WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE (POST)SOCIALIST CITY?
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Whatever Happened to the (Post)socialist City?

ABSTRACT  For several decades, urban geographers asked themselves whether there was such a thing as the “socialist city.” Did cities during the duration of state socialism (in most parts of East-Central Europe, 1945-1989) include spatial features that were sufficiently distinct from the characteristics of cities located farther west to warrant the existence of an autonomous term: the so-called socialist city? Were the processes of spatial production in these cities also sufficiently distinct? A quarter of a century after the end of state socialism in East-Central Europe, this paper revisits the old debate with a new twist. Assuming there was a “socialist city,” is there a post-socialist one? Did the features of the “socialist city” disintegrate or endure after 1989? Is the new formation distinct not only from its socialist predecessors but also from contemporary European cities that were never socialist?

KEYWORDS  East-Central Europe, socialist city, post-socialist city

Introduction

For several decades, urban geographers of East-Central Europe have asked themselves whether there was such a thing as the “socialist city”: a city whose spatial characteristics were sufficiently different from those of its counterpart in the developed capitalist world (especially in Western Europe) as to warrant the very existence of the term “socialist city” (e.g., Fisher, 1962; Hamilton, 1979; Dangschat and Blasius, 1987; Smith, 1996; Sheppard, 2000). Two main schools of thought could be distinguished. The so-called ecological school (e.g., Van den Berg et al., 1982) advocated the theory that urbanization in the 20th century was dependent on two primary socio-economic trends: modernization and industrialization. Since both were underway in capitalist as well as in socialist settings, the similarities between the capitalist city and the socialist city outweighed the differences. Both were versions of the general model of 20th-century modern, industry-led urbanity. If differences did exist, they were either a matter of detail or of temporal lag (ostensibly, socialist cities acquired the features of their capitalist counterparts within a few years delay because the countries in which they were situated were developing with a slight delay; e.g., Andrusz, 1996; Enyedi, 1996, 1998). The historical school (e.g., Castells, 1977), on the other hand, argued that the political economies of socialism and capitalism functioned so differently that their spatial products—the socialist and the capitalist city—were
autonomous constructs. Some of the key differences in the processes of spatial production included: the fact that in socialist cities, the state had a near-monopoly on urban development (because it had nationalized the majority of urban land, real estate and means of production); that land and property markets were suppressed; and that the structure of cities was one of the means through which the almighty socialist state tried to create an ostensibly classless society (e.g., Bertaud and Renaud, 1995; Crowley and Reid, 2002; Tsenkova and Nedovic-Budic, 2006; Stanilov, 2007). As a result of these socialist specificities, Szelényi (1996) outlined the following features which, in his view, sharply distinguished the urban system and urban forms in socialist nations from those in capitalist ones: less urbanization (i.e., a lower portion of national populations in socialist states resided in large urban centers), less urbanism (i.e., socialist cities were marked by less diversity and marginality), and the socialist city had a specific structure.

This paper focuses on the last aspect of socialist-capitalist urban differences proposed by Szelényi (1996): urban spatial structure. But instead of comparing the socialist city—a construct which in East-Central Europe now exists only in history—to the capitalist city, the paper evaluates its successor: the “post-socialist city.” This term is controversial. It invites perhaps an even greater number of questions than those raised by the term “socialist city.” For example: What is post-socialism? Is it an appropriate term to describe the state of East-Central European nations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries? Is it a potentially long-lasting socio-economic condition? Or was it a temporary, transitional state that led to capitalism in East-Central Europe (e.g., Chari and Verdery, 2009)? Leaving these complicated questions aside, however, this paper zeroes in on the spatial characteristics of the “post-socialist city.” Three main limitations should be acknowledged at the onset, all of which follow from the need to address a subject in sufficient depth with sufficient brevity. First, the paper deals with cities in East-Central Europe (including
European Russia and the westernmost former Soviet Republics) but *not* with cities in other parts of the world which can too be considered post-socialist (e.g., China, parts of Central Asia, parts of Africa). Second, the paper discusses East-Central European cities in general terms, without paying detailed attention to the trans-national variety of urban forms\(^1\). Some reflections on potential sub-regional cleavages are offered in the conclusions. Lastly, the paper focuses on the large cities of East-Central Europe, especially the state capitals. An analysis of small towns, rural settlements or mid-sized industrial cities (which were a landmark legacy of socialism) may lead to conclusions slightly different from the ones presented here.

