professionals aged 25–40 years, who are the most active in taking loans," as a developer of a large company said. Some developers did express concerns that, in 10 years, the situation would change rapidly demographically. It was only after I repeated a question expressing interest in how aging and depopulation processes are factored into city planning that one investor said that the new apartments are suitable for all. They have a small but efficient floor space, and Scandinavian investors aim for universal design with easy access, small spaces for storage, and outdoor access via balconies and inner yards. Typically, the economy-class flats built by Nordic and Scandinavian developers are smaller but more functional. To some extent, they are better and more modern versions of the Khrushchev-era functional flats. However, they contrast with post-Soviet era flats, built in the 1990s–2000s, where a three-room apartment was typically 75–80 m^2. Currently, new apartments with three rooms are 50–55 m^2, with a bedroom of approximately 10–12 m^2, fulfilling the main function without wasting any floor space. In contrast to Soviet-era small bedrooms, which did not have ventilation other than a window, the new flats have obligatory recuperation systems, stipulated by the law for new houses. Elevators are obligatory according to current legislation if buildings are higher than five floors. Developers are now adding elevators to houses with four floors as an additional bonus to demonstrate their commitment to accessibility. This is promising, as universal design tends to consider equitable access spatially (Imrie, 2012; Imrie & Hall, 2003). However, due to an ageist bias, conscious or not, and the reality that most seniors are not economically well-off, the commercial discourse excludes older people as a desirable demographic group for these apartments. In addition, while the commercial discourse emphasizes the efficiency of small spaces and friendliness to the climate, it ignores and even dismisses the quest for aesthetic appeal.

Aesthetic appeal is crucial to Anita. She lived most of her life in unitary Soviet-style housing. Independence, in her vision, gave her the power of individuality. Her vision aligns with many existing clients whom new housing

development investors meet. People want bigger balconies and fancier architecture, but developers insist that they need to balance this question according to purchasing power and the "profitability test" (Swedbank, 2023). More balconies and beauty add to the costs of standard production. People expect beautiful entry staircases and individual touches to their kitchens, but economy flats come with standardized kitchens with little room for individuality. Another important issue is acoustics. Buyers often request better sound isolation to block out noises from neighbors' flats and staircases. Extra sound isolation is costly and may not seem justified from the point of view of a builder, who wants to provide economical flats for the typical customer.

There is another crucial issue that makes Anita's choice of moving difficult. Rīgas Siltums—the central provider of heating in Riga—has a privileged right to provide services in Riga. If there is Rīgas Siltums infrastructure in the land plot on which a new apartment house is built, the developer has no choice but to connect to the main provider for individual heating. While it can be the best choice in terms of environmentally friendly energy—Rīgas Siltums uses wood pellets and other renewable resources—an individual person, in reality, is not motivated to have climate-friendly solutions if they suffer from cold because Rīgas Siltums refuses to heat the whole house due to debts of one or several tenants.

In sum, new commercial flats in Riga are seldom affordable to aging individuals. In terms of social responsibility, lonely and poor seniors and people with severe disabilities, whose incomes are very low, can have a discount on their utility payments from 50 to 90%.

9. Conclusion: Towards an Age-Friendlier Riga?

In this article, I propose a novel way to address an inevitable reality: Riga's population is rapidly aging and the city is depopulating. I argue that post-socialist cities like Riga must be analyzed with a focus on both demographic aging and the aging of available housing. Furthermore, I suggest examining these challenges through the ethnographic and narrative approaches in order to understand what it means to age well in Riga's built environment today. I do so by sharing the story and considerations of one research participant, a woman who can be considered middle-class and who owns a large apartment in the historical center of Riga. Like many people (although not everyone) this woman, Anita, can rely on support from her children, who live abroad.

The center of Riga, where Anita resides, is becoming an unattractive zone. It lacks green spaces, has high carbon emissions, and flats are very challenging to renovate according to today's ideals of comfortable living. For developers, developing housing in the suburbs is easier, as the center is restricted by numerous regulations. These factors, combined with the neoliberal ethos that emphasizes individual responsibility rather than the role of municipalities or the state, present real challenges for creating an age-friendly environment. Drawing on the scholarship of Imrie (2003, 2012; see also Imrie & Hall, 2003), I demonstrated that all segments of housing in Riga represent a complex history showing how Soviet, post-Soviet, and contemporary architecture envision able, mobile, and essentially young bodies. The only design that comes closer to inclusivity for an aging society in Riga is the universal design, currently provided by Nordic investors. However, this design overlooks aging individuals and does not acknowledge the historically nuanced quest for aesthetic qualities and the ability to express one's individualism.

In neoliberal states like Latvia, individuals rely heavily on vernacular renovation and their own decisions to satisfy the desire for a better life and a more aesthetically pleasing living environment. This can be achieved

incrementally even with a limited budget, as it is the very common practice across all segments of the apartment market in Riga and in private houses. However, while these efforts have good intentions, without comprehensive discussion and education within society on what constitutes good housing throughout the entire lifespan, an unwise renovation can lead to an uninhabitable space in older age.

Regarding tactical solutions in Riga, one potential approach would be to incentivize flat swaps, although here persistent bureaucratic challenges need to be taken into account (Borén & Gentile, 2007). People could be encouraged to offer options for aging individuals who want or need to live on the ground floor for accessibility reasons. Other initiatives could focus on downsizing to improve quality of life and increase savings from selling a larger apartment or house. However, the challenge should not be underestimated, as Latvia already has one of the smallest allocations of floor area per person in Europe.

Finally, and importantly, in 2023, Riga formulated its new housing policy guidelines (Riga City Council, 2022). It remains to be seen how the reality of rapid aging will be addressed in these policies. However, one enormous challenge arising from neoliberal practices is that Riga City Council owns only 3% of the land in Riga. Finding ways to increase land ownership is one of the most pressing and challenging issues in the consultation processes on these guidelines. Current social housing in Riga is in poor condition, with some houses so dilapidated that it is not viable to invest in their renovation (Tsenkova, 2007). The looming concern is that Riga could soon face a large crisis of inaccessibility to social housing, a potential "policy collapse" due to neoliberal practices (Pichler-Milanovich, 2001). Even if there were an idealistic and far-sighted vision that a highly unequal aging society, which aspires to democracy and the inclusion of all citizens, will inevitably need this infrastructure, it may not be possible to build enough new social housing quickly enough for those in dire need.

Anita is still relatively well-off and will not require social housing. Hence, her socio-economic positionality embodies an ideal figure for neoliberal city management. She more frequently fantasizes about moving abroad to spend her old age close to her children in Western Europe. She does not want to contemplate the potential need to move into a care home, as she is apprehensive about such a prospect. Meanwhile, Riga is not prepared to serve those who may have this need, even if they have the means to pay for it with the assistance of caring relatives. The waiting lists for care homes are full, and getting a place in a care home becomes increasingly difficult (LETA, 2020; Ministry of Welfare, 2024). This issue, ultimately, invites future research on aging, the built environment, and social policies in post-socialist cities.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Calibrating the Parallax View: Understanding the Critical Moments of the Yugoslav Post-Socialist Turn

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Abstract

In this article, we seek to provide a new line of sight referring to specificities of the neoliberal turn in post-socialist societies and corresponding transformations of space. By employing the methodological approach that side-by-side explores two mutually exclusive strategies of analytical and empirical survey, we intend to tackle the question of irreducible antinomies pertinent to architectural research methodologies. Block 23 of the Central Zone of New Belgrade, designed by Branislav Karadžić, Božidar Janković, and Aleksandar Stjepanović (1968), has been widely recognised and aptly studied as one of the highlights of modern urban planning and design, conceived and realised in the period of late socialism in Belgrade (Serbia, former Yugoslavia). Featuring a notion of a "parallax gap," we presume that the reading of Block 23 through two close yet clearly distinctive perspectives can bring a new scope of knowledge and point to the gap inscribed in the buildings themselves. The first point of view is empirical, centred on the notion of everyday life, and concerns the interpretation and use of space by its inhabitants. The second one is analytical, determined by the work of the architect and architectural theoretician, Branislav Milenković. We start from their point of contact and seek to find a shift in the diverging discursive positions producing a parallax gap. By way of architectural drawing, we explore and theorise new possibilities opened up by the actual buildings: interstitial, intermediary, transitional spaces, and spatial in-betweens. We hope to demonstrate the pursuit of both meticulously planned and dynamically conceived spaces open for the unpredictable was not only a way to respond to specific Yugoslav socio-political realities, but that it fostered the capacity of architecture to accommodate the future population and socio-economic transformations.

