

Overall Layout of Socialist and Post-Socialist Large Housing Estates in Croatia

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1 ABSTRACT

The study compares the overall layout of socialist (old) and post-socialist (new) large housing estates (LHEs) in Croatian large cities that depends on daily basis equipment and public infrastructure. The existence and quality of primary facilities and infrastructure is different in new settlements, where it is more often reduced in comparison to old settlements. The main differences occurred during the last three decades of transition and market-led economy adopted by Croatia, when the construction of multi-family buildings became commercial and private, and when the construction of urbanistically planned housing estates as housing units became mostly abandoned. For the analysis, the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews with experts (N=26) was used, which was conducted in Croatia during 2022 as part of a joint and bilateral project between Croatia and Slovenia. The current study analyses attitudes of experts on how socialist and post-socialist LHEs in four major Croatian cities (Osijek, Rijeka, Split, and Zagreb) fulfill residents' daily, primary level needs. Experts show that it is the level of neighborhood in which elementary differences in these estates can be seen, and that basic facilities used daily by the residents (school, kindergarten, health center, public transport, green spaces, public spaces etc.) often lack in new residential construction. Therefore, at the level of estates, socialist estates show that they are often better equipped than post-socialist estates, with more public and green spaces and facilities. Due to a large density of building during the transition period new housing estates experience a reduction in public services, green areas and equipment, and therefore a neglect of residents' needs. New residential construction is shown to be reduced in terms of the multifunctionality of space and estate, which should be urbanistically, sustainably and ecologically desirable, but it is often not the case. Thus, the architectural appearance of the post-socialist estate is inadequately adaptive for the residents, because it is too densely built and inhumane in its overall layout, with inadequate infrastructure and facilities, unlike the socialist estates that are, although older and more derelict, more desirable to the residents for everyday living. It is therefore necessary to regulate the future process of planning and housing construction through the national legal framework.

Keywords: primary neighbourhood equipment, residential satisfaction, old (socialist) and new (post-socialist) large housing estates, quality of housing, comparative analysis

2 INTRODUCTION

The study is related to a research conducted bilaterally between Slovenia and Croatia¹ that aimed to analyse the quality of housing and estate equipment at the level of both states, and to explore the residents' perception on housing in large housing estates of the socialist and post-socialist period. Large housing estates built after the Second World War in the socialist system period (1945-1990) were comparatively selected, along with new or post-socialist estates built in the period of transition, or the post-socialist period, respectively (after 1990). Two types of estates in these neighboring countries have a similar history of development of large housing estates, both in the former system in Yugoslavia, and after the 1990s, since their independence until today. This common tradition is in the context of housing policy interesting for comparison in the research and scientific sense, but also for bringing certain recommendations for possible improvements and renewal of housing estates and multi-family buildings at the level of each particular country. Nevertheless, the aim of the present analysis was only Croatia and its sample of largest cities, because the common methodology did not employ all identical methods.

The joint project included the use of mix methodology, i.e. the quantitative method of questionnaire survey and the qualitative method of focus groups, conducted at the level of both countries. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper there was not enough space to present all the employed methods and obtained results.

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Additionally, in Croatia the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews with experts was also carried out, which was not conducted in Slovenia, so that we decided to present only the basic findings of this qualitative method. Therefore, the current study will explore how experts in Croatia see socialist and post-socialist LHEs comparatively between these two types of estates, socialist and post-socialist. The content analysis of experts' attitudes, whose domain of work is related to spatial and urbanistic topics, explored to what extent the differences between these estates are present at the level of neighborhood and everyday life, and of their overall layout. It was especially analysed how much LHEs fulfill residents' daily needs for public and green spaces and facilities, and what suggestions and improvements they offer. These improvements are important in the context of potential renewal and revitalization of old, and improvement of life quality in new estates. As Croatian national housing policy is still in the process of development, and political and legal formulation, it needs to be pointed out that it is still trying to adapt to existing European trends, declared primarily in The New Leipziger Charter, 2020 and the New Urban Agenda 2023. In these documents, basic principles of development of contemporary cities are highlighted, such as sustainable, safe, inclusive, green and resilient cities. Nevertheless, everyday life in Croatian LHEs, especially in the largest cities, demonstrates how much these principles are still deviated from and hard to implement. In that sense, there is a national housing strategy envisioned for 2024 in Croatia, which could additionally strengthen a more sustainable and nature-based developmental direction, which has to this point been minimal.