The paper discusses five key elements of urban spatial composition: overall spatial articulation, scale of urban development, functional balance, building typologies, and urban aesthetics. To answer the question of whether we can make a case for the existence of a “post-socialist city,” the paper discusses each of these spatial aspects from three perspectives: first, how did this element of city form contribute to the distinctive character of the “socialist city”?; second, how has this element of city form evolved since the end of socialism?; and third, how does this element compare to what exists in today’s cities farther west that were never socialist? Although the focus is on urban spatial character, attention is also given to the socio-economic causes which underpin it. The paper relies primarily on secondary sources. Its purpose is to evaluate the case for a “post-socialist city” by citing examples of large East-Central European cities as presented in the literature over the last twenty years. A systematic analysis of a specific set of indicators of spatial change of all (or even most) large cities in the region is beyond the scope of this paper.
Spatial composition of the post-socialist city: Five key elements

Overall spatial articulation

One of the key spatial contrasts between socialist and capitalist cities was the fact that the former were denser and more compact (Hamilton, 1979; Hausserman, 1996; Hirt, 2006, 2007). Calculations by Kenworthy et al. (1999) for the year 1990 show socialist cities such as Moscow with significantly higher densities than capitalist cities, especially those in North America (it should be acknowledged, however, that European cities on both sides of the former Iron Curtain have consistently been much denser than American cities). In addition, socialist cities were marked by a clear urban edge framed by the last towers of the vast mass-housing complexes erected during the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s. There was nothing resembling residential or commercial sprawl in East-Central European cities during the socialist period. The reasons for this difference are clear. Farmland and green-fields at the edge of large socialist cities generally belonged to the state. Since the majority of residential (and other) development was executed under public auspices, the state had nearly full control over the rim of its cities—control that far exceeded the authority that capitalist countries such as England could exercise over their own urban peripheries through designating greenbelts. The socialist state prioritized the construction of high-density, panel-made residential areas which were equipped with the basic services such as schools and hospitals (of the type of the Soviet micro-rajon). These housed very large segments of the urban populations; for instance, 60% of Sofia’s population, 77% of Bratislava’s and 82% of Bucharest’s (Hirt and Stanilov, 2009). Thus, there was no mechanism through which spread-out and low-density urban peripheries—of the type that the private sector has been building around large capitalist cities for many decades—could be erected in socialist countries at all.
Since the end of socialism, however, the clear edge that once characterized the East-Central European city has been vanishing. True, because of the enormous building legacy of the socialist regimes, specifically because of the massive size of the socialist pre-fabricated estates which continue to house large populations, East-Central European urban densities continue to be higher than those in Western Europe. According to calculations by Bertaud (2006) in the early 2000s, Moscow’s density was still very high, 180 people per hectare, and so are others: Yerevan’s was 168 people per hectare, St. Petersburg 121, Sofia 94, etc. West European cities with comparably high densities do exist (Barcelona with 171 people per hectare, Paris with 88), but overall it is formerly socialist cities that continue to lead the chart of European urban densities. Today, however, East-Central European urban peripheries are consumed by sprawl at a rate exceeding that of Western Europe. Recent studies of land-cover changes in Europe have ranked cities in Estonia, Latvia, Croatia, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria among the most sprawling urban areas on the continent (European Environmental Agency, 2006a, 2006b; see also Pichler-Milanovic 2008). For instance, in just two years, from 1999 to 2001, Moscow lost about 750 hectares of forests located in its once-lush greenbelt. Between 1991 and 2001, forests in metropolitan Moscow declined by 15 percent and grass areas shrunk by 55 per cent, whereas impervious surface increased by 26 percent (Boentje and Blinnikov, 2007). Poland registered a much larger decrease in farmland during the first 14 years of the post-socialist transition (1990-2004) than in the 52 years between 1938 and 1990 (Lowicki, 2008). Urban sprawl has been enabled by the fundamental transformation of land and property relations after 1989: most land, including land in the periphery of cities, has been privatized; the strict socialist-era building regulations have been lifted; public investment in the built-up areas of cities as well as in mass transit has been relatively limited (propelling mass increases in private automobile
ownership); and the private sector, which replaced the state as the chief city-builder, has been busy meeting pent-up demand for higher-end office, commercial and residential space, most of which is now available in the periphery of large cities.