Keywords

Block 23; Branislav Milenković; dynamic scheme; Jugoslovenska narodna armija; New Belgrade; parallax gap; parallax view; post-socialist turn; Serbia

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Historical Grounds for the Yugoslav Neoliberal Turn

Addressing the subject of spatial production under the neoliberal market economy in post-socialist societies, we start from the premise that the particular individual manifestations of architectural and urban practice can both reflect and subvert this globally dominant paradigm. We assume that the investigation of such critical cases can bring additional knowledge regarding the mechanisms of its transposition and disclose the moments of its suspension. To this end, the concept of "parallax" is utilised, as introduced by Japanese philosopher and literary critic Kojin Karatani and adopted later on by Slavoj Žižek, particularly in relation to architecture's capacity to bring out the repressed antagonisms of society. The notion of parallax, that is the apparent displacement of an (observed) object due to a change of the observer's position, was used by Karatani (2003) as a metaphor to describe the coupling of two different perspectives (parallax view) in order to provide a coherent understanding of complex relationships, pointing to a transcendental critique "capable of leading not to a third position, as such, but to the opening of transversal and transpositional movement" (Harootunian, 2004, p. 30). The methodological approach of our research is derived from Žižek's (2010) interpretation of architectural parallax, which further aimed to foreground socio-political and ethical discourse in criticism of contemporary architecture (Nadir, 2009).

Searching for the clues that can reveal less obvious aspects of the spatial production under neoliberalism, the curious insights might be found on the margins of the ongoing process, at the very beginning of the neoliberal turn (Harvey, 2005). In societies that shared the common experience of socialism after the Second World War, it roughly coincided with the collapse of the existing economic and social system. In this respect, national states that succeeded the socialist Yugoslavia were no exception, yet the Yugoslav transition happens to be unique by involving decade-long disastrous wars. Also significantly, the shift to a market economy started already in the mid-1960s, much earlier than in other socialist states, and lasted longer, till the end of the wars and the final dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation in 2003.

Based on the massive nationalisation of land, housing stock, and means of production, the near-monopoly of the state on urban development in all socialist socio-political systems assumed systematic suppression of land and property markets (Hirt, 2013). Economic liberalisation in Yugoslavia started with the introduction of the concept of workers' self-management in 1953 which brought a new decentralised model of housing provision and induced cultural and economic modernisation through the concept of residential communities (Le Normand, 2014). However, the turn towards a liberalised market economy was marked by the 1963 Constitution and the following Resolution of the Federal National Assembly on the Further Development of the Housing Economy (Rezolucija Savezne Narodne Skupštine, 1965). As a result, social enterprises and construction companies started to compete to provide mass housing in the still-regulated housing market, which, likewise, opened for private housing provision through favourable housing loans (Milinković et al., 2023). The 1974 Constitution and the 1980s economic strains and inflation paved the way for the dispersion of housing production and subsequent transitional measures. After the break-up of Yugoslavia, central planning mechanisms ceased to exist and the resources including land and property were gradually privatised and distributed according to market principles (Milojević et al., 2019).

Deep structural changes in Yugoslav society that coincided with the civil war could be traced through diverse spatial transformations, both those informal (ETH Studio Basel, 2012; Sekulić, 2011) and those

undertaken by the new economic elites (Perović, 2003). More to the point, both the right to housing as a socialist-modernist paradigm and the apartment as its material manifestation became tools for navigating the changing circumstances of the post-socialist turn. This was particularly distinct in spatial practices of the previously established, but now fading symbolic elites (political, intellectual, and military; Dukanac & Blagojević, 2020). In this article, by taking an "extreme but significant case" (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 38), we would argue that the Yugoslav transition to a free market economy and its spatial consequences might be explored through the lens of the daily life of a tenant in a mass housing project commissioned by the Yugoslav Peoples' Army (Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija [JNA]).

The JNA served as one of the key devices in the shaping of a new, multinational and multicultural federation and its core values, and hence grew into an elaborate system of garrisons with a large support network of socio-cultural, health, education, but also design and construction facilities (Nikodijević, 1992). Such intricate apparatus demanded significant state budget investments, some of which were channelled towards much-needed housing development. Against the backdrop of the Yugoslav model of workers' self-management (as of 1953) and socially-directed housing construction (as of 1974), these housing developments resulted in numerous projects, spanning from large-scale, mass housing estates such as the Central Zone of New Belgrade (Blagojević, 2012; Jovanović, 2017; Vesković & Jovanović, 2018), to smaller urban renewal interventions during the late socialist period. However, the disintegration of Yugoslavia was swiftly followed by the rapid liquidation and socio-cultural marginalisation of the JNA, which ultimately led to the "demilitarisation" of housing production (Dukanac, 2023). In these terms, the history of construction and inhabitation of Block 23 in the Central Zone of New Belgrade may provide a glimpse into the inner mechanisms of this particular social and spatial change and bring additional arguments to the overall discussion (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Photo-collage of Block 23. Note: The first image shows the completed Block, while the following two display it during construction with a focus on building no. 6. Source: "Fotografije blokova 22 i 23" (1975).

Designed by the prominent architects of the period, Božidar Janković, Branislav Karadžić, and Aleksandar Stjepanović, Block 23 was awarded the first prize at the all-Yugoslav competition in 1968 and built between 1969 and 1975 (Dragutinović et al., 2023; Jovanović, 2019). The Block was commissioned by the Federal Secretariat of Peoples' Defence, and the 2,342 apartments, almost entirely intended for the JNA personnel, were distributed through occupancy rights. Significant for the selection of the case study was the shift in Yugoslav—and hence JNA—housing policies and strategies during the late socialist period, which was directly reflected in the spatial framework of Block 23. This included a systemic rooftop extension of buildings nos. 5

and 6 of Block 23, which produced an entire additional floor consisting of 96 new apartment units. Such alteration of a socialist-modernist block represented one of the first among many to follow in Belgrade, authorised by the 1984 Law on Superstructures and Conversion of Common Areas into Dwellings (Zakon o nadziđivanju zgrada, 1984; Figure 2). By superimposing the analysis of this process and the fallout it sparked within the individual spatial practices of the Block 23 tenants, previously unknown elements of the complex spatial production were discovered. The 1980s anticipated the transition to an open housing market by reducing housing production and encouraging housing loans, which later on led to the privatisation of housing stock in the early 1990s, as the first transitional measure implemented in all former socialist countries (Petrović, 2004). The case of Block 23 rooftop extension is interpreted within this context, as well as in relation to the general socio-economic and political conditions of late socialism, the end of the Cold War period, and the impending disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation with the accompanying conflicts across its territory.

