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Infrastructural Thinking: Urban Housing in Former Czechoslovakia from the Stalin Era to EU Accession

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Abstract

In contemporary conversations about urban housing, the cities of the former Eastern Bloc rarely come to mind as potential models for future development. Images persist of vast, grey, treeless expanses of space occupied by repetitive apartment blocks that dwarf their human inhabitants. This view does capture something about the experience of living in what came to be known as the "socialist city," yet the cities had many other kinds of spaces—older urban fabric, small apartment blocks, green spaces, village remnants, and neighborhood shopping corridors. Often the existing and the new were integrated into a synthetic whole. The ambitious master plans for cities across the region included large swathes of housing provisioned with services such as schools, retail stores, cultural centers, utility services, and public transportation networks.[1] Labor and material shortages meant that the final results usually deviated (sometimes significantly) from these initial plans, leading in part to the bad reputation of socialist construction. Yet over time, some of the missing components have materialized and gaps have been filled. This process of completion and change continues even today.

[1] These units were known as *mikroraions* (microdistricts) in Soviet parlance, although the term was not typically used in Czechoslovakia. On the Soviet case, see Smith 2010.

Disciplines
Architectural History and Criticism | Architecture | Contemporary Art | Slavic Languages and Societies

Chapter 3

Infrastructural Thinking: Urban Housing in Former Czechoslovakia from the Stalin Era to

EU Accession[1]

Kimberly Elman Zarecor

In contemporary conversations about urban housing, the cities of the former Eastern Bloc rarely come to mind as potential models for future development. Images persist of vast, grey, treeless expanses of space occupied by repetitive apartment blocks that dwarf their human inhabitants. This view does capture something about the experience of living in what came to be known as the "socialist city," yet the cities had many other kinds of spaces—older urban fabric, small apartment blocks, green spaces, village remnants, and neighborhood shopping corridors. Often the existing and the new were integrated into a synthetic whole. The ambitious master plans for cities across the region included large swathes of housing provisioned with services such as schools, retail stores, cultural centers, utility services, and public transportation networks.[2] Labor and material shortages meant that the final results usually deviated (sometimes significantly) from these initial plans, leading in part to the bad reputation of socialist construction. Yet over time, some of the missing components have materialized and gaps have been filled. This process of completion and change continues even today.

Comprehensive city planning was first implemented on a massive scale in the Eastern Bloc within 1950s Stalinist economic and social models that emphasized the city in relation to its spaces of industrial production. It is a perspective that relied on what I call infrastructural thinking—decision making propelled by the requirements and scale of urban infrastructure. This point of view is not itself socialist, but rather a perspective that thrived in state socialist economies, run by bureaucrats who embraced the concept and pace of multi-year planning (the

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"five-year plan" is the classic increment, although there were others).[3] The basis of such planning in state socialist countries was a belief in the power of quantitative measuring and scientific methodologies to solve long-term social and economic problems brought about by the unpredictability of capitalist systems, i.e. imbalances in supply and demand, unplanned urban growth, unemployment, and homelessness (see Kornai 1992).

Through a discussion of Ostrava, a large industrial city in the northeast of the Czech Republic, this chapter explores the implications of infrastructural thinking for the building of socialist cities and their continued transformation in the post-socialist period. Rather than positing the socialist city as an isolated phenomenon bounded by the beginning and end of Communist Party rule, and therefore a place inextricably linked to the existence of socialism as a political system, it argues instead that the era of the socialist city was a phase of urban development when a particular set of priorities and infrastructures for future growth were established. Decisions in this period were connected, not surprisingly, to the East European interpretation of Marxism-Leninism with its focus on the development of heavy industry. With the influence of infrastructural thinking, socialist urban planning emphasized growth over time, an idea already implicit in the concept of infrastructure. In this way, the socialist city lives on as an embedded logic in the contemporary city, a layer of urban spaces and hierarchies that have the potential for other meanings and uses in the absence of the socialist system itself. A new moniker for this emerging city is up for debate, since the term postsocialist has lost some of its meaning more than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The proposition of the socialist city as a permanent embedded logic in the contemporary city is not a radical proposition on its own, but it can lead to the reevaluation of some common assumptions. If a basic infrastructure for future growth was established during state socialism—a kind of scaffold onto which other economic systems can be attached and activated—then the

