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Achieving the Basic Sustainable Qualities in New Housing in Post-Socialist Serbia: Regulation vs. Case-Studies

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Abstract

In a period of post-socialist transformation, unexpected and sudden socio-economic changes in society have deeply reflected into urban space. Their influence has been specially observed in the most common spatial elements, such as housing. Thus, the housing has proved to be an evident example of both positive and negative characteristics of post-socialist transformation in urbanism and architecture.

The regulation of housing in Serbia has been postponed compared with other post-socialist countries. A few different guidelines for housing design existed in socialist Serbia, but they were overcome in transition period, in early 1990s.

Furthermore, the official evaluation of current housing is still an underdeveloped field, regarding to various factors. The differences and deficiencies between housing regulation and related statistic data are among the most noticeable. The implication of such state can be overviewed through housing construction in situ; the quality of new housing projects varies greatly, even by basic characteristics, such as housing area, number of rooms or accessibility to natural lighting.

The methodology is critical analysis of existing regulations of housing in Serbia, through the official Act of conditions and normative for the designing of housing buildings and flats, adopted in 2012. The differences and deficiencies between regulation and statistics were the starting-point to define criteria. The relevant case studies were checked through them. The expected contribution of the paper is providing the set of recommendations and guidelines for the improvement of evaluation process of the basic elements of new housing in Serbia as well as other countries with similar background.

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1. Introduction

Post-socialist transition in Central and Eastern Europe has proved to be a “great experiment” in the recent history. Sudden and comprehensive changes in the social, economic and the political structure of post-socialist societies have not had similar role-models across the World¹. This unique position has exposed these societies to the processes of democratization, post-industrialization and globalization². As a consequence of these intensive influences, space in post-socialist countries has also been profoundly changed³.

Being a very complex and the spaciouly the most demanding urban function⁴, housing is a good example of transformations in post-socialist space. Socio-economic changes in housing sector have deeply influenced to new spatial characteristics of housing, i.e. they have formed new urban and architectural patterns in housing³. Nevertheless, the entire post-socialist space has not been a monolithic^{1, 3}. Accordingly, post-socialist housing has significantly varied between different countries and regions. Even more, different housing policies have played an important role in the creation of several sub-types of post-socialist cities⁵.

This stance is also true for housing in post-socialist Serbia, which has formed specific characteristics during the last 25 years of transition. The harsh post-socialist transition of Serbia, influenced with the Yugoslavian wars and international isolation, has postponed housing transformation and made Serbian housing very distinctive⁴. The absence of real housing policy and strategy and the inadequate legislative framework of housing⁶ have indirectly positioned market as the main factor of housing “development”. Furthermore, new conditions of capitalist economy made all guidelines for housing design from socialist period obsolete even in the early 1990s. This situation has caused many spatial challenges in housing sector in the last two decades.

The influence of “very liberal” market in post-socialist Serbia is especially noticeable in the case of newly-built housing. Generally, everyday media often informs about new housing projects and, especially, about more problematic cases. Nevertheless, housing sector is still professionally and scientifically poorly-analyzed field. This is particularly true in the physical aspect of housing, which is always more connected with local conditions⁷. New, post-socialist legislation and regulation documents have been enacted in the last few years and hence they still have limited influence. Furthermore, there is also an obstacle between official legislation and regulation of housing and relevant statistical evaluation. In fact, official statistics in Serbia differently considers and collects many parameters of housing standards. This is noticeable even in the case of basic characteristics, such as housing area, number of rooms or accessibility to natural lighting. In accordance to this observation, it is very hard to scientifically evaluate the quality of new housing in Serbia.

This paper tries to clarify this issue. The aim of the paper is to overcome the gap between regulation and statistical information in Serbian housing through the setting of the links common for both sides. It uses the methodology given by the official Act of conditions and normative for the designing of housing buildings and flats, which was enacted in 2012. This act is especially dedicated to improve the architectural conditions of new housing in Serbia. Before it, the critical analysis of existing regulations of housing and related statistical data in Serbia is presented. The differences and deficiencies between regulation and statistics are the starting-point to define criteria for the second step. These criteria will be checked in two cases of new multi-family housing in Belgrade. The first one is referred as the best practice; the second one is a typical example of mass-production of post-socialist housing. Expected results are important for the formation of relevant recommendations and guidelines for housing design. Their importance is to improve the evaluation process of the basic elements of new housing in Serbia as well as other countries with similar background.

2. Housing design in socialist and post-socialist societies

The socio-economic dichotomy of housing in post-socialist societies refers to the evident shift of state role in housing from strong support in socialist period to the neglect of housing as well as the other social elements of urban policy⁸. During social period, housing was positioned very high among important social needs for proletariat. Due to socialist ideology, ruling system tried to minimize the influence of housing market and private ownership, ignoring economic aspect of housing, i.e. housing as a commodity⁴. State was the main actor in housing sector and, especially, in the sector of the provision of new housing for fast-growing urban population. By some estimation, 3-5% of the gross domestic product of socialist countries went to the sector for housing provision/construction and it

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