By featuring Karatani's concept of "parallax," we presume that the re-reading of Block 23 through two diverse yet related perspectives (parallax view) can bring a new scope of knowledge. To this end, we propose a twofold enquiry. The first point of view is empirical, centred on the conception of everyday life that concerns appropriation and use of space by its inhabitants. It is conducted through historical research and problematises the shift in spatial production and distribution during the 1980s and 1990s. The second one is analytical, defined by the work of the architect and architectural theoretician Branislav Milenković. It sheds light on the original project and reveals, as Žižek (2010, p. 244) would put it, "the gap inscribed into the 'real' building itself," interpreted hereby as a parallax space. We start from a common historical background of both historical/empirical and analytical/theoretical approaches and seek to find a shift in the diverging discursive positions (parallax gap).

Figure 2. Photo of building no. 6, Block 23 in the present moment.

Thus, following the basic premises of parallax ontology, we have focused our research on the investigation of the spatial changes within Blok 23, in relation to the socio-economic shifts that marked the transition of Yugoslav socialist self-management to capitalist market economy. The concept of parallax promises a heuristic tool capable of grasping both empirical data obtained from field observations and analytical findings derived from theoretical reasoning. Consequently, on the one hand, the problem of research is centred on the potential of the applied methodology to reveal not-so-obvious relations between historical and theoretical approaches, coupled with empirical and analytical investigations. On the other hand, we seek to disclose the capacity of one specific case to adapt to, tune with, and resist the neoliberal market tendencies, accommodating effectively the ever-changing needs of its inhabitants. In a narrower sense, this article is aimed at revealing the specific local implications and transpositions of the neoliberal paradigm. More broadly, the research intends to introduce a new methodological framework that corresponds to the complexity of the research subject and addresses the multiplicity and heterogeneity of research problems. The starting assumption is that the superimposition of two related yet clearly distinctive perspectives of architectural investigation can bring additional and unforeseen insights regarding the production of space in post-socialist times.

1.2. Twofold Methodology of Research

In regard to the first line of research, the case of Block 23 has been investigated through the combination of archive material and field research that included in-depth interviews with residents and photo and graphic documentation, conducted during 2018 and 2019. A total of 42 informal, undirected interviews (Vučinić Nešković, 2013) were conducted with the aim of understanding the intimate history of housing practices of Block 23 residents, but also the wider demographic changes that followed the processes of housing privatisation and demilitarisation. The interviews included residents of various ages and economic and professional dispositions belonging to the first and the second generation of the original tenants, as well as the new economic elite acquiring apartments in New Belgrade blocks (Nikolić, 2023). The motives, ways, and results of spatial appropriation and the differentiation of a particular socio-cultural group associating themselves to JNA (which officially ceased to exist in 1992) even to the present day were documented and further analysed.

Building on the method of undirected interviews within the architectural discourse, Till (2005, pp. 34–37) advocates storytelling as part of an alternative design methodology and proposes the open-ended interview model as a research tool that affirms spontaneity and unexpectedness as important components of the research process. Such research methodology provided the authors of this article with insight into the complex relationship between designed and lived-in spaces, or in Lefebvre's (1992) words, representation of space and spatial practices. Furthermore, it resulted in an immersive experience that develops a new point of view striving to understand the singular, lived experiences of the individual resident and urban community of the Block. As storytelling became a tool for "locating the individual in shared spaces" (Till, 2005, p. 37), we were able to document, understand, and graphically represent the everyday practices of Block 23 residents and their spatial manifestations (Figure 10). By combining architectural and ethnographic research methods, we aimed to explore the potential of architectural drawing as a tool competent to inform interdisciplinary studies (Stender, 2017). The ethnographic nature of this research approach echoes the methodologies previously engaged in architectural studies during the 1970s (the time the Block was built), the academic milieu that also emanated the grounds for our second, analytical point of view of the enquiry.

Both the academic and the housing construction context of the 1960s and 1970s Yugoslavia had made way for the emergence of various scientific and applied architecture study groups which contributed to pioneering housing standards, inventive design patterns, and experimental research methodologies. Beyond their exceptional contribution to the Yugoslav scene of urban and architectural competitions (Aleksić, 1975; Baylon, 1975), the authors of Block 23 took part in different areas of housing research and design; Stjepanović worked in academia, teaching courses in housing design, while Janković and Karadžić participated in developing housing norms and standards within prominent research group Centar za Stanovanje IMS (Centre for Housing, Institute for Testing Materials in Serbia; Badnjar-Gojnić, 2019). At the same time, the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Belgrade advanced the postgraduate study program Stanovanje (Housing). The course encouraged qualitative research exploring the subjects of everyday life, the socially sustainable future of mass housing and other humanist approaches to housing design. One of the most prominent and prolific scholars in this field, and the essential figure in the organisation of this course, was Branislav Milenković.

The specificity of Milenković's analytical work in relation to our research is contained in his study of complex, dynamic spatial relationships and exploration through drawing. His body of work is highly referential as he was an eminent figure in the Yugoslav architectural context, engaged as a practising architect, university professor, and PhD-qualified researcher. Simultaneously, he was an active member of various professional associations, institutes, and commissions, and participated in numerous discussions about design standardisation. His position was defined as trans-disciplinary: anchored in urbanism, architecture, and engineering and shaped by the evolving discussions on anthropological, sociological, and philosophical questions. Milenković referred to a few contemporaries in both international and local contexts, thus establishing an authentic and autonomous stand, not aligned to any specific political current or theoretical or philosophical movement. When reflecting on spatial relations and fundamental oppositions in spatial notions, he leaned onto Heidegger's writings but dominantly focused on Lefebvre's work, specifically on the matter of dialectics traced by Slovenian philosopher Vojan Rus (1969). The systematisation of spatial oppositions, as one of the essential points of his approach, was grounded in the structuralist reasoning of Dutch architect Aldo Van Eyck. With the imperative to inspect the relations between the various scales—from urban to architectural,—Milenković investigated the logics of cross-scale thinking found in the work of Serbian philosopher Božidar Knežević (1920) and the science of ekistics by Greek urban planner and architect Constantinos Apostolou Doxiadis (1968). Milenković's particular perspective and engagement position his architectural analysis between various professional fields and address the very essence of design research.

By distancing himself from housing policies and mass construction politics during the 1950s–1970s in Yugoslavia, including the specific case of New Belgrade development, Milenković placed problematisation at the core of his research and design approach. He identified the perils caused by the growing urgency for housing construction and chronic deficit of housing space (due to vast rural-to-urban migrations and the Second World War damage) as the need for "large numbers" which degraded architectural units and urban compositions (Milenković, 1972, p. 26). Hence, the employment of Milenković's analysis in the case of Block 23 represents a new, specific contribution to our field of work.

Instead of striving for a definitive organisation of space, Milenković foregrounded changing spatial conditions and the inhabitant's experience. In an effort to propose a comprehensive and delicate methodological apparatus for architectural design, the author built a multidisciplinary research system where

the drawing, founded on theoretical and philosophical discussions, plays the central role (Bnin-Bninski, 2018). His idea to initiate new readings and provoke debate on the problems of time, change, and movement in the design process makes his research approach relevant to present-day investigations of urban and architectural practice. In this regard, we employ the architectural drawing to explore how were the transitional (parallax) spaces, opened up by the design of Block 23, adopted and co-opted in the new historical circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s, which culminated with pauperisation and catastrophic wars in Yugoslavia, and how the corresponding adaptation reflected the prolonged and gradual shift from a planned to a free-market economy (Figure 3).

