

Towards a Radiography of Socialist Housing Blocks

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Abstract

Socialist housing estates are an every-day life reality in the former Eastern Bloc. As opposed to similar social housing developments in the west, these were built to be inhabited by the whole population, not just by the economically disadvantaged. In the Romanian urban environment, more than half of the inhabitants still live in these structures. After the fall of the communist regime, tenants changed status, from former renters they became owners. Once this status changed, communal public space turned into one open to private appropriation. In this way, the socialist housing block has become a sum of private spaces which look to extend in any adjacent interstice. Individual changes that deviate from the uniformity of the initial project can be generally noted on the façade, which offers the key to reading the whole structure from public space. A thorough radiography of such a structure could reveal a three dimensional character of the extensions in all possible directions, expressing various needs that should be brought into discussion. This paper aims to investigate strategies for DIY home improvements in the post-communist years.

Key words: large housing estates, privatization, home improvement, DIY initiatives

Introduction

At a first glance, one of the most powerful images that stand out in Bucharest's cityscape are large, dense and grey housing estates, which still house about 70 per cent of the city's population. This is not an isolated case of the capital city, but represents an everyday reality in all Romanian cities.¹ Considering that prior to 1989 the state was the only investor, builder and manager of housing estates, the whole population was living in rented apartments. In the post-communist years, privatization policies of housing estates turned most of the former renters into homeowners. Private property and

¹ Vockler, Kai; Ghenciulescu, Ștefan; Goagea, Constantin; Goagea, Cosmina; Baroncea, Justin, *Socialist Housing Estates in Bucharest – An Overview* in *The Conditions of self-regulated Urbanity*, UR Volume #2, Zeppelin Association, p.45

homeownership has brought along the former tenants' own vision regarding collective living. This led to private initiatives of *in situ* improvements, consisting in extensions or the reuse of balconies, apartment insulation and façade rendering, interior modernizing spatial reconfigurations, appropriation of no man's public space for private use, etc. Extensions can be found at different levels, above and below ground level inside the structure or outside in public space. Rather than a collective responsibility, the latter seems to be a collective space-mine that each tenant can exploit endlessly. Rehabilitation strategies should not be limited to technical matters, as public initiatives currently are, but stress the regeneration and enlivenment of the collective, in order to render possible a general context in which the private can flourish as well. Furthermore, even if architecturally the outcome of extensions as a result of private initiatives is very poor, it expresses specific needs that should be brought into discussion in the elaboration of rehabilitation strategies.

Collective living during Romanian communism

Housing estates following the soviet model were built in Romania from 1947 to 1989. In the first decade, public housing ensembles in Bucharest, which represented the development model for the whole country, adhered to a certain urban scale, being inserted into the existing urban fabric. Starting with the 1960s, new functionalist housing neighborhoods were built on the outskirts of the city (model workers' neighborhoods are Balta Alba, Titan and Drumul Taberei). The next decades represented a boom in terms of housing estate construction with rough urban transformations in the cities' organisms, characterised by demolition of the old urban fabric to make way for new major axes of unbroken slabs and standardized fronts.²

The idea of modernity embodied in social housing developments in Western European countries might show certain similarities to socialist housing estates in the former Eastern Block, but their origins and character explain the fundamental differences. While the housing developments in the West were designed for economically

² Ibid

disadvantaged people, in the east they represented the new housing type, meant for everybody, from workers to intellectuals.³ The concept was to develop a prototype for the new collective socially mixed house for the new individual that society was willing to create. The eulogy brought to the new housing typology and the way it was induced into the inhabitants' consciousness can be observed in the cinematographic productions of the time.⁴ Despite of the new ideological efforts to equalise the members of society, the inhabitants of the new housing typology had very different backgrounds. Most of them were forced to leave the countryside to work in urban factories, so their idea of home was transferred from the countryside into the multilayered housing block, where neighbours were closer than one expected and was used to. The habits and way of life of the first generations of tenants transformed the blocks into vertical villages.⁵ Uniformity between tenants relied in the fact that none of them was a homeowner, but all were renters, the state being *the sole designer, investor, builder and manager* of the new housing estates. The modern dream of social mix was fulfilled only due to *the lack of any other choice*.⁶

The limited number of housing prototype typologies might make the socialist collective living seem uniform; in fact, it was far from this. Location made a big difference in the perception of urbanity, because the same architectural solutions were implemented on the outskirts of the city or inside the city fabric, replacing freshly demolished housing neighborhoods. Depending on the period of construction, housing estates vary in urban regulations, construction techniques, materials – towards the end of the communist era, in the 1980s, an emergency plan of savings was implemented, which meant the densification of earlier built neighborhoods.

