



Soviet housing: who built what and when? The case of Daugavpils, Latvia

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Abstract

Throughout much of the Soviet period, access to housing was a major consideration, both for individual citizens and employers intent on increasing their number of employees. Because of the heavy emphasis on industry, and despite the progress made within the area since the late 1950s, Soviet urban residential provision never managed to fully recover from the acute housing shortage that characterized the Stalin years. In this paper, we address the quantitative side of housing construction during the socialist era. Using the mid-sized diversified industrial town of Daugavpils (Latvia) as a case study, we set out to investigate the extent to which employers were involved in decisions concerning housing provision. To do this, we consult a large volume of archival records, our focus being on documents tracing entries indicating that new living quarters were ready and could be allocated to employees of sponsoring organizations and enterprises.

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'Let us face the truth, state allocation [of housing] which dominates in our country differentiates the population not by a family's ability to pay, nor by the work effort or by its need for living space, but by one's position in the state and party structures.'¹

Introduction

Two decades of post-socialist reform and transformation have had a visible effect on urban areas across the former Soviet bloc. With few exceptions, the socialist city has ceased to exist. The urban economy has witnessed a sea-change, and the commitment to social and spatial equality (to the extent that it did exist) has disappeared. In

one respect, however, it is premature to proclaim the socialist city's death: the built environment and, concomitantly, the socialist spatial structures² inherited by today's post-socialist cities have by no means been squeezed out by the market. Nor is it the case that developments simply, and in a very spatial sense, leapfrog over the socialist urban fallout. Although there is something to be said in favor of Kiril Stanilov's suggestion that 'most of the energy of the post-socialist growth has been channeled to the suburban outskirts, where new shopping centers, office parks and clusters of single-family residences have popped up, leaping over the belt of socialist housing estates', this view is an exaggeration.³ The pre-transition urban fabric represents at once both an obstacle and an opportunity.

In fact, we propose that the market squeezes *into* the existing socialist spatial structure and that there is strong spatial path

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¹ O.E. Bessonova, *Zhilishchnaya strategiya: kak uyti ot gorodov-"khrushchob"* [Housing strategy: how to depart from the Khrushchevite slum cities], *EKO* 5 (1991) 52–59, quote from p. 53. *Khrushchoba* is a compound of the words Khrushchev and *trushchoba* (slum).

² On which see, e.g., M.F. Parkins, *City Planning in Soviet Russia*, Chicago, 1953; R.A. French and F.E.I. Hamilton (Eds), *The Socialist City: Spatial Structure and Urban Policy*, Chichester, 1979; J.H. Bater, *The Soviet City: Ideal and Reality*, London, 1980; F. Werner, *Stadt, Städtebau, Architektur in der DDR. Aspekte der Stadtgeographie, Stadtplanung und Forschungspolitik*, Erlangen, 1981; A. Karger and F. Werner, *Die sozialistische Stadt, Geographische Rundschau* 34, 11 (1982) 519–523 & 526–528; T.H. Elkins and B. Hoffmeister, *Berlin: the Spatial Structure of a Divided City*, London, 1988; H.-J. Kadatz, *Städtebauliche Entwicklungslinien in Mittel- und Osteuropa. DDR, Tschechoslowakei und Ungarn nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, REGIO Beiträge des IRS, 12. Erkner b. Berlin, 1997; R.A. French, *Plans, Pragmatism and People: the Legacy of Soviet Planning for Today's Cities*, London, 1995; A. Bertaud, *The spatial structures of Central and Eastern European cities*, in: S. Tsenkova and Z. Nedović-Budić (Eds), *The Urban Mosaic of Post-socialist Europe*, Heidelberg, 2006, 91–110.

³ K. Stanilov, *Taking stock of post-socialist urban development: a recapitulation*, in: K. Stanilov (Ed), *The Post-socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism*, *GeoJournal Library*, Vol. 92, New York, 2007, 3–17 (quote from p. 8).

dependency leading from socialism to post-socialism.⁴ It is this issue that the present paper addresses. Toward this end, we need to examine what has come before. Merely using as a benchmark the final year of socialism in its Soviet guise is neither likely to allow a full understanding of why the post-Soviet city looks the way it does nor is it likely to help us see why developments take the form they do. To the extent that path dependence is a place-dependent process, our ability to understand the forces that shaped that context will be of some consequence, as will any insight into processes such as lock-in, path destruction, shifting trajectories and *ab initio* developments—both (potential) processes of path creation—as might subsequently occur.⁵