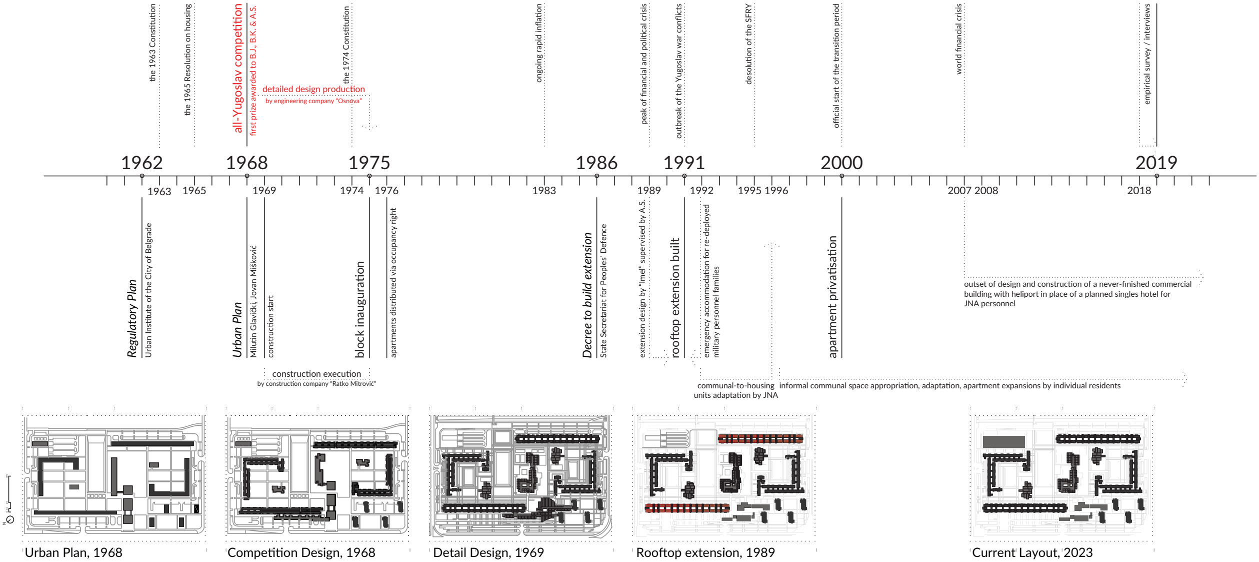


Figure 3. Timeline of Block 23 development and transformation.

2. Case Study: Investigating New Belgrade's Block 23 Through Different Urban and Architectural Scales

2.1. The Transition of the JNA to Liberal Housing Policies

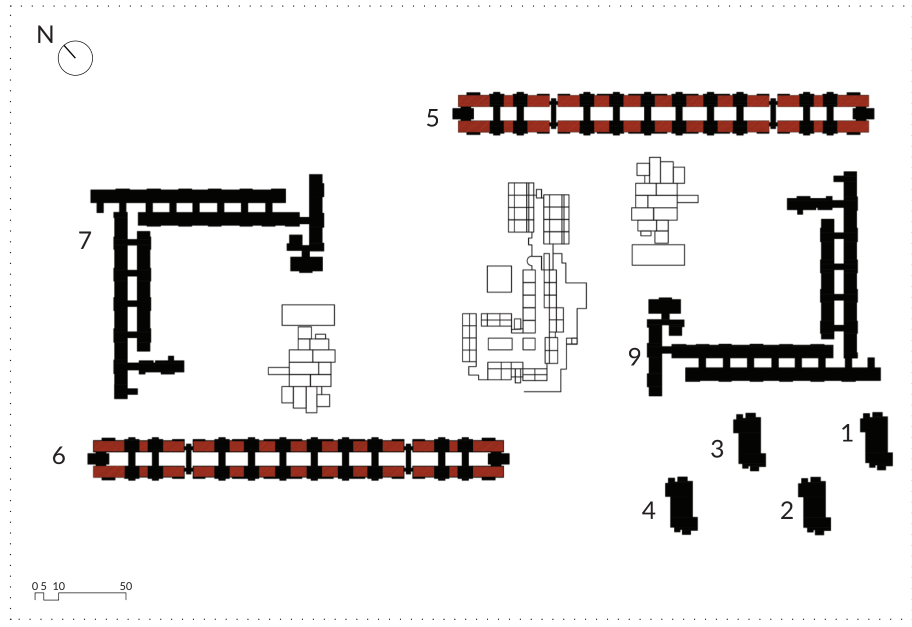
The empirical survey of decades-long exploitation of Block 23 housing space spanning several contextually different periods revealed an inextricable connection between residents' spatial practices and housing design. We would argue that throughout different ideological, socio-political, and economic contexts, the apartment became a spatial mirror of professional and symbolic status, which, in the case of the JNA, was finite in time and without immediate possibility of inheritance. This distinction of the Army experienced a radical transformation during the post-socialist transition period. The previously observed stagnation of the cultural-historical model of the military (Miladinović, 2006) was overcome by the possibility of long-term and multi-generational economic capitalisation of the acquired social capital within the established Yugoslav military elite. This transposition of the capital became even more literal with the accelerated reduction of the military apparatus, whereby the military personnel often sought professional and symbolic emancipation, or experienced the devaluation of previously acquired socio-cultural resources within the service. Housing designed as part of the rooftop extension and communal units of Block 23 repurposed during the 1990s proved to be a potent subject of research on the transformation of spatial practices and the following emergence of new types of spaces.

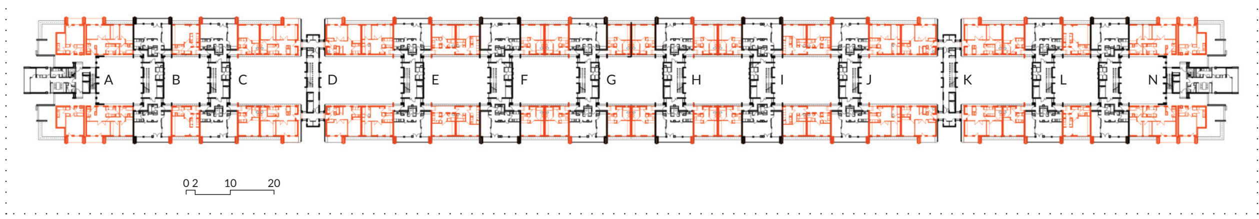
A strategic turn in the JNA housing policies followed the general shift in housing rights and market model. As of the mid-1980s, the JNA turned to a variety of housing loans and small-scale architectural interventions replacing large-scale developments of mass housing, aiming to increase its housing stock without excessive investment. These housing strategies included, among others, the extension of the flat rooftops of socialist-modernist housing estates, and buildings nos. 5 and 6 of Block 23 represented a suitable testing ground. Although the intention to overbuild the Block was documented as early as 1986 ("Tehnički opis," 1989), the extension project was built in 1991, coinciding with radical demographic and political changes within the Yugoslav state. The structure and functional scheme of the newly designed apartments greatly diverged from the original housing design concept and value. Furthermore, the solution to the housing deficit of military personnel was considered an urgent need in comparison to achieving the maximum cost-benefit value of the given space, which resulted in irrational gross areas of apartments with minimal or substandard individual rooms; the apartment surfaces were consumed by long corridors, landings, and vaguely defined areas. In contrast to the more flexible organisation of the original apartment units, the newly built ones, despite the skeletal steel construction, did not offer the possibility of a simple spatial-functional reorganisation (Figure 4).

In anticipation of a military conflict at the beginning of the 1990s, the redeployed JNA personnel also depended on the exploitation of the Block's spatial resources that were not initially intended for housing. JNA's strategies for housing displaced families included the conversion of a series of communal facilities (service, commercial, and social) into residential units. The aforementioned actions were systematic and organised, but consistently accompanied by spontaneous individual practices of appropriating (communal) space. The latter contributed to the spreading of new forms of formal and informal housing practices; for example, the practice of remodelling a flat rooftop as a means of creating additional space (and value) became widespread and is still relevant today.