Scale of spatial development

Szelenyi (1996) posited that one of the most fundamental facets of socialist city-building was less economizing with space. Like with overall spatial articulation, the nature of the socialist political economy underpinned this urban aspect. By holding near-monopoly on urban land, socialist public authorities could develop it as they wished; unlike their colleagues in capitalist countries, they did not have to worry about land prices, nor did they have to resolve private-property conflicts related to land acquisition. As a result, public spaces and development projects in socialist cities were marked by an extraordinary spatial generosity. This generosity was visible in the socialist mass-housing estates, where tens of thousands of dwelling units could be erected in a few short years, as well as in the industrial giants that were built in the large East-Central European cities to secure socialism’s economic victory in the world. The vast scale of development projects was partially premised on economies-of-scale considerations. It was certainly cheaper and more efficient to produce thousands of standardized housing units rather than small groups of individualized ones. But there were also clear ideological explanations of the socialist “big is beautiful” development approach (Andrusz, 1996). Socialist urban planners and designers were called to manifest in space the regimes’ heavy propaganda for the triumph of public over private interests (Crowley and Reid, 2002). This could be accomplished most directly through the construction of monumental projects that existed, ostensibly, for the benefit of the public. In addition to mass housing, the category included government buildings and “people’s palaces” of the type that Romanian dictator Ceausescu built in Bucharest, as well as
vast ceremonial plazas and lush public parks and green spaces. The latter likely well exceeded public green space available in capitalist cities and may well be the most positive building legacy of the socialist period. Compare, for example, Budapest with Vienna, two major European cities which until 1918 were part of the same empire. According to data from Eurostat (undated), public green space per capita in Budapest exceeded that in Vienna nearly four times (43 versus 11 square meters per capita).

The economic meltdown that followed the collapse of socialism brought an abrupt end to socialist-style grand spatial endeavors. Once the massive state-owned building companies that had erected the socialist city went into bankruptcy or were dismantled, monumental public development projects were no longer either financially or logistically possible. Thus, the scale of development projects decreased and so did the number of buildings (both public and private) erected per year. The decrease was especially sharp in the early years of the transition, when the economic crisis was deepest, although there has been an upswing in construction after the year 2000 parallel to the economic recovery. For instance, in Czechoslovakia, the average number of new dwelling units was 50,000 per year during the 1980s as compared to only 7,500 in 1993 (the numbers recovered to 1980s levels by the early 2000s, however; Stanilov, 2007). The building of vast ceremonial plazas and parks was relegated to the back burner. In fact, one of the most representative processes of post-socialist urban restructuring has been the corrosion of the generous public spaces inherited from socialism and their appropriation for private commercial use. Bodnar (2001), for instance, describes vividly these transformations in landmark public plazas such as Moscow Square in Budapest. Public green space, both in large parks and in neighborhood gardens, has been shrinking. Sofia appears to be one of the most extreme cases: some 30% of its public green space has reportedly been “lost in transition” (i.e., it has been
converted to private use since 1989; Hirt, 2012). As economic stability returned to most East-Central European countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s, construction investment has increased. This has been particularly true for the countries that entered the European Union, which have received massive infrastructure money. And whereas public funds have been directed towards projects with social purposes (e.g., subway construction, renovation of existing public housing), a return to the socialist-era generosity of public space is not in the making. Where mega-projects have been created, these have generally been private commercial ventures sponsored by transnational capital, especially in the largest and wealthiest cities in the region (e.g., Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz and Moscow’s International Business Center).