More concretely, our point is this. Squeezing in is not just a metaphor but also an expression of local path creation, a process that predates the demise of the socialist economy. Just as the existing built environment may reduce the flexibility of (or sets limits on) processes of adjustment and change, other traits typical of the centrally planned economy may similarly provide opportunities. Thus, the existence of large surfaces of vacant land within socialist cities, often in their central areas, was a direct precondition for the densification or infill developments that have characterized the past two decades. Indeed, as Åslund astutely notes, 'Socialist economies had no exit mechanism, so factories remained where they had once been built and were hardly ever closed down. ... Consequently a big old power station faces even the Kremlin.'⁶ Likewise, because inner-city regeneration and the modernization of existing industrial facilities were not given priority over the outward quantitative expansion of these functions under socialism,⁷ we now witness a process of gentrification⁸ and inner-city brownfield regeneration⁹ that would not have been likely or even possible if history had taken a different route. As for the

suburban zones, without the formation of the typically socialist pattern of concentrated satellite towns coupled with a strong legacy of military land 'freezing' in near-metropolitan areas,¹⁰ there would never have been enough land to accommodate the dramatic expansion of mainly low-rise residential suburbanization that has become evident during the past ten years or so.¹¹ In short, current spatial developments in the post-socialist city cannot adequately be assessed without an appropriate understanding of its past.

The reasons for this are manifold. In addition to the general patterns noted above, there are at least three other features whose legacy is important for today's cities. First, socialist-era dwellings still house the majority of the population of post-socialist cities and are arguably the main 'building block' of the post-Soviet (and elsewhere, post-socialist) city. To a considerable extent, this means that these dwellings replicate the late Soviet socio-spatial differentiation, albeit with inhabitants who are twenty years older.¹² Second, the way housing was allocated has a strong indirect impact on today's socio-spatial landscape: as Raymond Struyk pointed out a decade and a half ago, those occupying better-quality centrally located dwellings—often a privileged group—enjoyed a better initial endowment.¹³ Third, and most fundamentally, the manner in which the Soviet system of central planning encouraged action among economic agents at various levels of decision-making is likely to prove an important explanation for the allocation of resources, including land and housing finance.¹⁴ A lack of adequate pricing, long recognized by students of the Soviet system, may also explain the low intensity of land use in central locations, which would have translated into the vacant lots and brownfields that are a prominent characteristic of the post-socialist city. However, the finer detail

⁴ See T. Borén and M. Gentile, Metropolitan processes in post-communist states: an introduction, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 89, 2 (2007) 95–110.

⁵ On path dependence as a place-dependent process, see R. Martin and P. Sunley, Path dependence and regional economic evolution, *Journal of Economic Geography* 6, 4 (2006) 395–437; see also D. MacKinnon, Evolution, path dependence and economic geography, *Geography Compass* 2, 5 (2008) 1449–1463, in which institutional and political economy factors including structures of power are brought into view. For a discussion of path dependence and urban history, primarily working from studies on technical systems and urban utilities, see e.g., M.V. Melosi, Path dependence and urban history: is a marriage possible?, in: D. Schott, B. Luckin and G. Massard-Guilbaud (Eds), *Resources of the City: Contributions to an Environmental History of Modern Europe*, Aldershot, 2005, 262–275.

⁶ Å. Åslund, *Building Capitalism: the Transformation of the Former Soviet Bloc*, Cambridge, 2002, 38. See further A. Bertaud and B.M. Renaud, Socialist cities without land markets, *Journal of Urban Economics* 41 (1997) 137–151; J. Salukvadze, Spatial structure of Tbilisi: Soviet legacy and ongoing change, paper presented at the Inaugural Nordic Geographers' Meeting, Lund, 10–15 May 2005; on densification and infills see I. Szélenyi, Cities under socialism – and after, in: G. Andrusz, M. Harloe and I. Szélenyi (Eds), *Cities After Socialism*, Oxford, 1996, 286–317; A. Ivanou, Infill development in Moscow and its social implications, paper presented at the 2nd International Urban Geographies of Post-communist States workshop, Stockholm, 7–10 December 2007.