2.2. The Alternative Production of Space

The main research subject presupposes the intricate superimposition of the rooftop extension and its primary building basis. Between 1989 and 1991, Block 23 underwent spatial and functional changes in order to expand the JNA's housing stock. Coinciding with the onset of the Yugoslav Civil War and the accompanying redeployment of JNA officials from other Yugoslav republics, 96 new housing units were allocated mainly to these displaced families. We further examine how the socio-spatial strategies made possible by the socialist housing system, which arose as a result of a specific state of emergency, later mutated into a widespread housing practice of the post-socialist model of a free market economy, often debasing the wider urban space and community. It can be argued that this strategy of housing redeployed or displaced military personnel changed the image and urban fabric of New Belgrade and that these changes became permanent during the transition to an open housing market (Dukanac, 2019). This strategy led to practices that can be interpreted as an alternative production of space (Lefebvre, 1992), which, in the conditions of demilitarisation of residential and urban space, more clearly established the socio-cultural group of the members of the JNA. In the interviews conducted as part of this research, this group was particularly verbalised in the cases of displaced families of JNA personnel in relation to the rest of the residents of Block 23 and New Belgrade. This was partially due to significant changes in the original tenants following the process of privatisation and subsequent increase in housing mobility. For this reason, it became questionable whether Block 23 residents' spatial practices can be understood through interviews





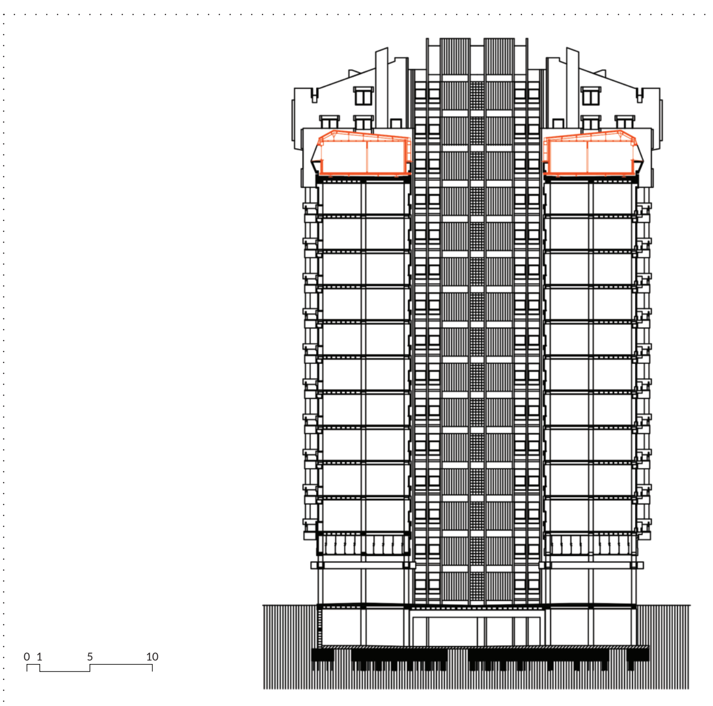


Figure 4. Rooftop extension rendered in red colour throughout various scales and plans.

based on the premise of a representative agent (Bourdieu, 2010). Conversely, ensuing the 1990s crisis, a certain collective self-image was created during the complex process of acquiring a home and the right to an apartment, under the conditions of an emergency situation—a process that caused permanent housing insecurity among the displaced families. This insecurity, on the one hand, represented an escalation of the previously formed isolation of this social group due to insufficiently developed "interest networks" that would correspond to the status acquired during the period of the dominant ideological and social role of the JNA (Miladinović, 2006); on the other hand, it progressed into marginalisation caused by the loss of the original social networks and subcultural entities, leaving this specific group of tenants in a kind of spatial and social limbo.

Buildings nos. 5 and 6 were originally designed as two-tract slabs with rhythmical stairwell interruptions creating a series of inner courtyards. The otherwise longitudinal, repetitive design of the buildings was vertically accented by atypical two-floor-level apartment units positioned in line with transverse stairwell slats. The volume design was further broken down by elaborate facade modelling enabled by the advanced concrete prefabrication industry (Jovanović, 2021) which sparked the coinage of Block 23's colloquial design brand, the so-called "concrete baroque" (Jovanović, 2019, p. 43). Such a design approach scaled down the grand volume of the buildings and made it possible to organise residential slats as groups of four two-side-oriented apartments. Noticing the development of the typification trend, as well as the aspiration of the socially oriented housing construction towards prefabrication on the one hand and "the increasingly complex needs of the modern family for which the apartment in today's living and working conditions acquires a much more important and complex significance," ("Tehnički izveštaj," 1975, pp. 1–6) on the other hand, the architects assumed the principles of designing a typical apartment unit. These principles included the disposition of the "basic core" which would enable the optimal structure of the housing stock with minor modifications, the application of a prefabricated building system, the division of the housing unit into "external and internal areas" in relation to the orientation within the two-track assembly, as well as the division into day/night and private/family zones. Such principles aimed at enriching "the possibility of a more diverse use of…space, which, with its size, position and connections in relation to…parts of the apartment, should achieve a more modern type of housing in more modest conditions" ("Tehnički izveštaj," 1975, pp. 1–6). "More diverse use" of the housing unit was also made possible by the position of the dining area, as well as the combinatorics of movable partitions, which resulted in the performance of multiple circulation routes within the apartment (Figure 5).

The rooftop extension added from two to six new residential units per slat; the units were modest in space (27–42 m^2), consisting of an entrance hall, a kitchen with a dining room, a bathroom, and one or two rooms. Although not initially intended for multi-member households, these apartments provided the necessary space for redeployed families. At the same time, the rhythmic architectural accents in the linear, repetitive structure of buildings nos. 5 and 6 were reduced. The documentation that followed the design of Block 23 revealed constant negotiations between the investor and the designer in order to achieve the highest possible value for the apartment, residential complex, and the entire block. Per contra, the dialectical relationship between assumed and real needs of inhabitants, which mostly took place spontaneously, without (preserved) documentation, informally, and sometimes illegally, was examined through field research insight into the lived experiences of tenants and their personal archives, memories, and impressions.