**Functional balance**

As compared to its capitalist counterpart, the socialist city had a different functional profile. This goes beyond the fact that in socialist cities the ratio of public-to-private land and buildings (both in ownership and in use) was much higher than it was in capitalist cities. A significant difference also existed in the balance between the basic urban land uses, especially commercial and industrial ones. Specifically, because of the regimes’ obsession with the development of heavy industry as means of achieving global economic supremacy and because of the ease with which socialist planners could designate land for whatever purposes they wanted without concerns for land prices, industrial land occupied a much higher portion of the total land area in socialist cities than in cities farther west. For example, lands designated for industrial use comprised a mind-boggling 44% of socialist St. Petersburg, 32% of Moscow and 28% of Krakow. The corresponding percentage for London and Paris was just 5 (Hirt and Stanilov, 2009). The collapse of the socialist mega-industrial enterprises accompanied by the structural shift in employment throughout the region—the decline in manufacturing jobs and the rise in
service jobs\textsuperscript{6}—converted the over-sized urban industrial areas into polluted fields full of crumbling old factories. By about the year 2000, 30\% of the industrial land in Budapest and Warsaw and 40\% in Bratislava lay derelict (European Academy of the Urban Environment, 2003). Parallel to improving economic conditions after 2000, some industrial sites have been refurbished to high-tech and mixed-use purposes (e.g., see Kiss, 2007 on Budapest). Still, brownfields remain a serious problem throughout the region.

Whereas industrial spaces were over-allocated in the socialist city, commercial uses were under-allocated. At the onset of the post-socialist transition, retail space per person in Berlin was more than three times higher than in Moscow (Tosics, 2005).\textsuperscript{7} This fact should bring little surprise keeping in mind that out of the 276 consumer goods officially designated as basic in the Soviet Union, 243 were severely under-produced (not to mention that many were of notoriously low quality; Roberts and LaFolette, 1990). The situation was less extreme in most other East-Central European countries. Still, everyday consumer goods from toasters to trousers were a low priority for socialist authorities across the board. The mere fact that there were fewer things to sell naturally meant that fewer places were needed for selling them; hence, the systematic under-supply of commercial spaces in the socialist city. To most socialist citizens, who caught a glimpse of life on the other side of the Iron Curtain through occasional travel or through books and movies, Western “consumer society,” as it manifested itself in vibrant cities with shiny shops and bright billboards, was something to be craved rather than scorned—a fact that must have caused great sorrow to Marxist propagandists.

After 1989, as the state withdrew its domination over the production and sales of consumer goods, as trade restrictions were lifted and East-Central European countries were flooded with foreign goods, the pent-up demand for commercial goods and services, from travel
agencies to tattoo shops, from Italian restaurants to Irish pubs, erupted like a genie from a bottle. In a few short years, formerly grey first floors of buildings that were once all-residential were converted into colorful collages of miniature shops selling everything that was previously unavailable for sale. Kiosks and bazaars filled in the formerly disciplined sidewalks, squares and even neighborhood gardens of East-Central European towns and cities, causing some observers to label the spatial impacts of the post-socialist period with semi-joking terms such as “ground-floor capitalism” (Sarmany-Parsons, 1998) and “garage architecture” (since many garages and basements were converted to shops; Hirt, 2012). The remarkable thing about these East European “retail revolutions” (a term that seems at least as appropriate as the more inspirational one—the “velvet revolutions”) is that they proceeded even when the national economies were shrinking and people’s purchasing power was plunging. Even in Belgrade—the capital of a country that disintegrated in the 1990s through wars—the number of retail outlets per person quadrupled in sixteen years (from 3.7 outlets per 1,000 people in 1989 to 15.4 in 2005; Hirt, 2008). In retail space per person, the large East-Central European cities seems to have nearly caught up with their Western counterparts within dozen or so years after 1989 (e.g., in 2001, Warsaw had 217 square meters of retail space as compared to London’s 275; Startseva, 2001). In most cities, retail growth remained strong until the onset of the Global Recession in 2008 when investment slowed down as it did in most other parts of the world.

