

Transformation of the built environment in Petržalka pre-fabricated housing estate

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Abstract

The last two decades have brought significant changes into pre-fabricated housing estates built during the era of state-socialism. In the 1990's an active discussion about "humanisation" of the biggest pre-fabricated housing estate – Petržalka in the city of Bratislava – started. Petržalka's monofunctionality, its dependency on the city centre and at the same time its segregation from other parts of the city were heavily criticised. In our paper certain aspects of the housing estate's post-socialist transformation are analysed in the context of wider intra-urban changes triggered by the new production of built environment. This transformation is manifested mainly in the construction of new residential and commercial real estates. The dynamics of that is highly influenced by the political and economic changes taking place at state level. In case of new residential investments, the densification of the existing built-up structure took place. In contrast, heavy concentration of commercial buildings can be observed along the key transport corridors of supra-local (regional and international) importance.

Keywords: built environment, pre-fabricated housing estate, transformation, Petržalka, Bratislava

Introduction

Erecting large housing estates of pre-fabricated, standardized block of flats was an important element of the societal transformation during state-socialism. Transforming the pre-war society with strong agrarian-rural features was a large-scale modernisation project which involved, among others, the development of (heavy) industry and the transfer of a significant portion of the Slovak population into growing urban centres where predominantly panel housing estates were developed.

Between 1950 and 1990 in Central and Eastern Europe 14 million and in the territory of former USSR 66 million flats were built. In the late 1980's in

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Czechoslovakia one third of the total population lived in the blocks of flats mentioned above (TEMELOVÁ, J. *et al.* 2011). The different level of industrialisation and urbanisation in pre-socialist era and the equalisation/homogenisation project pursued by the socialist Czechoslovakia were the main reasons why most new development projects were located in the less developed Slovak part of the country. Even Bratislava, the biggest pre-war urban centre, needed enormous investments in both residential and industrial sectors in order to reach the level of second ranked cities in the Czech lands. Thus, in the late 1980's almost 80% of the residents of the Slovak capital settled in pre-fabricated housing estates of which Petržalka was the biggest one with almost 140 thousands inhabitants (not only in Slovakia but in Central Europe as well) (MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. *et al.* 2011).

Soon after the collapse of state-socialism, pre-fabricated housing estates, once the pride of the spectacular project of socialist urbanisation and modernisation, were perceived as a problem. Functional homogeneity and the strong dependency on the city centre (only basic amenities and services were located there apart from the residential function) were often accompanied by spatial segregation from other parts of the towns.

In the early 1990's authorities, professionals, and the general public were all preoccupied by discussing the possible ways of humanisation of pre-fabricated housing estates (SZELÉNYI, I. 1996; ENYEDI, Gy. 1998). At the beginning there was no agreement to what extent this should involve the improvement of different negatively perceived aspects of residential areas; rather complex revitalisation was expected (ŠLACHTA, Š. 2009). However, it soon became clear that anything happening on the pre-fabricated housing estates would be of more spontaneous nature, more selective and it would be driven by profit interest rather than the realisation of clear intentions and plans.

Attempts to specify and refine analytical methods helping to understand processes of urban transformation have been undertaken by several authors within the field of urban geography. Particularly influential, among others, contributions written by L. SÝKORA (2001), in which basic processes were defined. Here, rehabilitation and regeneration are understood as a positive (in contrast to decline or stagnation) transformation of built environment while the existing morphology is preserved. In contrast wider intra-urban transformations may involve demolition and redevelopment which have not always been perceived as positive (IRA, V. 2003). Present paper addresses this wider intra-urban change caused by new built environment in Petržalka pre-fabricated housing estate.

The early history of Petržalka housing estate

The housing estate of Petržalka was designed to follow the typical modernist architectural style which was tackled with criticism by the contemporary ex-

perts in Czechoslovakia, although those voices were repressed (MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. *et al.* 2006; MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. 2012). Applying pre-fabricated concrete blocks, offered the opportunity to provide a uniform dwelling to everybody regardless profession or social status. As MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. (2012) points out: owning a flat in a pre-fabricated block of flats became a symbol of personal success for many people those days in spite of the already mentioned criticism related to the inappropriate design or the negligence of.

After erecting the first block of flats in Bratislava in 1955, the construction activities spread all over the city, though the quarter of Petržalka was intentionally left out. On 15 June 1966 the Board of the National Committee launched a tender for the Ideological Purport Study for the Southern District of the City of Bratislava (GROSS, K. 1969). Eighty-four proposals of 19 countries were evaluated; eventually the jury did not award the first and the second prize. Instead, 5 third prizes, 6 premiums and 10 honorary distinctions (*idem*) were granted.