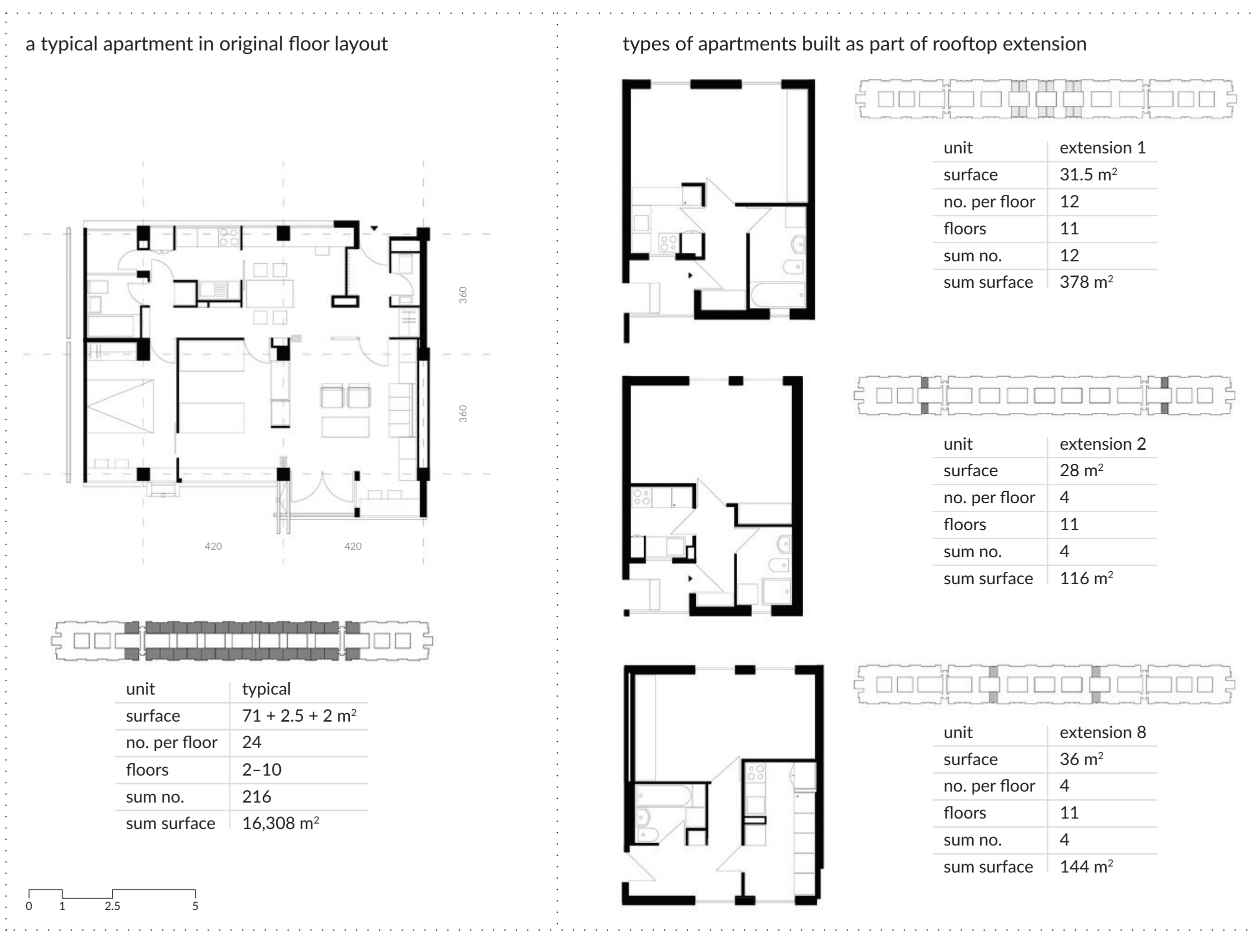


Figure 5. Typical apartment plans: Original vs. added.

In the transition from self-managed socialism and socially-directed housing construction to a free market, the apartments of Block 23 were almost all privatised, including those that were part of the strategy of housing displaced military personnel. During the precarious economic, political, and cultural period of Yugoslavia, the JNA emerged as a socio-cultural paragon which, with the support of budget funds, provided a testing ground for new models of housing construction, including the blocks of New Belgrade. Such power dynamics persisted into the period of economic stagnation, political disunity, and social turmoil resulting in very different housing practices. However, in the present moment, the individual users of the housing stock and the urban community of Block 23 participate in the dialectical process of building a new space of representation through the questioning of the inferred spatial and social patterns and practices of appropriating space (Lefebvre, 1992). These practices were documented and represented by way of three-dimensional architectural views enriched with prosaic, everyday sentiment (Figure 10). Their spatial manifestations incorporate appropriated common spaces such as communal facilities (repair shops, recreational units for pensioners, laundry and housing council rooms, and similar), passages, parts of inner courtyards, hallways, corridors, and stairwell landings, as well as rooftop terraces, much in contrast to the official JNA housing policies that produced the original urban image of the Block. To summarise the analysis of Block 23, it can be argued that, through the dialectical relationship of housing standards created by the participation of the professional and academic community and the military sector and the daily life practices of tenants, a process of "alternative production of space" was created (Lefebvre, 1992). Such production is further explored by way of analytical tools derived from Milenković's theoretical work.

3. Parallax in Drawing Research: Re-Reading Branislav Milenković's Analytical Method

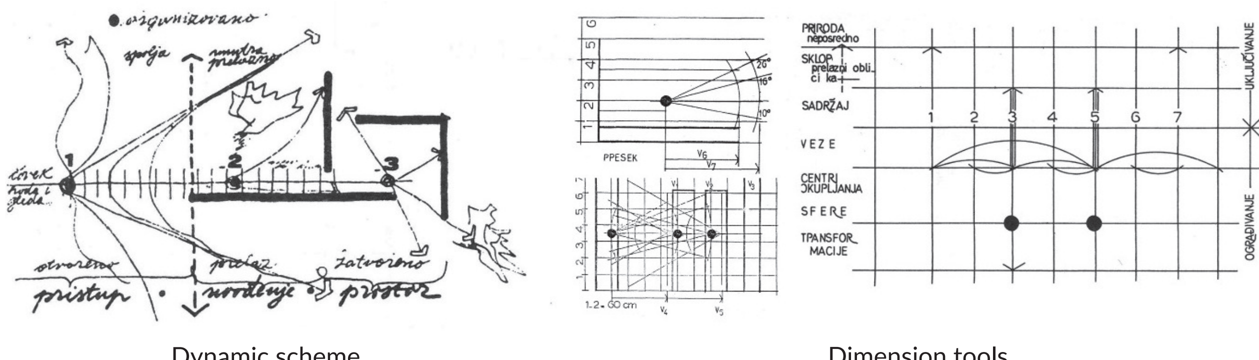
In Žižek's interpretation, the parallax gap is not just a matter of shifting perspective, but it is inscribed into the material existence of the building itself, "as if the building…bears the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives" (Žižek, 2010, p. 244). In this respect, he refers to interstitial spaces, created between the skin and the content of a building, named "poche" or "spandrels," and described as any geometric configuration of space left over as a consequence of other architectural decisions. These phenomena, argues Žižek, open up the space for co-options, that is the "architectural exaptations." The distinctive guidelines for conceptualisation and analysis of parallax spaces, we would argue, can be found in the theoretical work of Branislav Milenković.

To challenge the dominant architectural production, Milenković is introducing the concept of "single-space–multi-space relationship" (*jednoprostor–višeprostor*), established upon prioritising the spatial condition "enclosed–included" over other spatial dualities (Milenković, 1972, p. 18). He describes the idea of single space as organically evolved from the common notion of "the heart of the home" (a home's central point traditionally used for family gatherings) and argues that the act of enclosing and distributing the internal space of the home results from the concept of "single space" and the particularities of its use, rather than presupposed design standards. "Each space encloses while being included in a specific way, thus all essential organic transitions from one polarity to the other—from enclosure to inclusion—are opened" (Milenković, 1972, p. 18). Such a design approach, Milenković claims, provides dynamic spatial organisation open to the unpredictability and variability of future use. Consequently, the housing design standards would not be relevant as "the difference in standards doesn't reduce the family's affiliation…the centre of the house is a place that radiates, and from which complete space, organic, rich in illusions and perspectives, an open space for deliberate and spontaneous is developed" (Milenković, 1972, p. 19). This kind of space has a nuanced scale of distribution that begins with a precise organisation stemming from the exterior, moving through fine internal partitions, and concluding with intermediate spaces or alterations in the horizontal surfaces. It is precisely in this relationship of horizontal surfaces that Milenković sees the potential for a possible departure from the demands of economy and functionality urged by the market. He further dwells on this issue by introducing the concept of "transitional space," which could connote the relationship between the internal and external atmosphere (Milenković, 1972, p. 105).