New building and neighborhood types

The post-socialist period witnessed the emergence of several building and neighborhood types that one could find in capitalist cities for decades but which were either entirely or nearly absent in East-Central Europe prior to 1989. These urban forms are associated primarily with the two extremes of the post-socialist social spectrum: the very rich and the very poor. Of course,
despite socialist propaganda for a classless society, wealth and poverty existed under socialism too. A vast literature has documented income, educational, ethnic and other status segregation in the socialist city (e.g., Szelenyi, 1987; Smith, 1989; Simmie, 1991; Kulu, 2003; Ruoppila, 2004). The general pattern was that the cream of socialist bureaucracy lived in the central urban areas (often in the very same neighborhoods which were once dominated by the bourgeoisie); the socialist “middle classes” (workers and intelligentsia) were concentrated in the pre-fabricated housing estates; and the marginal groups lived in partially dilapidated early-to-mid-20th-century urban neighborhoods and in semi-rural settings around the large cities. Still, by all accounts, inequality and segregation were much milder in the socialist city as compared to the capitalist one; indeed, this was one of the most notable contrasts between the two.

Post-socialist urban spatial reorganization, which has followed in part from the significant social disparities that developed after 1989,\(^8\) entailed the movement of social groups from certain parts of the city to others, as well as the creation of new neighborhoods dominated by new housing types. Two neighborhood types are especially visible. The first is the informal slum dominated by self-built housing. Because the socialist state did a relatively good job in absorbing urban population growth by building mass housing and because it suppressed marginality and informality, the slums that characterize fast-growing cities in the developing world barely existed in socialist East-Central Europe. Only in some countries, such as Yugoslavia, a relatively liberal socialist regime faced with housing shortages, was willing to turn a blind eye toward informal housing construction in the periphery of large cities (e.g., see Zegarac, 1999). Today, however, areas resembling Third-World slums and squatter settlements are present in many cities in the region, mostly in the south and the east, where weak states cannot address housing challenges posed by the movement of people from rural to urban areas in
search of jobs and better living standards (not to mention the war refugees). This is true for cities such as Tirana, whose population has recently doubled, and Belgrade. The peripheries of both cities now include new low- and low-middle-class neighborhoods dominated by self-built housing that have not been legally sanctioned (e.g., Hirt and Stanilov, 2009). In fact, according to some estimates, 40 percent of the built-up residential areas of these two cities are now taken by informal settlements. The situation is similar in other large Southeast European cities such as Bar, Skopje and Pristina (Tsenkova, 2009, 2012). Certainly, such high levels of informality would be unthinkable in socialist times. They also exceed what would be “tolerable” in the wealthier parts of Central and Western Europe today.