The project of Petržalka was not prepared in haste, on the contrary, a thorough elaboration of studies evoked the impression of an “ideal place amidst greenery developed along the romantic arms of the River Danube” (BUDAJ, J. *et al.* 1987, p. 39). The individual quarters were supposed to be self-contained and multifunctional but simultaneously organically communicating. The islands of houses were to be four to eight-storeys with full amenities. The central axis was oriented towards the Castle of Bratislava, a dominant landmark, which “optically and emotionally integrates the city” (BUDAJ, J. *et al.* 1987, p. 40).

However, the construction of the housing estate had started before the evaluation of the tender due to the impatience of local authorities. Territorial-planning study was not applied in a consistent way (MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H., 2012), instead spontaneous constructions started in 1973 (ČAPOVÁ, M. *et al.* 1995).

As a consequence of all those factors, a special urban structure developed in Petržalka. Regarding the spatial distribution and functions, Petržalka is a type of “belt city” lying along the basic north-south axis cut by the secondary axis of a loosened urban fabric. A central axis and a central integrating core are missing. As a result, today’s Petržalka is lacking a single centre with a town hall and the accompanying conveniences and accommodated transport. The residential zone consists of three large quarters: Háje, Dvory and Lúky (after ČAPOVÁ, M. *et al.* 1995).

Each quarter has a particular urban and spatial composition: the tall buildings in Háje are facing the sunny southern side. The characteristic conception of Dvory is to maintain closed space between the blocks; and the composition of Lúky is based on a meander-like arrangement of blocks of flats (ČAPOVÁ, M. *et al.* 1995).

Viewed from Bratislava, Petržalka is a monolith wall void of natural and functional dominants (BUDAJ, J. *et al.* 1987). The same authors also de-

nounced the poor quality of flats quite early: the bad sound-insulating properties of the pre-fabricated panels, doors and sanitary units allowing the noise penetration of lifts, piping, neighbouring flats and road traffic; inadequate entrance and common spaces (fractured hallways, complicated access to flats) – eventually expensive options of refurbishment (BUDAJ, J. *et al.* 1987).

In terms of architecture, MORAVČÍKOVÁ, H. *et al.* (2006) discredited the oversize of Petržalka, its monotony, monofunction, the exclusion from the city and the existing functional dependence on it. MLÁDEK, J. *et al.* (1998) reported about the absence of a central axis and a core of the whole urban structure which made impossible for the architects to draw a thorough transport plan in that quarter. The absence of a natural centre gives rise to social problems; there are no definite meeting points, a place for cultural events while the insufficiently and unevenly distributed amenities are also problematic (BUDAJ, J. *et al.* 1987).

Changing structures within the housing estate

The last two decades of the profound socio-economic changes have transformed the life of post-socialist Slovakia in many respects (SÝKORA, L. and BOUZAROVSKI, S. 2012). Bratislava, which is the capital and the primary urban centre in Slovakia, has been particularly exposed to the pressure of new transformative relations and those shifts have not left untouched the built environment either (KOVÁCS, Z. 1999; TOSICS, I. 2005; SAILER-FLIEGE, U. 1999). For Bratislava those changes eventually² brought a significant development stimulus which materialised in an unprecedented construction boom of the past decade. Bratislava with its hinterland can be considered as the winner of the transition period among the regions of Slovakia, at least in terms of ability to attract capital investment and economic development activities³.

The most significant changes in the built environment occur mainly through new constructions, especially residential and commercial real estate investments and the developments in transportation infrastructure. The general dynamics of residential investments in Bratislava and Petržalka have been affected by the fact that the city represents the most important urban and economic centre of Slovakia (ŠUŠKA, P. 2012). The growing interest in real estate investments have also materialised in Petržalka (*Figure 1*) where new

² Generally, in Slovakia there was a sort of delay of many social transformations due to the postponed economic and political integration. Therefore, suburbanisation processes, the commercialisation of certain parts of mono-functional areas, socio-spatial stratification and separation, the building boom and the real estate bubble – all appeared much later than those in the neighbouring post-socialist metropolis.

³ Which does not mean that there are no losers in the transition in Petržalka.