3 SOCIALIST AND POST-SOCIALIST LHES

For Croatia it could be said that it belongs to Central and Eastern European pathway (Dekker et al., 2005) characterized by a significant percentage of former housing estates in the existing housing stock, and a more positive image of living in estates of this type than is present in the estates of Western cities. The estates of Western and North European cities far more often feature numerous social problems linked with economic poverty and issues of segregation and stigmatization (Dekker et al., 2005; Hess et al., 2018), which are for now rarely present in Croatian estates, and residents mostly feel safe and do not wish to move out from them.



Fig. 1: Socialist estate in Zagreb with more public and green space. Source: authors

Similar to other European countries, especially the ones of the former Eastern bloc, LHEs in Croatia were built primarily to resolve the housing issues within the broader processes of post-war regeneration, state-level industrialization and mass urbanization. Socialist LHEs (Figure 1) were supposed to provide housing mostly for the members of working and middle-class in the cities of the newly industrialized society (Rogić, 1990; Sendi and Kerbler, 2021). Because of that mass and urgent need for housing production in socialist LHEs, often cheap and prefabricated elements and suboptimal architectural and constructional solutions were implemented (Hess et. al., 2018; Pojani and Barr, 2016; Nedučin et al., 2019), but they were also built with solid reinforced concrete construction, which even today gives them a safe and good quality of housing in high-rise buildings. LHEs were often located on the periphery of the cities resulting in more dispersed

housing, spatial isolation, higher costs of commuting, higher infrastructure costs, and higher energy costs (Hegedüs et al., 1996, 106; Hegedüs and Tosics, 1998). High building density, monolithic design and focus on residence were the customary characteristics of socialist LHEs (Seferagić, 1988; Rogić, 1990; Dekker and Van Kempen, 2004; Musterd et al., 2017) and after more than 50 years most of them became neglected and deteriorated. Therefore, with the passage of time, in combination with poor maintenance and management, housing in these estates often led to further decay of external and internal layout of buildings (problem with elevators, dilapidated facades, old windows, bad roofs, poor isolation etc.), and with neglected built environment and public infrastructure in the estates (Seferagić, 1988; Černič-Mali et al., 2003; Svirčić Gotovac et al., 2021).

The new, post-socialist housing estates (Figure 2) are those built after 1990, and they could be independent housing units, but also building complexes interpolated into already existing estates. Most of the new residential construction situated either on city outskirts or in the city zones, is being built “in spots” (Svirčić Gotovac, 2015). These new housing locations were built by private investors and real-estate entrepreneurs looking for extra profit in the housing sector. Almost three decades since, these locations in large cities are overbuilt and lacking basic infrastructure requirements and public facilities for daily urban life. All this puts extra pressure on the old estates, formerly better urbanistically planned as autonomous housing units with basic and additional infrastructure (services, public institutions, public and green spaces, etc.) (Svirčić Gotovac, 2015). In Croatian cities, commercialization and gentrification that has occurred in the newer housing estates, has thus created large contrasts between old buildings and new ones. Destructed and overbuilt public spaces often “become a battleground in the competition between different users” (Madanipur, 2004, 271; Petaccia and Angrilli, 2020; Vasilevska et al., 2014). There is also not only a physical lack of space, but also a lack of the social content necessary for different activities that would meet the sociability needs of all their residents, no matter of their age, socio-economic status and cultural background (Petaccia and Angrilli, 2020), especially of children and the elderly population. Lack of public and green spaces especially in the summer months, threatens, for example, the residents' stay in outdoor spaces and often leads to high temperatures in these city zones that are not pleasant for housing. Thereby, in the context of public health, specific groups of residents are at additional risk, particularly children and the elderly.