3.1. Drawing Analysis

The role of the drawing in Milenković's design analysis is essential and multifold. It correlates to a spectrum of theoretical, philosophical, and practice-based assumptions, acting as a mediator, with meticulously developed autonomy from textual content. While some drawings act as explanations or tests for his analytical hypothesis, others are introduced as design research tools open for application, interpretation, and enhancement. Considering our research framework, we point out two specific types of Milenković's drawings, devised as drawing tactics (Bnin-Bninski, 2018, p. 235): "dynamic scheme" and "dimensional tools." Both drawing tactics consider the problems of time and movement as essential elements of design practice and are thus interpreted as appropriate for a multi-scale approach in our investigation. The two drawing tactics are here employed successively as two analytical procedures on distinct spatial levels. Firstly, the "dynamic scheme" is applied as a tool for examining, testing, and understanding the dynamic relations. Secondly, the "cross-scale analytical instrument" is derived from Milenković's three-dimensional tools: limits of visual field, spheres of communication, and operational scheme. Conjointly with the "dynamic scheme,"

the newly developed analytical instrument is engaged to propose a delicate cross-scale research platform focused on the Block's inhabitants through a synchronised polygon of multiple urban and architectural scales (apartment, building, and block transitions; Figure 6).



Dynamic scheme

Dimension tools

Figure 6. Dynamic scheme and dimensional tools: Limits of visual field, spheres of communication, and operational scheme. Source: Milenković (1972, p. 68).

3.1.1. Dynamic Scheme

The focus of the dynamic scheme is the concept of advent (*pojava*), which Milenković defined through the emergent values interconnecting the user's activities, spatial dynamics, and environmental influences. The dynamic scheme is rooted in the notion of transitional space as a vital concern in Milenković's analysis. It primarily employs a horizontal plan to articulate problems of temporality and movement and is rendered through various line qualities, numeration, and text. One particular drawing is highlighted here as a representative of the dynamic scheme; it is not named but described by the author:

> Three key moments are in the space between the open, natural, i.e., urban environment and the enclosed, new environment: access (*pristup*), entrance (*uvod*) and the interior space—The user is in front of the form, still undecided to subdue (*osvoji*) it, while the form remains in their visual field. The second is the moment of entrance or the particular time of shift between the two environments—external and internal. The third moment is the interior space itself. (Milenković, 1972, p. 10)

The notion of the moment in Milenković's analysis can be traced to Lefebvre's theory. In his critique of everyday life, Lefebvre points out that critique is implicit in the moments of unpredictability and surprise, which he attributes to a surreal experience as opposed to reality (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 29). He argues that such a moment is an integral part of everyday life and contains pleasures that overcome its oppositions between lightness and weight, seriousness and frivolity. Regardless of the fact that Milenković formulated habitation as a place of safety and freedom, he opened his studies of the lived-in space to the criticism of everyday life in the specific Yugoslav context; this is most clearly reflected in his use of the concepts of moment and advent. To summarise, the advent is defined by the user's activities, spatial dynamics, and environmental influences, while the notion of the moment is used to capture, explore, and further elaborate the particularity and uniqueness of the advent.

In the interest of understanding the advent in the context of Block 23 in the period of the neoliberal turn, we pursue an in-depth analysis based on the employment and interpretation of Milenković's dynamic scheme.

Relying on his ideas of "transitional space" and moments of transition (implying the very nature of parallax spaces), we explore the spatial and social capacities of the Block, with a specific focus on the relation between various scales. The reference time point—the built state of the Block in 1975 (Figure 4)—enables the analysis of the implicit architectural questions in turbulent times that followed. Dwelling on the movement of an inhabitant and their relation to socio-political circumstances, we are looking back to the 1970s in order to understand why and how this housing neighbourhood exhibited certain architectural resilience. Here analysed are five specific moments of the inhabitant's transition through Milenković's lens: (M1) the Block entrance, from the highway bridge; (M2) the building entrance, through the atrium space; (M3) the hallway entrance, from the elevator to the apartment; (M4) the typical apartment entrance in buildings nos. 5 and 6; (M5) the rooftop entrance from the hallway stairs (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Dynamic schemes of transition moments identified via a cross-section of Block 23 designed as part of the urban plan from 1968. Source: "Tehnički izveštaj" (1975; intervention made by the authors).

3.2. Cross-Scale Analytical Instrument

The moments of transition explored through dynamics schemes revealed a spectrum of various in-betweens, transitional spaces, and spatial gaps. Yet this study correspondingly exposed the impossibility of cross-scale perspective. This matter is further questioned on a consecutive analytical level, centred on the inhabitant as a common and essential anchor of all examined scales. This problem was repeatedly scrutinised by Milenković, who proposed specific research tools, with an emphasis on dimensional analysis, as permanently present in the design process. He believed that the established practice of space dimensioning reduces the importance of measurement procedures to preparatory actions (Milenković, 1972, p. 59). On the contrary, the author claims that the constant verification of dimensional relations between the user's gestures and the surroundings is necessary and crucial for design practice.

With the intent to enable the cross-scale perspective (while focusing on the inter-scale relations), we directly transpose his theoretical and schematic hypothesis onto the design research via a newly proposed instrument, formulated as the theoretical-analytical drawing. In this process, the “operational scheme” is considered a cross-scale platform as it attempts to couple fluid scales of dimensioning (approaching and distancing) with the primary differentiation of space by means of enclosure and inclusion. The intention of this scheme is to consider the transformability of space and to “investigate the elasticity of space [for] all situations that cannot be fully predicted” (Milenković, 1972, p. 69).

The theoretical platform of the “operational scheme” is further elaborated with the interpretation of two other dimensional drawings: *spheres of communication* and *limits of the visual field* (Milenković, 1972, p. 68, 1985, p. 62). These drawings concern the dimensioning of the basic “spheres of spatial determination” (*sfere opredeljenja*) that generates the refined relationship between the individual and the environment. Relying on the module of 60 cm, the dimensioning of the “spheres of communication” refers to the nuance of spatial relations between intimate (15–45 cm), personal (45–75–120 cm), social (120–210–360 cm), and public sphere (360–750 cm). While the drawing regarding the spheres of communication uses a horizontal plan to develop the argument, the drawing regarding the limit of the visual field relies on a section view to demonstrate different viewing angle boundaries, whereby the total field is 120°, peripheral 90°, central 30°, and the field of maximum sharpness is 1–2°. Having established them on these three analytical tools, Milenković places the metric scales of spatial relations in the very focus of the measurement process and irrevocably relates them to the user and their perception as the only relevant criteria. Following his assumptions, we propose the theoretical-analytical drawing, i.e., the “cross-scale analytical instrument,” stressing the role and the importance of the inhabitant, their movement, and needs (Figure 8).