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[3] James Scott (1998), James Holston (1989), and others have written about a similar way of thinking under the rubric of high modernism, and stress its emphasis on control and its tendency to dehumanize. This chapter does not explicitly take up their critique of high modernism; instead, the focus here is on the effects of infrastructural thinking on the development of postwar communist cities over decades. For other critiques of high modernism, see Ong and Collier (2005).

socialist city might be best understood as a set of connections that organize a multi-layered network of urban life. This scaffold is not an overtly political or ideological expression of state power in the sense that its architectural or urban form carries a fixed meaning. Meaning is derived instead from objects, images, and the relationships between them in the environment, allowing the scaffold to remain even with a shift in political regime. Thus new images and objects resulting from changes after 1989 can occupy the socialist-era spaces and networks that were created in this earlier period, sometimes to even greater effect.

The spatial logic of Ostrava's scaffold is the node, a term popularized in Kevin Lynch's book, *Image of the City* (1960). Lynch described nodes as "strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is traveling. They may be primarily junctions, places of a break in transportation, a crossing or convergence of paths, moments of shift from one structure to another. Or the nodes may be simply concentrations, which gain their importance from being the condensation of some use or physical character" (47). Ostrava's nodes—coal mines, ironworks, factories, commercial districts, public squares, transportation hubs, and residential neighborhoods—were dispersed in clusters across the city. Since the 1950s, choices about where to build have been based on geological surveys of underground coal deposits and, in the case of the western neighborhoods, a desire for cleaner air. The pieces were then connected back together by a large web of trams, trains, buses, and later automobiles, giving the city the character of "an urban agglomeration"; a city that many claim is the most American in the region (see Lipus 2006: 72–77). The transportation infrastructure, in particular, was designed to move people from their homes to their place of work (the binary sites of socialist everyday life), not to the city center as one might expect, thus emphasizing and reinforcing the web-like or networked organizational logic of the city.[4]

Since 1989, Ostrava has developed to accommodate the scale of the automobile with new big box stores, shopping malls, condominiums, and highway interchanges (incredibly, due to

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[4] The scale of the network is large: 282 miles of track and roads with 648 stops within the city's 83 square miles for a population of about 300,000. See Dopravní podnik Ostrava a.s., "Dopravní podnik Ostrava a.s. v číslech" http://www.dpo.cz/spolecnost/cisla.htm, accessed August 20, 2013.

struggles over resources, corruption, and political infighting, Ostrava was not connected to the national highway system until 2009). Some of these new buildings occupy sites that were vacant, often from unfinished socialist master plans, or contaminated, what are called "brownfields," left behind when industrial sites closed. In fact, the fundamentals of socialist-era planning, in terms of urbanism, social relations, and distribution of services, are such that, even with liberal-market housing reforms, EU membership, and a functional democratic civil society in the Czech Republic, the scaffold of the socialist city remains the dominant organizing pattern in many cities, only now serving the interests of capitalism and the market. Sometimes, like in the case of Prague, earlier urban schema and plans also persist, but the socialist imprint still contributes to the city's overall development. The Prague Metro is one example. Built in the late 1960s, the system continues to open new stations and spur residential and commercial development along its lines.

Ostrava, which is a more thoroughly socialist landscape, provides a testing ground for the postsocialist viability of a socialist-era scaffold. In more straightforward terms, Ostrava offers the opportunity to rethink the view that socialist cities are evidence of modernism's failures. Immediately after 1989, there were dire predictions of Ostrava's imminent and precipitous decline—state-owned industrial enterprises would inevitably shut down and massive economic crisis would follow. Instead, some of the industries were privatized or liquidated slowly, mitigating the potential effects of sudden mass unemployment. The financial, service, technology, and education sectors have expanded to make use of the available workforce. The revival has been slow and inconsistent, but irrefutable. By the mid-2000s, the local economy, like that of the rest of the region, was strong and improving. National and international investment in Ostrava increased as factories, corporate headquarters, retail complexes, and new housing were built, indicating the degree to which the city had found a new identity for itself linked to capitalist entrepreneurship and consumerism. Through aggressive marketing campaigns initiated in the Mayor's Office in 2006, Ostrava has branded itself as the hub for a regional network of small cities that includes Katowice in Poland and Žilina in Slovakia. Its extensive regional public transportation system of buses, trolleys, and trams, as well as the busy train station at Ostrava-