Fig. 2: Densely built post-socialist estate in Zagreb. Source: authors

Therefore, it is not surprising that socialist LHEs, because of their better equipment, spatial and urbanistic layout, still maintain their reputation as desirable places to live (Kovacs and Herfert, 2012; Grossmann et al., 2017). It is the urban design of these estates, with an adequate ratio of green spaces (parks, walks, tree alleys) and public services (kindergartens, schools, health center) that brings an additional positive image of residing in them, 50 and more years after their construction. This difference occurring between socialist and post-socialist estates affects the perception both of residents and experts, the latter particularly pointing to it.

4 QUALITY OF HOUSING ENVIRONMENT

The existence and quality of public facilities should improve the quality of housing environment and quality of living in the neighborhood, and could add to its use value (Seferagić, 1988; Svirčić Gotovac, 2015). When a housing estate has well-developed equipment, its use value is high. An ill-equipped housing development does not satisfy the needs of its residents and its use value is low. Furthermore, the perception of these attributes of the estate is important for the residents' overall feeling of satisfaction, and influences the decision on a possible relocation (Sirgy and Cornwell, 2002). Sirgy and Cornwell (2002) also state that the dissatisfaction with the physical attributes of the estate, such as the disrepair of buildings, yards and environments, is important for the residents' overall feeling of satisfaction with housing environment. Outdoor services or elements may contribute to the quality of the housing stock, urban design, physical appearances, cleanliness, quality of public space, safety, etc. (Van Gent, 2009; Diaz-Serrano, 2006). In general, it can be said that the perception of the neighborhood is a result of the interplay between various factors (Pan Ké Shon, 2007). They often depend on specifically and spatially driven urbanistic standards by which everyday resident's needs could be better fulfilled.

Thus, in the post-socialist context of housing in Croatia the notion of the so called spatial standards, which has for decades defined the basic urbanistic parameters of the housing estates' development, is gradually lost. Therefore, analyzing the standards of housing and their equipment by comparing the spatial standards for building and the urbanistic-technical conditions of building set in the Zagreb Master Plans of 1971, 1986, 2000, 2003 and 2007, it can be concluded that for decades they have been gradually reduced, and some disappeared completely (Jukić et al., 2011, 103). The problem is in inconsistent implementation of existing urbanistic regulations, for example by the loss of the role of the General Master Plan. This has led to the problem of commercialization of the urban space and the loss of the housing estate standard, and the so called scattered building that even in the new housing locations often leads to the downfall of the quality and equipment of housing estates, and eventually lowers the residents' satisfaction (Svirčić Gotovac et al., 2021). Therefore, the main differences can be seen in the level of neighborhood basic equipment with utilities/facilities used daily by the residents (school, kindergarten, health center, public transport, green spaces, public spaces etc.), which is in new housing estates reduced and inadequate (Svirčić Gotovac and Đokić, 2023), and also by the experts who emphasize these disadvantages and unbalanced housing development, often not in line with the European sustainable and Nature-based solutions (Bush & Doyon, 2019; Zlatar Gamberozić et al., 2021; Snep, et al., 2023).

5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Semi-structured interviews with experts

The method of semi-structured interviews with experts was within the project conducted only in Croatia. This paper presents results obtained from semi-structured interviews with experts from Croatia, and the thematic and content analysis of the interviews was related to LHEs and the quality of life in them with regard to the two explored periods. In the analysis of results, the emphasis was put on experts' opinions on the situation in Croatian cities, and the attitude of urban policy towards the built and housing space in the context of everyday life and residents' needs.

The total number of experts interviewed by the researchers was N=26, and the majority were according to their specific scope of work from the architectural and urbanistic profession (18), then the urban-sociological (6), civil engineering (1), and the art historical (1). The interviews were carried out during 2022, from April till September in 4 Croatian cities (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek), according to an a priori developed writing protocol. Most interviews with experts were conducted in Zagreb (13), Rijeka (6), Osijek (5) and Split (2). The questions from the protocol were then additionally adjusted to the specific professional working domain of a particular expert. The duration of talk per an interview was 40 minutes. Interviews were recorded by a dictaphone and transcribed, and data was analysed in NVivo-12. Ethical consideration included informing the respondents about the purpose of the research, and guaranteeing them confidentiality.

