

**Viktória Szirmai**

# “Artificial Towns”

## in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**Social Polarisation**

**in the New Town Regions of East-Central Europe**

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SOCIAL POLARISATION IN THE NEW TOWN REGIONS  
OF EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

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# “Socialist” New Towns’ Development: the Formation Period

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Viktória Szirmai

## Determining urbanistic doctrines

With the new town construction wave following World War II, not only town types lacking historical traditions and spontaneous, organic development spread around Europe (and other parts of the world), but spatial and social formations striving for the regulation of social life, for the management of social conflicts that are well-balanced and capable of eliminating social inequalities and promising well-being for their local community also emerged.

There may be different periods, different manifestations or even different forms and characteristics of building new towns (including for example the new towns and satellite towns), they are mostly planned for different aspects and purposes in various countries. This is the reason why the concept of new towns is not easy to specify, as it can be defined according to several criteria<sup>1</sup>. Among the many criteria history and genesis are the most important ‘which appeared in a certain site practically “at a bare place” in

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<sup>1</sup> New towns must be differentiated from the administratively declared new towns which can be defined on the basis of functional capabilities, regional central roles and the number of population. Although new towns have such characteristics as well because their formation is associated with administrative decisions that are mostly state decisions. What is important here is that this concept is dynamically changing. These towns are characterised by slow changes. It is important for them to have good urban infrastructure which ensures the well-being of the population. Demographic criteria (young population of childbearing age) are also among the major determinants. Although this

accordance with the specially elaborated new urbanistic and architectural concept, or at least with a new general plan.’ (*Szymanska, 2005, p. 2.*)

The introduction of the European new towns developments are really inseparable from the urban doctrines seeking town planning solutions for spatial-social problems, for the negative phenomena of urban sprawl, for urban poverty and overcrowding in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and finding them in the building of new towns. It was Ebenezer Howard, an English architect, who first proposed the introduction of new urban forms, the creation of new suburbs for the remedy of metropolitan social problems (*Howard, 1898*). Howard’s idea aspiring for connecting the urban with the rural style of life was not only promoting the planning of suburban forms but the effects of Howardian doctrine can also be perceived behind the most diverse types of new towns.

The term of new industrial town was first used by Tony Garnier, a French architect, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who for the treatment of industrial production related social problems planned modern, new industrial towns (*Garnier, 1914; Meggyesi, 1985*). Le Corbusier and his staff devoted to modern architecture represent the idea that interfering in social relationships should be done with the creation of new towns in the most mature form. They replaced old towns neither by garden towns, nor by small towns, but rather by highly populated, densely built centres with rich community life opportunities, lively centres, garden towns, villa neighbourhoods around the town centre to ensure separation (*Le Corbusier, 1966*).

The dialogue between the Soviet constructivists and the leading architects of the CIAM group during the twenties was not only of the era’s most exciting – and in its effect still controversial – discussion but it also served as a theoretical ideological basis for a new urban form spreading across the territory of the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern European countries. The building of new dwellings was complemented by such society-shaping

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has changed a lot in different developmental periods, in the first period the differences between the ratio of inflowing migrants and the indigenous population was in favour of the former ones. This rate, however, changed during development, and the proportion of the two types of population has become more balanced in the subsequent periods.

efforts that were aimed at intervening in the processes of social lifestyle by the instruments of planning and architecture and which saw the guarantees of creating new socialist life and society in building new towns (new districts). As an influence of the era's urban thinking, and mostly of CIAM, an avant-garde group of Soviet architects, the Constructivists attached crucial importance to urban planning in creating a new social order, especially to the architecture different from the previous ones, based on rationality, on the principle of utility, on the functional order of elements and on the architecture denying the past and oriented for the future (*Gans, 1979; Guinzburg, 1979*).

Between 1929 and 1931 two trends emerged among the avant-garde architects, one of them was the urbanist, the other was the dezurbanist theory (*Sabsovitch, 1979*). Both trends were for those decentralised industrial and urban developments that later on were realised by the development of cities built next to industrial areas, and giga-investment projects. There was a significant difference between the representatives of the two groups. The urbanists were for decentralised and regional urban development showing some signs of centralised development with towns of 30-60,000 inhabitants while dezurbanists proposed full decentralisation with homogeneously dispersed individual dwellings instead of towns. Both urbanists and dezurbanists sought for the elimination of differences between town and country, and for the establishment of new settlements different from the cities of capitalist societies, with creating and expressing socialist way of life. Despite the debates they agreed that the establishment of a socialist society can be expected from building an institutional system creating the possibilities of living in community.

The CIAM and the constructivists collectively prepared the so-called Collective House, a new type of residence, which attempts to harmonize individual and collective life; it was planned not only for the world of work but also for spending free time. Sabsovitch, the head of urbanists, imagined future socialist cities as a combination of 15-20 huge adjoining community buildings, inhabited by two or three thousand people (*Sabsovitch, 1979b, p. 234.*).

