

Past and present of large housing estates in Visegrad countries and Armenia

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Abstract

In all Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), as well as in Armenia, a large proportion of the housing stock consists of blocks of flats erected during the Communist era. Those quarters have become an identical part of the cityscape inducing intense scientific discussion in the field of social sciences including human geography addressing such topics as architectural and spatial planning of housing estates, the analysis of society settled in those blocks of flats or even the psychological effects of the uniform environment on individuals. Following the systemic transformation the possible rehabilitation of the gradually deteriorating housing stock and environment meant a further challenge. Although examples from the West European countries provide significant help and information regarding housing estate rehabilitation, nevertheless due to the different scale of the problem, the altering history and the embeddedness of the topic, discussion on regional level is not only promising but necessary at the same time. This paper focuses on the important questions of large housing estates (LHEs) with special attention to the Visegrad countries and Armenia.

Keywords: large housing estates, Visegrad countries, rehabilitation, social environment

Introduction

“Concrete jungle”, “rabbit hatches”, “concrete deserts”, “vertical slums” – only a few examples of the numerous, not too flattering phrases referring to housing estates all around in the former state-socialist countries. The idea to improve the living conditions of working class by building modern housing estates emerged in the early 20th century but primarily the severe shortage of dwellings after World War II together with the rapid growth of population and the increasing pace of urbanization made housing estates a viable and widespread solution offering home for a great amount of people in need for a relatively cheap price (VAN KEMPEN, R. *et al.* eds. 2005, p. 2).

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Projects like *Million Programme* in Sweden (BORGEGÅRD, L. and KEMENY, J. 2004, p. 37) or state financed house building projects in suburban areas in France were initiated for the similar reason as any other long term housing development plans in the state-socialist countries.

As a result of those programmes ten thousands of flats were constructed all around in Europe, both sides of the Iron Curtain. As MURIE, A. *et al.* (2005, p. 85) points out those blocks of flats share some common features, namely representing the most recent, up-to-date notions on residential construction of the era when they were built, additionally they were financed everywhere by the state, local governments or non-profit organizations. Besides the similarities, substantial differences also need to be highlighted.

First of all, in the former state socialist countries the ratio of population living in large housing estates reaches 40% of urban population. Furthermore, in certain newly established socialist towns or industrial centres housing estates can concentrate 60–80% of the population while in the Western European countries typically less than 10% of the population lives in such blocks of flats (VAN KEMPEN, R. *et al.* eds. 2005, p. 2).

Secondly, in socialist countries housing estates were attractive not only to blue collar workers, but also to middle class families or even representatives of the socialist elite (SZELENYI, I. and KONRÁD, Gy. 1969). Soon after the appearance of pre-fabricated housing, similar tendency was observed for instance in France (BLANC, M. and STÉBÉ, J.-M. 2004, p. 105). Decades later the large housing estates built to solve housing problems of families with low income and other vulnerable groups turned to be the symbols of the social problems. The spatial concentration of poverty in housing estates resulted in growing risk of social (in many cases ethnic) segregation (KEMPER, F.-J. 1998) and the decreasing prestige of those quarters (HASTINGS, A. 2004).

Thirdly, there is a fundamental difference between the most Western and Nordic countries and the former state-socialist states: while the majority of housing estates are owned by public authorities or cooperatives in the former group of countries, in the CEE countries the great majority of these dwellings were sold during the privatization process on discount price and now they are owned by private households. As a consequence, the local governments can only implement limited and rather indirect tools to improve the living conditions of housing estates, while the condominiums made up by the private owners/tenants usually lack the fund to carry out significant rehabilitation (KOVÁCS, Z. and DOUGLAS, M. 2004, pp. 243–244; WASSENBERG, F. *et al.* eds. 2004, p. 24).

Recent developments of housing estate rehabilitation

In the last decade the future perspectives of large housing estates have attracted growing attention in the international literature. In the frame of RESTATE

EU FP5 project, substantial research was carried out in ten European countries in order to clarify processes, and identify problems attached to the decline of housing estates. As research reports of RESTATE project (WĘCŁAWOWICZ, G. *et al.* 2005, etc.) show, the concerns and actual problems demanding research and policy interventions are similar on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the aforementioned differences in social composition or ownership, the former state-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe face specific problems of their own. In Western Europe complex rehabilitation programmes have been designed including the modernization of blocks of flats in terms of energy consumption (e.g. insulation), safety (additional gates), and even, the improvement of connectivity and accessibility of public services are part of these programmes (HELLEMAN, G. and WASSENBERG, F. 2004). Learning from the failures of earlier rehabilitation projects where interventions had exclusively either physical or social objectives, nowadays complex projects are implemented addressing both dimensions (DEKKER, K. and ROWLANDS, R. 2005).