6 RESULTS

The coding of obtained data was conducted at thematic level, which was building on the specific research questions (Elliot, 2018), and the analysis resulted in the following two thematic codes: a) advantages and disadvantages in LHEs and b) partial urbanism and planning process today.

In the first thematic unit called advantages and disadvantages in LHEs, statements of experts of various profiles were extracted, in which they mostly pointed out the shortcomings of new estates visible in excessive building and reduced green and public areas, such as squares and streets, while advantages of old estates were underlined.

As of green areas, I think that a big problem is that ‘toothless’ building. We increase the density, which is not followed by public areas. Nothing of new parks, children's playgrounds, and here is a kind of an imbalance. We increase the number of people, and that's why old estates appear better in that sense. (architect, Osijek).

Further, it is pointed out that “generally, it can be assessed that housing estates lack green areas and public space, primarily the one that is designed and functions as a public area of pedestrian character (square, street) with the central amenities of the estate“ (architect, Rijeka), and that it is a fact for most housing estates in Croatia.

Such a situation is present primarily in new estates, which are also called ‘parasite’, due to their frequent reliance on old infrastructure from the socialist period. This happens because new infrastructure is not built, so most of accompanying public institutions and services are missing.

We have these buildings that I call parasite buildings. So, investor, if he/she has a 5-meter access to a road, nobody checks whether he/she has further access, then whether the capacity of kindergartens is adequate, the capacity of schools, etc. (architect, Zagreb).

Nevertheless, besides disadvantages, they also pointed out certain advantages of new estates, such as better building quality, better solutions for traffic and parking spaces, and their better demographic structure (more families with children) 'preventing' them from further degradation and neglect, present in older estates.

The advantage of “new” estates lies in the better quality of building, solving of stationary traffic (in the greatest number of cases), better demographic structure and a relatively balanced social structure (architect, Rijeka).

In the second thematic unit called partial urbanism and planning process today statements on an inadequate process of planning were pointed out, the one that no longer cares for the quality of housing, but instead for the occupation and consumption of space by new and permanent building. Additionally, certain neglect of public spaces is pointed to in new estates, which are on the other side reduced only to a street, but not to a structure of estate as a whole.

In new estates public spaces are almost non-existent, because what the market, finances, investments do is leads to a situation in which they are willing to sell everything that can be sold. In former times during the social ownership, it was not that important to sell everything, but the quality of housing was what mattered. And this is our problem (architect, Osijek).

The relation towards public space and estate is abandoned or criticized, as something that is not structured, and the concept of street is affirmed. When you look at certain solutions, it is visible that there is a vagueness of public space, which is between semi-neglect and neglect (sociologist, Zagreb).

They also point out the importance of regulations in spatial documentation for instance for green areas, which are omitted, and due to which the neglect of public space happens. Today they are viewed in the urbanistic process as a ‘loss’, because they do not yield profit and cannot be commercialized. Experts see in it the guilt of both their own profession and the legal framework at the level of state, which has adjusted to the post-socialist transformation of space.

Unlike for some other areas, not the smallest regulations are prescribed for the dimensioning of green areas. In the nowadays situation, when green infrastructure is so much emphasized, there should be at least some binding basics of dimensioning established, because the practice of spatial/urbanistic planning shows the following: public green areas are treated as a “loss” of space (no commercialization opportunity), expense for the state budget (buying of the land and further actions), and the support is lacking even within the architectural profession, which is primarily oriented towards designing (architect, Rijeka).

The expert then emphasizes the difference between urbanisms of these two periods, pointing out their different values and concluding “it could be ascertained that with time the civil engineering quality of building has risen, while the urban and esthetic has declined”.

On the other side, it is stated that there is awareness on the importance of adopting the sustainability paradigm and, within it, of strengthening of the participation process of citizens and local community, i.e. neighborhood, who themselves need to work more actively on the raising of life quality in a sustainable and contemporary way.