On the other side of the spectrum are the upper-class residences of post-socialist elites. As elsewhere, East-Central European elites have in some cases moved into gentrified downtowns and refurbished urban neighborhoods (e.g., Kovacs, et al. 2012). But the new built form associated most decisively with post-socialist wealth has been the upscale detached single-family home in suburban settings. This type of home may be partially rooted in regional traditions of having secondary homes in the urban periphery. Still, for most cities in the region, the permanent single-family home located in pristine settings away from urban crowds—the type of home that has thrived around capitalist urban centers for decades—represents a novel building form. Low-density residential suburbanization has by now been documented for dozens of cities in the region (e.g., Hirt, 2007 on Sofia; Nuisl and Rink, 2005 on Leipzig; Buzar et al., 2008 on Ljubljana; Rudolph and Brade, 2005 on Moscow; Novak and Sykora, 2008; Sykora, 1999a, b, and Stanilov and Sykora, 2012 on Prague; Dingsdale, 1999; Kok and Kovacs, 1999 on Budapest; Ruoppila, 1998, and Leetma, et al., 2009 on Tallinn). It may well be the landmark housing contribution of post-socialism to the city (much as the panel-made housing district was the
paradigmatic contribution of socialism to the city). A notable aspect of the new residential forms is the fact that many of them are gated and guarded. Under socialism, the only heavily securitized compounds were some government complexes and the houses of a small number of communist-party bosses. The last twenty years of East-Central European urban development, however, brought about the widespread fortification of residential (and other) urban environments partly in response to high levels of crime. During the early years of the transition, upper-class single-family homes were often individually walled off and securitized (whereas middle-class multi-family buildings became locked and watched over by security officers). The emergence of large real-estate companies after the year 2000, many of them funded by transnational capital, led to the development of a different type of securitized residential environment: the full-fledged, Western-style gated community with hundreds of dwelling units and common services. Such communities can now be found in many cities across the region (Bodnar and Molnar, 2010; Hirt and Petrovic, 2011; Hirt, 2012).

New building forms have been introduced to absorb the growth of commercial uses as well. As noted in the earlier section, the early transition years were marked by the proliferation of small-scale retail forms: extensions of existing buildings, self-styled stalls, kiosks and bazaars. Following from the concentration of capital and from state attempts to root out the widespread illegality of the 1990s, the trend during the last dozen years has been towards the erection of Western-style megastores, malls, and large multi-functional office/shopping/entertainment districts. These building types did not exist under socialism. But today, East-Central Europe is considered one of the hottest markets for large-scale commercial developments (International Council of Shopping Centers, 2008). The region’s wealthiest cities such as Prague and Budapest have caught up with their Western counterparts in having “high-quality” office and retail space,
investment in Russia is massive, and even the poorer cities and countries in the Southeast are experiencing a “mall boom” (e.g., Draganov, 2012; Slavic, 2012). As with the new residential communities, these large commercial groups are often inaccessible to large segments of the population, whether because retail prices are high, because the facilities can be reached only by car, or because they are fenced-off and carefully guarded against entry by marginal groups.

_Urban aesthetics_

As Szelenyi noted, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the socialist city was less diversity. Indeed, perhaps the first thing that struck the lay observer who crossed from West into East Berlin before the fall of the Wall was an overwhelming sense of grayness and boredom. Even Vaclav Havel (1992) complained about it. In part, this sense came from the fact that the tightly disciplined street scene of East Berlin lacked the variety of people (e.g., street-vendors, musicians, protesters, homeless people) and the variety of land uses (e.g., much fewer commercial buildings with their bright advertising logos) that were present in West Berlin. Yet partially, the sense of boredom was a function of the urban aesthetics. East Berlin was grey because it lacked the color, visual variety and architectural eclecticism of its “other” half.