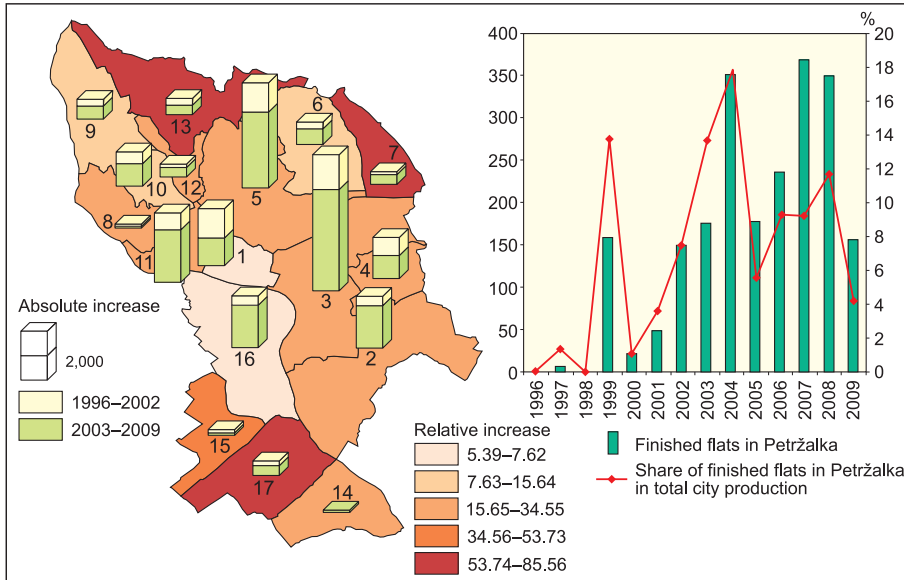


Fig. 1. Production of residential built environment in the districts of Bratislava. Urban districts: 1 = Staré Mesto; 2 = Podunajské Biskupice; 3 = Ružinov; 4 = Vrakuňa; 5 = Nové Mesto; 6 = Rača; 7 = Vajnory; 8 = Devín; 9 = Devínska Nová Ves; 10 = Dúbravka; 11 = Karlova Ves; 12 = Lamač; 13 = Záhorská Bystrica; 14 = Čunovo; 15 = Jarovce; 16 = Petržalka; 17 = Rusovce

dwellings scattered all over the territory contributing to the intensification of the existing urban fabric. Here the densification of existing structures was the dominant process after 1990.

While in the city centre new developments and extended building processes have been taking place, in Petržalka functional diversification including the creation of urban-centre-like spaces was postponed and the central parts of the housing estate remained underdeveloped in terms of commercial function (Figure 2).

Numerous factors contributed to that deficiency: the disregard of original development plans of the socialist era, the market-driven spontaneity in the location of the new dwelling projects (ŠLACHTA, Š. 2009, p. 13) and the long-term suspension of the intraurban rail transport system.

Especially, the latter means a serious impediment as the intraurban rail transport system is not only crucial in terms of the housing estate connection with the city, but the planned route is also supposed to become the central axis where the concentration of business activities, services and amenities may evolve and thus it can serve as a genuine central zone of the housing estate.

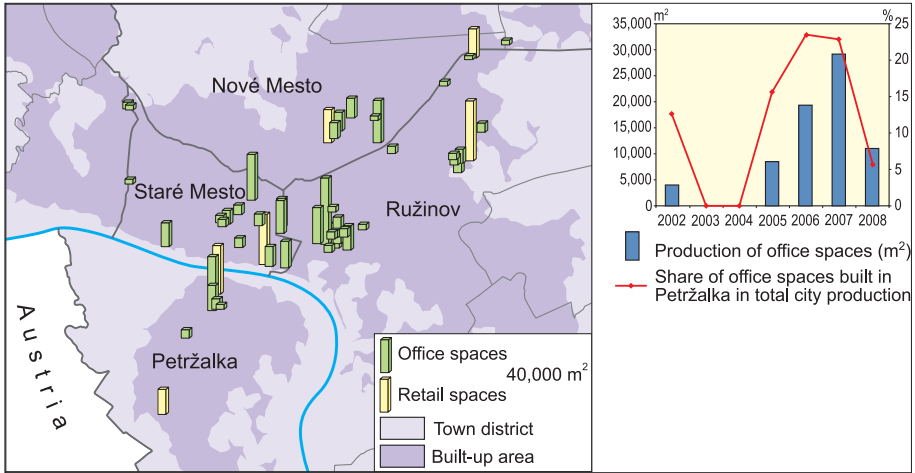


Fig. 2. Production of commercial built environment in town districts of Bratislava

Conclusion

The last twenty years have witnessed significant transformations in pre-fabricated housing estates built during the state-socialist period. Many of the original, encoded problems have been removed, but others persisted or even deepened. Additionally, due to the post-socialist transformation, new problems appeared. In terms of physical transformation of intra-urban structures, virtually all building initiatives, with the exception of transport infrastructure, have been pursued by private investors. The market logic of investment in the built environment does not always meet the needs of complex humanization of environment. The delay of key public investments (i.e. construction of roads and intra-urban trains, which would improve Petržalka's efficient transport links with the city and would also serve as an important socio-spatial integration area of the estate), remains cardinal problem.

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