LHEs in the future – if wishing to ensure the quality of life to their residents, will have to include sustainability paradigms. It means green, but also social sustainability, relying on participation, local community, and eventually, on the readiness to connect together in one sustainable social community (sociologist, Zagreb).

According to the statements of experts, it can be concluded that there is a clear difference between the two examined types of estates in terms of urbanistic standards for providing the neighborhood with infrastructure and equipment. The standards related to public infrastructure were more adequate in the socialist period than during the processes of shifting to market capitalism and privatization, introduced from the 1990s onwards. Nowadays context of urbanism has brought a gradual reduction of standards visible in urbanistic plans, and in the housing construction that was not equipped with complementary infrastructure. An overview of the largest differences in the built primary and public infrastructure is presented in Table 1.

BASIC INDICATORS	Socialist estate	Post-socialist estate
school	often built	rarely built
kindergarten	often built	rarely built
green spaces/parks	often built	reduced on smaller place
children's playground	often built	reduced on smaller place
health center	predominantly exists	does not exist
market place	predominantly exists	does not exist
parking places	inadequate (for today's car number)	inadequate (the advantage is the occasionally construction of underground garages)

Table 1: Built primary and public infrastructure in socialist and post-socialist estates. Source: authors.

7 CONCLUSION

In the current study, it was explored how experts for spatial themes in Croatia see socialist and post-socialist LHEs in the comparative sense of these two types of estates. The content analysis of experts' attitudes revealed that there are significant differences between these estates at the level of neighborhood and everyday life quality, but also the overall layout of these estates. The thematic analysis of interviews with experts points out that in the previous, socialist, system it was easier to protect and build public spaces because there was no market, which nowadays evaluates space differently, i.e. only to the extent at which it brings profit. Urban design of housing spaces used to be planned as a housing unit, which had certain spatial standards and regulations, which were in the post-socialist period brought into question or even partly lost. Thus, a space for significant commercialization of housing space was left open, and for private investments and thickening of the remaining city space, primarily for housing purposes. Professional remarks especially of the architectural profession emphasize that nowadays practice of spatial and urbanistic planning in Croatia shows that public green areas are treated as a “loss” of space that does not bring additional profit, and that they are often viewed only as an expense for the state budget. This way investing in them is either postponed or minimized, and urbanism is replaced with the process of designing, but not planning, at least not on the long term. In that context, in the last three decades public interests have been continuously threatened and destructed in Croatian cities, especially the largest ones. In addition, it can be emphasized that the basic foundations of development of contemporary cities such as sustainable, safe, inclusive, green and resilient principles are better incorporated in the old, or socialist, than in the new, or post-socialist, estates. At the national level it is therefore important to bring a housing strategy by which further housing construction would be controlled and planned more clearly, and which would be based on the mentioned nature-based principles.

Current lack of urbanism and urbanistic standards is particularly visible in new housing estates, which are mostly overbuilt with housing construction and suffer from reduction of public and green areas and basic services. Thus, the architectural appearance of the post-socialist estate is inadequately adaptive for the residents, because it is too densely built and inhumane in its overall layout, with inadequate primary and public infrastructure and facilities. Therefore, despite the old age and neglect of old estates, their advantages in equipment with accompanying infrastructure are pointed out, which was urbanistically planned in the former system and is more adoptive in the architectural sense. With regard to the differences occurring between these estates, experts conclude that it is necessary to follow and incorporate European sustainable trends on liveable, resilient and green cities so that the quality of life and housing at the level of neighborhood would be raised, especially in new estates. This is possible with nature-based solutions by turning the remaining unused spaces into public and green spaces (urban parks, urban gardens, more bicycle paths and recreational zones, etc.) at a small-scale level. In this process it is necessary to activate also the local community and the residents themselves, so that they could reach concrete improvements more successfully. Finally, although the recommendation for the first phase of changes is aimed at short-term solutions, because long-term are harder to achieve and oblige the city and state authorities to be involved, for the second phase it is recommended that exactly the city and state institutions become more intensively involved in urban development, so that post-socialist cities would come closer to desirable European trends.

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