In CEE countries housing estates, more or less, managed to maintain their positions on the housing market and they still represent a fair option for lower middle-class households and young families with children (KOVÁCS, Z. and HERFERT, G. 2012). Unlike in Western Europe, neither influx of immigrants (BONVALET, CH. *et al.* 1995) nor massive depopulation affected them. Notwithstanding, following the transformation, housing estates suffered from a decline in terms of their market position and reputation while signs of growing socio-spatial segregation also appeared. One of the most troublesome tendencies is the relatively high and growing proportion of trapped and unsatisfied households in comparison to the western examples (KOVÁCS, Z. and HERFERT, G. 2012). Tensions may emerge upon this situation on the housing market and within the local society. In those cases complex rehabilitation procedures aimed to influence living conditions in blocks of flats might help to mitigate the situation and decrease the tension.

As housing estates compose relatively massive part of local housing stocks and they bear specific characteristics in CEE countries, including the Visegrad states, a comparative analysis is needed which may offer relevant data similar to the Western European results. It is worth taking a closer look at the present situation and the living conditions in LHEs besides evaluating locally the effects of rehabilitation projects carried out in the region. There have been numerous (mainly state financed) housing estate rehabilitation programmes completed during the last twenty years, though most of them focused on the reduction of energy consumption of buildings with central heating (BIERZYŃSKI, A. *et al.*).

Since the permanent growth of maintenance costs has been perceived as the biggest downgrading factor, the renewal of insulation, the change of

windows and doors, the removal of poisoning asbestos and the external painting have been the most commonly applied renovation works. If one would like to evaluate the effects of such kind of projects, s/he will find many difficulties as even the technical terms applied in the literature and the renovation work they include shows a great variety. The terms like “revitalization”, “renovation”, “humanization”, “rehabilitation”, “reconstruction” are all commonly used in policy documents or public discourses but in most cases the actual meaning of them are dissimilar or overlapping from country to country. The main question is whether the renovation programmes could improve the prestige of housing estates (or their positions on the housing market)?

Conclusion

The future of large housing estates remains a challenge both in Western and Eastern Europe in spite of the changing socio-spatial context and problems. Due to the fact that one of the most obvious shared legacies of the former state-socialist countries are the large housing estates that shape the urban landscapes from Berlin to the Caucasus (and beyond), it is worth taking a snapshot about current situation of those estates.

With the support of the International Visegrad Fund, in the frame of HEAS project (Residential Environment in Housing Estates in V4 countries and Armenia), a group of young researchers made an attempt to evaluate the present state of selected housing estates with special attention to the rehabilitation of pre-fabricated houses and the residential environment in Budapest, Bratislava, Katowice, Brno and Yerevan.

The first article written by Pavel ŠUŠKA and Linda STASÍKOVÁ offers a brief overview about the history of Petržalka in Bratislava, one of the largest housing estates in the region which manifests some typical problems of LHES. From Bratislava we move on to Brno to familiarize with three housing estates and how they are perceived by local inhabitants. The research conducted by Ivan ANDRÁŠKO, Pavlína LESOVÁ, Josef KUNC and Petr TONEV point out how different imaginations and opinions can coexist about housing estates: residents tend to be more satisfied with their own neighborhoods which may indicate the existence of “local patriotism” in housing estates. Additionally, the role of media in influencing peoples’ opinions about residential quarters is also important to mention.

The three following papers report about the present state of housing estates taking into account the effect of implemented and planned rehabilitations as well. Three housing estates in Katowice are analyzed shortly in Agata WARCHALSKA-TROLL’s paper highlighting, among others, the relation between the social status of residents and their willingness to take part in rehabilita-

tion investments. Balázs SZABÓ introduces the spatial peculiarities of the rehabilitation of large housing estates in Budapest, highlighting the tendency how residents of low status estates perceive rehabilitation as a possible tool to preserve their position on the real estate market.

In the former Soviet socialist republic, Armenia, due to the immense political and economic difficulties of the 1990s, both on the evaluation of the housing stock and the rehabilitation of large housing estates were delayed. The author, Tigran SARGSYAN calls attention to one of the interesting findings of a survey carried out in the framework of HEAS project in Yerevan LHEs: although the housing estates in Yerevan are in relatively bad conditions, both in terms of internal (e.g. lack of safety) and external features (e.g. poor condition of greenery) their residents are quite satisfied with the blocks of flats they live in.

We do hope that this colorful imaginary journey may contribute to the better understanding of recent issues and processes of housing estates in Visegrad countries and Armenia.

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