In the 1920s and 1930s, all the Central and Eastern European countries were influenced by the modern architectural concepts. Due to the spread of Stalin's policy, the policy of isolation from the Western relations since the late 1930s in the Soviet Union and

from the middle of the 1940s in Eastern and Central European countries the ideas of modern architecture were gradually abandoned. The socialist economies were unable to follow the modern architectural models and the ruling political powers did not want to satisfy the housing needs of societies. The rational nature of new architecture was not spectacular enough for the political powers. In the Soviet Union using the style of the so-called classic socialist realist architecture seeking for monumentalism was promoted, which according to the political concept was thought to raise the enthusiasm of people with greater efficiency. The new towns of the early 1950s in Eastern and Central Europe were built in this slow and expensive style.

## Principal objectives of new towns development

Settlement and urban policies used urban theories propagating the social opportunities of planning and architecture. Party states proclaimed in the 1950s the idea of founding social change through new towns developments with the purpose of political legitimacy. This ideological purpose of creating conflict-free municipalities sometimes was above any other issues. Regional development processes were subordinated to the interests of accelerated industrialisation, and to the development of heavy industry, energy and metallurgy. In the 1950s, only industrial settlements and towns were developed, while traditional towns and villages were declining.

The central powers considered energy and raw material supply as the preconditions of forced industrial development. When selecting the location of new settlements the proximity to raw material resources was an important aspect. In some countries, for example in the former Soviet Union, a significant part of the raw materials was located in remote areas, far from cities, thus in the Asian regions. And as more than three-quarters of the population lived in the European region, and industrial investments were realised in Siberia and Central Asia they founded new cities for the employees there (*Merlin, 1991, p. 92.*). In Central and Eastern Europe new towns were built mostly next to small villages, small towns, traditionally developed industrial settlements, industrial agglomerations to ensure access to the existing road and transport

network, to maintain contacts with industrial regions, due to the country's regional endowments. The designation of the location of new towns was determined by not only the availability of free labour supply, but also by strategic military considerations.

The number of new towns in the former Soviet Union is more than 1000 with more than 40 million inhabitants; a quarter of the total urban population lives in new towns (*Merlin, 1991, p. 89.*). In Central Europe much fewer new towns were built (in Poland 24, in Slovakia 4, in Hungary 11 urban settlements are classified as new towns). In Hungary, in 2015 3.2% of the total population was living in new towns, which is 4.6% of the total urban population.<sup>2</sup> Many people claim that the new settlements cannot be named as towns. In the early 1950s new towns were mostly the housing estates of factories with deficient facilities unable to serve the needs of the town and its neighbourhood zone. In the first periods of planning there were even no needs for regional functions, although it is a very important criterion for the town. New towns gradually became regional centres only from the 1960s when the conditions of education, health and trade facilities able to serve town's catchment area were created.

In the mid-1950s new towns were built according to a general plan, based on strategic concept, with a complex approach of town building. In several new towns now these are the best neighbourhoods. The new towns or districts built in later periods by the changing standards of modern industrial construction technology are mostly of inferior quality, due to the quantitative approach of flat construction to the purpose of increasing the density of built-in areas, to the aims of saving the costs of public facilities, to the over-centralisation of institutions and to the monotony of architectural styles.

The first generation of new towns was created in connection with the forced development of heavy industry and was built in the spirit of performing industrial functions. (For example, in Poland Żory, Wodzisław, Głogów, Lubin, Tychy were built for coal mining and processing while Polkowice for copper mining. Tatabánya and Komló in Hungary were examples of mining towns; Dunaújváros, Ózd, and the Polish Stalowa Wola are metallurgical towns.)

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Gazetteer of Hungary, 1st January 2015



From the 1960s onwards modern industries, such as hydrocarbon extraction, and chemical industry became the leading powers of development. (Kędzierzyn, Police in Poland and Kazincbarcika, Tiszaújváros in Hungary are functioning as centres for chemical industry.) Nuclear energy sector also created new towns (Paks in Hungary, Obninsk in the former Soviet Union). In the area of the former Soviet Union new towns were built for scientific research centres (Akademgorod and Novosibirsk in Siberia) (*Merlin, 1991, p. 92.*). The central powers also wanted to influence the economy, the territorial decentralisation of population, and the urbanisation of urban peripheries. New settlements were built on the surrounding areas of large cities such as new industrial satellite towns around Moscow and St. Petersburg (*Merlin, 1991, p. 92.*). In connection with the decentralisation of Budapest, the capital of Hungary, the question of building new satellite towns was raised in the 1960s in Hungary as well, but due to the informal conflicts between interests, the fights for resources and the resistance of provincial Hungarian cities this idea was rejected.

The functions and the industrial structure of the new towns of the former socialist countries embodied the demands for centralised power in the 1950s. From the 1970s onwards, industrial roles were less and less influenced by the central government's exclusive criteria, but rather by the new forces of the changed power structure during the reform processes in the meantime; such as the interests of corporate lobbies – which were rather political ideological, standing on the basis of exploiting the legitimacy of the workers' town character than economic. The possibility of enforcing these interests came from the fact that local interests coincided with the central power's political and ideological interests. During the transition period in the 1990s the coincidence of the interests of certain government and specific local power groups in maintaining the existing industrial urban functions was still maintained.