⁷ I. Szélenyi, *Urban Inequalities under State Socialism*, Oxford, 1983; J. Musil, City development in Central and Eastern Europe before 1990: historical context and socialist legacies, in: F.E.I. Hamilton, K.D. Andrews and N. Pichler-Milanovic (Eds), *Transformation of Cities in Central and Eastern Europe: Towards Globalization*, Tokyo, 2005, 22–43.

⁸ L. Sýkora, Economic and social restructuring and gentrification in Prague, *Acta Facultatis Rerum Naturalium Universitatis Comenianae, Geographica* 37 (1996) 71–81; L. Sýkora, Gentrification in post-communist cities, in: R. Atkinson and G. Bridge (Eds), *Gentrification in Global Context: the New Urban Colonialism*, Routledge, London, 2005, 90–105; Z. Kovács, Ghettoization or gentrification? Post-socialist scenarios for Budapest, *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 13, 1 (1998) 63–81; A. Badyina and O. Golubchikov, Gentrification in Central Moscow – a market process or a deliberate policy? Money, power and people in housing regeneration in Ostozhenka, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 87, 2 (2005) 113–129.

⁹ E. Kiss, Restructuring in the industrial areas of Budapest in the period of transition, *Urban Studies* 39, 1 (2000) 69–84; E. Kiss, Spatial impacts of post-socialist industrial transformation in the major Hungarian cities, *European Urban and Regional Studies* 11, 1 (2004) 81–87; J. Temelová, Flagship developments and the physical upgrading of the post-socialist inner city: the Golden Angel project in Prague, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 89, 2 (2007) 169–181.

¹⁰ E.g., T. Tammaru, K. Leetmaa, S. Silm and R. Ahas, Temporal and spatial dynamics of the new residential areas around Tallinn, *European Planning Studies* 17, 3 (2009) 423–439.

¹¹ In a rapidly growing body of literature, see e.g., H. Kok and Z. Kovács, The process of suburbanization in the agglomeration of Budapest, *Netherlands Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 14, 2 (1999) 119–141; J. Timár and M.M. Váradi, The uneven development of suburbanization during transition in Hungary, *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8, 4 (2001) 349–360; T. Ott, From concentration to de-concentration – migration patterns in the post-socialist city, *Cities* 18, 6 (2001) 403–412; A. Lisowski, Social aspects of the suburbanisation stage in the agglomeration of Warsaw, *Dela* 21 (2004) 531–541; H. Nuissl and D. Rink, The 'production' of urban sprawl in eastern Germany as a phenomenon of post-socialist transformation, *Cities* 22, 2 (2005) 123–134; Y. Valkanov, Suburbanisation in Sofia: changing spatial structure of post-communist city, in: F. Eckardt (Ed.), *Paths of Urban Transformation, The European City in Transition*, Vol. 5, Frankfurt/Main, 2006, 175–194; K. Leetmaa and T. Tammaru, Suburbanization in countries in transition: destination of suburbanizers in the Tallinn Metropolitan Area, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 89, 2 (2007) 127–146; J. Novák and L. Sýkora, A city in motion: the timespace activity and mobility patterns of the suburban inhabitants and the structuration of the spatial organization of the Prague Metropolitan Area, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 89, 2 (2007) 147–168; M. Ouředníček, Differential suburban development in the Prague urban region, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 89, 2 (2007) 111–126; S. Hirt, Suburbanizing Sofia: characteristics of post-socialist peri-urban change, *Urban Geography* 28, 8 (2007) 755–780; K. Leetmaa, T. Tammaru and K. Anniste, From priority-led to market-led suburbanisation in a post-communist metropolis, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 100, 4 (2009) 436–453.

¹² For a review of social differentiation and segregation, see S. Ruoppila, Processes of residential differentiation in socialist cities: literature review on the cases of Budapest, Prague, Tallinn and Warsaw, *European Journal of Spatial Development* (February 2004), <<http://www.nordregio.se/EJSD/>>, refereed article no. 9.

¹³ R.J. Struyk, Housing privatisation in the former Soviet bloc to 1995, in: G. Andrusz, M. Harloe and I. Szélenyi (Eds), *Cities After Socialism*, Oxford, 1996, 192–213.

¹⁴ Helpful accounts of how the centrally planned economy worked can be found in A. Nove, *The Soviet Economic System*, Boston, MA, 3rd Edition, 1986; J. Kornai, *The Socialist System: the Political Economy of Socialism*, Princeton, NJ, 1992.

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