The effects of changes to the post-socialist urban planning framework on public open spaces in multi-story housing areas: A view from Nis, Serbia

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A B S T R A C T

This study considers how changes to the post-socialist urban planning framework have affected the treatment of public open space in the transformation of existing mass-housing areas and newly developed multi-story housing areas for the city of Nis, Serbia. The study focuses on quantitative and qualitative changes as well as the physical characteristics of public open spaces, evaluating environmental comfort, safety, accessibility, privacy and intensity of social interactions. The investigation is based on a comparative analysis of three case studies in Nis, which are representative of different developmental, institutional and planning periods. The research indicates a regressive approach in the planning for and treatment of public open space. It also suggests that within the limited economic capacity of local authorities, investors and buyers, the market-oriented post-socialist urban planning framework can lead to spatial and functional fragmentation in housing areas and the degradation or disappearance of not only the public spaces but of open spaces in general.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the Central and Eastern Europe region (CEE) has undergone dramatic structural transformations that have been studied and analyzed intensively, with a prominent focus on political restructuring and economic development (Andrusz, 1996; Hamilton, Dimitrovska Andrews, & Pichler-Milanovic, 2005; Tosics, 2004), institutional and spatial changes (Nedovic-Budic, 2012), land restitution (Blacksell & Born, 2002; Valetta, 2000) regional growth and territorial conceptualization (Dingsdale, 1999; Enyedi, 1996), social economic changes (Enyedi, 1998; Vujiošević & Nedovic-Budic, 2007) and socio-spatial changes (Sykora, 1999). Because post-socialist changes have affected trends in urban planning and policy, many CEE cities have been subjected to considerable adjustments to spatial organization, which have been extensively influenced by a redefined real estate market and property ownership rights. Therefore, many studies have focused on understanding patterns of spatial restructuring (Brade, Herfert, & Wiest, 2009; Nae & Turnock, 2011; Tosics, 2007; Waley, 2011), urban periphery growth (Hirt, 2006; Nuisil & Rink, 2005; Rudolph & Brade, 2005; Sýkora & Ouredníček, 2007; Tammaru, 2001), development of the inner cities (Golubchikov & Badyina, 2007; Haase, Grossmann, & Steinführer, 2012; Temelová, 2007) and the spatial imprint of urban consumption and commercial real estate (Kreja, 2007; Makhrova & Molodikova, 2007; Sýkora, 1998). New legal and institutional arrangements have been introduced, leading to profound and unprecedented spatial changes. Under continuous pressure and without a well-prepared institutional infrastructure, urban development has been influenced by short-term visions, which inspired debates and criticism at the early stages of transition (Kennedy, 1995). As a result of local legislative differences, these processes have varied in their spatial manifestations. Stanilov (2007b, pp. 352) argues that the introduction of partial area plans, which has become a widespread practice, has undermined the development of regulation and stimulated ”haphazard patterns of urban development, subverting the implementation of unified plans therefore overloading the existing infrastructure, and creating tensions between new and old uses.” This trend has emerged from numerous spatial patchworks and asymmetric development on all urban scales.

One of the most frequently discussed issues in the transitional period has been the role and impact of urban planning on the housing sector. A major challenge regarding the transformation in housing has drawn the attention of scholars, who have conducted research into housing sector policies and reforms (Buckley & Tsenkova, 2007; Djordjevic, 2004; Petrovic, 2001; Pichler-Milanovich, 2001; Tosics & Hegedüs, 2003; Tsenkova, 2000, 2005). These reforms have had noticeable consequences on current housing conditions in the post-socialist cities and, indirectly, on the social cost of the transformation process, which now experiences different forms of gentrification, poverty and segregation. (Badyina & Golubchikov, 2005; Deda & Tsenkova, 2007; Hirt,
Achieving a more reliable guide for the improvement of urban planning practice within a particular context, whereby critics of lower spatial levels while mainstream research remains focused on Belgrade (Hirt, 2009). However, Nis is an exemplary case that reflects how shifts in development trends and urban policies in Serbia influence spatial changes and physical structures. In socialist Serbia, the development of Nis was fueled by rapid growth of industry and urbanization. Nis experienced intensive population growth from 122,100 residences in 1953 to 232,563 in 1981, followed by the expansion of mass-housing areas as a main model for responding to the growing housing demand. Nis is still perceived as an important regional center, but it is increasingly losing its production capacity because of inconsistencies between its potential and contemporary development processes. The city has experienced difficulty repositioning itself during the post-socialist transition and finding alternatives to urban models imposed by market-driven development. Nis has not yet managed to establish a strategic vision, and it has consequently experienced a prolonged identity crisis that is obvious in its urban landscape. Nis has suffered from a continuous economic downturn since the mid-1980s, with a peak unemployment rate of approximately 40% today and noticeable stagnation in population growth. In this period, Nis has undergone a constant strengthening of the private sector's role in the decision-making process and an intense transformation process that has focused on short-term economic and political decisions. Private capital has initiated maximum utilization of real estate, which is particularly noticeable in residential areas and their POSs. The current treatment of those areas of Nis has been influenced by numerous systemic changes, two of which have had considerable influence. The first was the replacement of a
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