From the mid-1950s on, after a flirt with Stalinist neo-classicism, cities in East-Central Europe developed under clear government directives to embrace the Modernist style, especially in the gigantic mass-housing estates. Certainly, different countries embraced Modernism differently. In the more liberal ones, like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, architectural creativity was never fully suspended. But overall, led by considerations for standardization and economies of scale and by the regimes’ taste for uniformity in design that ostensibly conveyed the message of equality, architecture in East-Central Europe during the “mature” socialist decades, the 1960s and ‘70s, took a turn toward a particularly monastic version of the Modern.
The post-socialist period marked a clean break with the principles of modernist/socialist urban aesthetics. The withdrawal of state near-monopoly on architectural production in cities, the termination of controls on aesthetic expression, the entry of private parties into the process of city-building with their individual likes and dislikes, and the cultural opening of the region to the world, led to a striking hybridity of styles in the post-socialist city (Dmitrieva and Kliems, 2010). In all countries, interest increased in the styles of the pre-socialist past(s), particularly those pasts viewed as “golden” in a nation’s history. And since national stories of past “glory days” vary significantly, these exercises in architectural nostalgia took on quite divergent forms. In the Czech Republic, for example, memories of the democratic inter-war period have spurred interest in early-20th-century avant-garde and cubism; in Poland, 1950s “international style” has come into vogue because of its association with anti-Stalin resistance. In Russia, however, revamped neo-classism has become the style of choice likely because it is linked, in people’s minds, with this country’s opulent imperial history (Boym, 2001; Goldhoorn and Meuser, 2006; Murawski, 2012). Quite often, architectural styles used in monuments and important public buildings have been employed toward overtly nationalistic goals (e.g., in the Baltic republics, where the Russian/Soviet spatial heritage has been suppressed and the new architecture has been called to celebrate the spirit of nationhood and independence; Czaplicka et al., 2010). In residential forms, the wide variety of individual preferences, many of them developing under the influence of the global mass media, led to an extraordinarily eclectic built landscape that includes not only local historic styles, but also various Las-Vegas-style excursions into the global architectural heritage (Hirt, 2012). Nouveau-riche areas, specifically, have become sites of such brave visual experimentation, not all of it classy, that as Sarmany-Parsons sarcastically noted: one can only comprehend the “curious disorientation of taste” found in these areas if one is familiar with the
educational background of their residents (1998: 221). Whether good, bad, or ugly, post-socialist urban aesthetics is the anti-thesis of socialist tradition: if socialist architecture was monastic, its successor has moved toward the hedonic.

**Conclusion: Change and continuity in the East-Central European city**

The starting point of this paper was the proposal of Szelenyi (1996) and others that fifty years (in Russia, longer) of socialism created a “socialist city.” The distinct spatial characteristics of this city included: compactness, grand scale of public projects, oversupply of industrial and undersupply of commercial uses, absence of key built forms typical of capitalist cities (from squatter settlements to upscale suburbs), and visual monotony. The main questions posed at the beginning were: How much difference did the last twenty-five years make to the spatial character of the city that socialism built? Did its paradigmatic features erode? And, are today East-Central European cities still principally different from their Western counterparts?