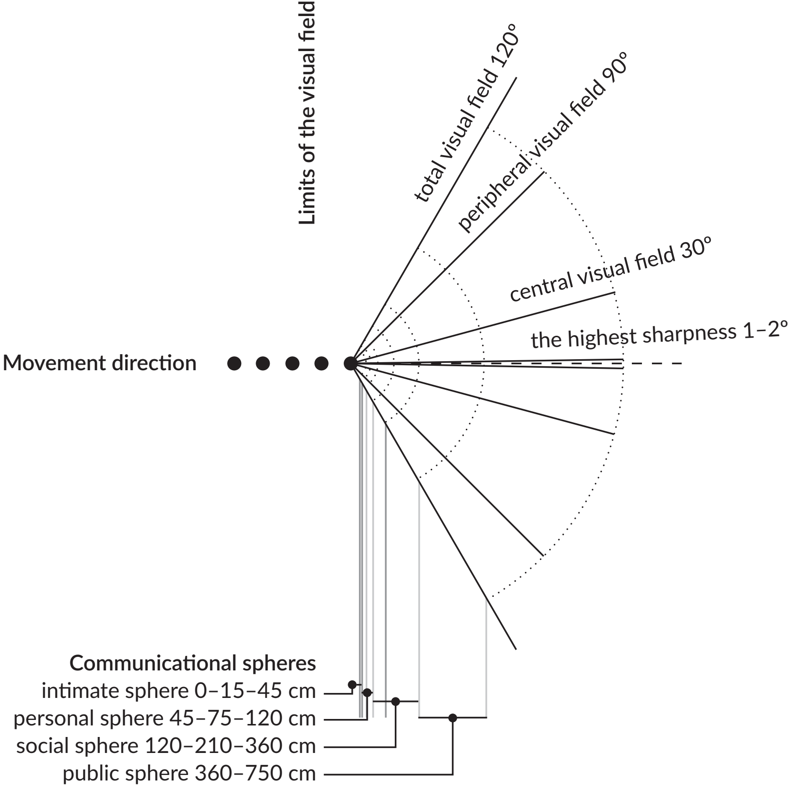


Figure 8. Cross-scale analytical instrument.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The difficulty of combining historical and architectural critical discourse, the latter being restricted by architectural tools and procedures, was detected by Tafuri (1968/1980), approximately at the same time as the architectural project for Block 23 and Milenković's theoretical and analytical apparatus emerged. While claiming that there cannot be a true complementarity between architectural and historical critical discourse, Tafuri (1980, p. 109) remarks that "they can converse with each other but they cannot complete each other, because the two find themselves, inevitably, in competition." By assuming that this gap can be meaningful and productive, we have juxtaposed the two research methodologies, in search of the parallax effect.

The peculiarity of spatial production, appropriations, and reappropriations in the case of Block 23 indicates the high complexity of the neoliberal turn in the historical context of Yugoslavia/Serbia/Belgrade. Rather than a U-turn, the shift to a free-market economy should be seen as a gradually progressive curve, which implies it belongs to a broader chronology that began around 1965 and ended with the disintegration of Yugoslavia (1991–2003). Conceived and built at the peak of socialist growth, already fuelled by the market economy, Block 23 reflects both the virtuosity of spatial production in late socialism and contains traces of its crisis and subsequent collapse. The historical narrative informed by empirical surveys shows that the spatial changes during the 1980s and 1990s were apparently minor but substantial. In relation to socio-political background, the type and scope of spatial transformations speak of systemic appropriation and usurpation of the common spaces and the existing building infrastructure, initially supported by state institutions. Paradoxically, the mega-structures of the socialist-modernist mass housing settlement were able to absorb the side-effects of the social turn: from "the bad taste of its inhabitants" (Tafuri, 1976) to the new developments, marked by the unfinished office building at the corner of the Block, serving as a true expression of ambitions and perils of construction under the free-market economy (Figure 9; see also Figure 3).

On the other side, theoretical assay through analytical drawings discloses the intrinsic logic and spatial relations indicated by the original design. By deciphering the specific spatial constellations, initially distinguished as a parallax gap, that is "the inscription of our changing temporal experience when we approach and enter the building" (Žižek, 2010, p. 245), the analysis speaks of openness to changes and points to the type and scope of changes the design invoked. Ranging from intimate to environmental scale and from everyday life adjustments to emergency dwelling construction, the spatial transformations reflect, not only the changing needs of the inhabitants but the overall social and economic shift. The moments of transition explored through dynamic schemes revealed a spectrum of various spatial in-betweens. These interstitial spaces, argues Žižek (2010, p. 278), are "the proper place for utopian dreaming—they remind us of architecture's great politico-ethical responsibility: much more is at stake in architectural design than may at first appear."

With his newly coined term "geometrical schematism," Milenković uses terminology issued from architectural drawing to disapprove the simplification and banalisation of the (current) design process. In relation to other modes of critical practice within the broader discourse of Yugoslav architectural modernism (Milinković, 2013), his criticism of social circumstances is contained in the method itself. Finally, Milenković suggests that focusing on the problem conception, instead of the space formulation, could be a pivotal point in architectural design. From the perspective of a designer, he places the problem at the crossroads between the user's needs, client,

spatial issues, formal determinants, and general environmental conditions, while rethinking both social and climatic prerequisites. He underlines that it is not possible to reduce the housing design process to standards and dimensions prescribed by a handbook, rather that it is necessary to consider the mutability of space and its orientation to the environment to achieve particular inhabitation quality and social, economic, and environmental durability.

Both perspectives speak of lost expertise. The fact that one of the architects of the original project from 1968 has signed the 1989 project for remodelling of flat roofs only stresses the fact that the wastage was not personal, but structural: the knowledge and expertise were still present and available, but the conditions for their implementation changed fundamentally. Indeed, the pioneering housing standards, inventive design patterns and experimental research methodologies became obsolete within the pervasive landscape of the free market (see Blagojević, 2008). Analysis of the specific moments of the inhabitant's transition, supplemented by the "cross-scale analytical instrument," comprises the fragments of this critical knowledge. In the final step, we paired them up with correlative graphical simulations, informed by qualitative field research, capturing the perplexities of everyday life (Figure 10). Still avoiding the overlap of the two parallel lines of thought, we have cautiously brought them together, thus opening the space for novel investigations and new interpretative keys.

Figure 9. Photo of present-day Block 23. Note: Building no. 7 is superimposed with the unfinished office building.

The moments of the inhabitant's transition can be traced back to the dynamic schemes (Figure 7) where they were identified within the urban plan, stressing the cross-scale experience through the previously discussed topic of the entrance (M1–M5). The newly created "cross-scale analytical instrument" is applied directly to each of the five dynamic schemes. This procedure implies that multiple design research tools from Milenković's analysis were applied simultaneously with the aim of inspecting the transitional as the substance of parallax space. The study of the transition moments (from the intimate to the public sphere, from the Block to the dining room) stands in parallel to the vertical sequence of descriptive perspective drawings representing the parallax spaces in present-day situations. The detailed descriptive drawings outline the findings of the empirical survey that corresponds to the five dynamic schemes. Horizontally related, schemes and perspectives highlight the timespan of 50 years. The two lines of thought (analytical and empirical) refer to the concept of parallax view as they execute diverse methodological stands on the same question.

By utilising the parallax view to disclose the inherent logic and potential of parallax spaces, this research corresponds to its twofold objectives. In broader terms, it questions the dominant narratives on the neoliberal turn that assume a univocal transition from the welfare state, that is state-interventionist models, towards the contemporary global doctrine of laissez-faire market economy. The chosen case of Block 23 shows an exquisite complexity and a particular mode of resilience that both reflect and subvert the dominant paradigm, thus evoking the question of the great politico-ethical responsibility of architecture, as urged by Žižek. At the same time, the conducted research offers a methodological conception which expands the scope of investigative strategies able to respond to the complexity of contemporary themes and problems. By developing and crossing the diverse research tools, particularly informal undirected interviews and theoretical-analytical drawings, we aimed to sharpen the instruments of critical reading and understanding. Future research could build on both the specific methodological approach and the key findings of the article, ranging from lost and obsolete modernist expertise to the capability of certain, in this case, modern architectural heritage to absorb the mutations caused by neoliberal tendencies and the capacity of parallax spaces to anticipate, accommodate, and resist the future changes.

Figure 10. Juxtaposing the parallax viewpoints. Note: The detected parallax spaces of Block 23 are interconnected and showcased using two different research methodologies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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