³ Vockler, Kai; Ghenciulescu, Ștefan; Goagea, Constantin; *Magic Blocks - Scenarios for the collective housing from the socialist period in Bucharest*, Zeppelin, 2009, p. 15

⁴ Film scene: *Serenade for the 12th Floor*, 1976

⁵ Ibid. In order to get in touch one with another, people in the scene opened the window and called their neighbor by name in order to ask him for some favor, as they would have done in the countryside.

⁶ Vockler, Kai; Ghenciulescu, Ștefan; Goagea, Constantin; *Magic Blocks - Scenarios for the collective housing from the socialist period in Bucharest*, Zeppelin, 2009, p. 15

Post-communist home improvements

Although the contemporary idea of collective living has developed, about half of the country's population still inhabits these structures, nowadays in an increasing state of decay. The main post-communist privatization policies regarded housing estates, so Romania turned into *a super ownership country by mid 1990s*.⁷ As soon as acquisitions from the state of former rented apartments were possible, collective housing blocks turned into a collection of individual private properties. The privatization process did not take into account the public space, formerly shared between tenants, so this turned into a no man's land with uncertain property status, open to appropriation. On their private property, homeowners started individual upgrading actions, unrelated to a public strategy. Most of the initiatives were implemented without a legal basis, so former apartments, formerly called matchboxes, turned over night in *modern* living spaces, corresponding to each homeowner's idea of modernity. Most of the improvements were the fruit of DIY initiatives, inspired by neighbors' and friends' home improvements.

As a consequence of private unrelated interventions, the standardized façades of housing blocks changed their original appearance. Individual changes can be categorized in interior and exterior interventions visible on the façades from public space. Due to their visibility, the latter express a variety of functional options in improving the standard balcony space in glazed loggias, extensions of rooms or kitchens, storage spaces, superposed courtyards/gardens. These changes express personal solutions to obvious general needs and their morphology usually expresses the homeowners social status and personal taste.⁸ As a possible reaction to the former imposed collectivism, the last two decades have proved an increasing individualization, which can be easily read in the above described privat actions. The extreme offtake into the private space left public space unused, but with an enormous potential.

⁷ Șoaită, Adriana Mihaela, (2012) *Strategies for In Situ Home Improvement in Romanian Large Housing Estates*, p.6

⁸ Vockler, Kai; Ghenciulescu, Ștefan; Goagea, Constantin; *Magic Blocks - Scenarios for the collective housing from the socialist period in Bucharest*, Zeppelin, 2009, p. 33

Rehabilitation strategies

Although a great amount of the country's population lives in communist blocks, they have been missing from the public discourse in the last two decades. The general state of decay of the large housing estates is continuously increasing since the 1990s, in absence of any public strategies of upgrading. Individual interior and exterior apartment improvements brought to a patchwork of interventions, present on façades to witness the need of a strategy for rehabilitation solutions. In this sense, a national rehabilitation programme was launched in March 2009, which sustains homeowners in initiatives like thermo-insulation of outside walls with polystyrene, window refurbishments and façade repainting. Such programmes should not be limited to resolving the technical problems of the external shell of the blocks, but enlarge its strategy spatially and socially, regarding the identity of each neighborhood they are being developed in. Even the illegal home improvements with a scarce architectural outcome, frequently visible on the façades of housing blocks in rather poor neighborhoods, should be taken into consideration by any rehabilitation strategy, as they are the expression of obvious general needs.

Conclusions

The questions that socialist housing estates raise in the contemporary society seem to be black or white: conservation or destruction of these structures? Reality proves a different perspective because life without communist blocks cannot be imagined, not because of nostalgia, but because of the huge amount of people inhabiting them. Due to privatization in the post-communist years, the initial social mix is segregating more and more in homogeneous neighborhoods. The social status of the inhabitants can be generally read off the shells of housing blocks, thanks to the private interventions or the lack thereof. In order to develop feasible rehabilitation plans, architectural and urban complexes forming neighborhoods from the socialist era need to be thoroughly studied in order to be understood in their complexity of details.

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Film: *Serenade for the 12th Floor*, Director Carol Corfanta, 1976