We should start answering these questions with what may be the most obvious: if we are talking about cities as mere collections of material objects, we can say that East-Central European cities are still different from their Western cousins in one major way: socialism left an immense legacy of built structures which are not about to vanish into thin air (German-style implosions of socialist-era housing notwithstanding). Some of this legacy, like the industrial giants of the past may be vacant and crumbling, but others like the socialist-era mass-housing estates continue to be in use. And although Western cities do have similar Modernist-style projects (e.g., the Parisian *grands ensembles*), there is still a difference in sheer magnitude: the socialist housing projects comprise a much greater share of the housing stock. On the other hand, we can state that if we are looking at *processes* of change, all major spatial features of the
“socialist city” have undergone intense erosion. Even the mass-housing estates are not what they used to be: today, they accommodate a different population (in most cases, lower-middle-class as opposed to solid middle-class population, as it was under socialism), they have a different land-use mix (e.g., more retail), their public green spaces have been taken over by new buildings and uses, and the once-plain buildings have been visually transformed by new extensions, colors, logos, etc. The cities are no longer compact: they may still be denser than Western cities, but are sprawling at higher rates. Their grand socialist-era public spaces have lost some of their publicness; their new grand projects tend to be private spaces. Industrial uses are down and commercial uses are up; the decline in the former and the upswing in the latter proceed likely at a rate much faster than the current rate of de-industrialization and commercialization occurring in cities that were never socialist. New building forms have mushroomed—the type of buildings and building groups familiar to us from capitalist cities in the 20th and 21st centuries. And the cities have lost—perhaps for the better—their once-overpowering discipline and uniformity; these have been traded for a more kaleidoscopic and cosmopolitan look. Thus without a doubt, even if the built heritage of the socialist period is still standing, today’s East-Central European cities resemble Western cities much more so than they did a quarter of a century ago. Have they then become capitalist? Is there still a “post-socialist city” (assuming there ever was one) or has it melted into a broader category? This is a major theoretical puzzle that can only be answered if we could determine with certainty what post-socialism is (or was) and does it (or did it) lead to capitalism. But for starters, we can at least claim that the basic economic, institutional and ideological framework within which spatial production occurs in today’s East-Central Europe is principally different from what went on under socialism: the majority of urban land, real estate and production means are now in private hands (one exception is Serbia where urban land is yet
to be privatized; Nedovic-Budic and Vujosevic, 2012); state monopoly over urban development has been eliminated; markets rather than central planning determine land-use allocation; global capital is becoming an important player; etc. However, time has shown that in this basic framework, some sub-regional cleavages are emerging. For example, by most accounts public planning is stronger in Central Europe and the Baltics than it is Southeast European and post-Soviet states such as Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. In the latter group of countries, property ownership is more fragmented. Thus, we observe a much greater informality in city-building in these countries, which brings them closer to Europe’s South (Greece, Portugal, southern Italy) and the developing world rather than Western and Northern Europe (Hirt and Stanilov, 2009; Tsenkova, 2009, 2012). The Russian case, where public authorities play a powerful role in urban development by partnering with politically connected major real-estate actors, may be a type in itself (Pagonis and Thornley, 2000). The potential emergence of several urban sub-types in East-Central Europe challenges the very idea that the “post-socialist city” is a meaningful term. At the same time, the mere fact that we are beginning to think about splintering the post-socialist urban world and appending different parts of it to different parts of neighboring regions suggest something else: that there is no single contemporary “capitalist city”; there are, rather, several capitalist urban sub-types. But we probably knew this all along.
REFERENCES:


NOTES

1 For instance, it is not clear whether cities in post-socialist Albania belong to the same family as those in post-socialist Hungary. Tosics (2005) has already argued that there are several divergent post-socialist urban types.

2 There was some variation here: in liberal socialist states like Poland and Yugoslavia, some farmland remained in private hands.

3 Socialist states are well-known for the construction of secondary homes of the type of the Russian dacha in the periphery of large cities. Still, the dacha areas could hardly be described as sprawling in the Western sense.

4 The general rule of thumb is that individual car ownership has tripled in most parts of East-Central Europe since the end of socialism. Some examples: during the first fifteen years of the transition, the number of cars per 1000 people rose from 119 to 314 in Bulgaria, from 114 to 350 in Estonia, from 83 to 297 in Latvia, and from 99 to 314 in Poland (Eurostat, undated).

5 Bucharest’s People’s Palace, now the Palace of the Parliament, is reportedly the world’s largest public building (after the Pentagon).

6 For example, in Moscow employment in the manufacturing sector declined from 24 to 13% between 1989 and 2001 (Medvedkov and Medvedkov, 2005).

7 According to other authors, Moscow’s retail numbers per capita may have been much lower (Startseva, 2001).

8 The Gini coefficient of inequality increased significantly in East-Central European countries after 1989: e.g., from 23 to 31 in Romania, from 21 to 27 in Hungary, and from 19 to 26 in the Czech Republic (Hirt, 2012: 42).

9 For example, in Estonia, the number of single-family dwellings increased fivefold between 1990 and 2002 (Stanilov, 2007: 184).

10 Or “socialist realism,” as the official term went.