Svinov, which links rail lines from Polish and Slovak cities to the north and west with lines to Brno and Vienna to the south, reinforce its role as a regional hub. Like many other cities, Ostrava has recently faced an economic slowdown because of the global recession, but it has weathered the most difficult period of post-socialist transformation better than most residents and commentators expected.[5] Because of this adaptability, cities like Ostrava, with scaffolds that support long-term planning and urban-scale infrastructure, might be instructive for development in other contexts, although hopefully without environmental degradation, authoritarian one-party political systems, and the loss of personal liberties.

What Made a City Socialist?

In *The Socialist City,* geographers R.A. French and F.E. Ian Hamilton (1979: 4) described the European socialist city, as opposed to the capitalist city, as a place with a "very high order of control vested in the State over such matters as land ownership, land use, the degree and direction of industrialization, capital investment in all sectors, and at all levels of the economy, rents, wages, prices, and even (in certain periods and in certain places) movements of populations … the State has a power to determine the pace and the form of urban development far greater than that wielded by any Western government, central or local." The authoritarian nature of this state control often resulted in opaque decision-making processes, lack of local engagement, and logics that operated at the regional, urban, and infrastructural scales, rather than at the scale of the neighborhood or the building.

In the context of this volume, it should also be noted that this power was far greater than in developing countries or sites of informal settlements, even to the point that informality in the housing sector did not exist. There was some spontaneous housing construction, such as small weekend cottages built with construction scraps or black-market materials, but even these were on land systematically subdivided and owned by individuals. Single-family houses continued to

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[5] Unemployment rates in Ostrava were almost 17 percent in July 2004, then fell to 8 percent by November 2008, but have since increased to over 12 percent as of December 2012. For current data, see Český statistický úřad (n.d.) and for historic data, see Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí (n.d.)

be built, mostly outside of city centers, but their construction also depended on the availability of building materials and was monitored and regulated by municipalities. One reason for the lack of informality was the highly bureaucratized tracking of people's addresses and places of employment; it was illegal to be unemployed or homeless in communist Czechoslovakia. As James Scott (1998) shows, such rigorous accounting of people and other methods to make the populace "legible" were practices shared by authoritarian regimes of all sorts.

State control was certainly one aspect of the socialist city, but perhaps the most visceral response to the question of what made a city socialist was the way that it looked—its visual and material character. Socialist cities were grey and made of concrete. The rows of standardized apartment buildings felt anonymous and the lack of maintenance led to deterioration. Geographic distinctions made little difference—a concrete panel building in Ostrava was similar to one in Riga, Tirana, or Tashkent. As French and Hamilton argued, "the sharing of … theoretical concepts and actual planning strategies by planners in the various socialist countries, and the similar problems of translating theory into practice have brought about a certain degree of uniformity" (1979: 14). In the 1960s, five-story blocks were common; high-rise towers became the norm in the 1970s and 1980s. As French and Hamilton wrote in 1979, "if one were transported into any residential area built since the Second World War in the socialist countries, it would be easier at first glance to tell when it was constructed than to determine in which country it was"(ibid.: 15). Historian Stephen Kotkin writes about this phenomenon in Soviet cities, emphasizing that it was not the buildings alone that made a city socialist, but rather the culture in which they were constructed.

> After Stalin's death in 1953, the adoption of mass standardization greatly accelerated, curtailing the parquet and, as it were, expanding the concrete. Sure, the suburbs of Paris and Seoul also swarm with prefabricated concrete block apartment blocks, but Soviet serial reproduction in material culture and infrastructure also came with 'standardized' Communist Party committees, state-owned economies, and the Gulag. This makes it more than a story of Robert Moses run amok, or of powerful global corporations like Bechtel and Siemens building to their brand-name standards in more than 100 countries. In the Soviet case, beyond the

technical matter of inexpensive mass construction and economies of scale lay a

comprehensive program and effects of 'harmonized' institutions, practices, ways of thinking,

and experiences. (2007: 525)

It was this combination of the formal, material, and experiential that gave the socialist city its

unique character (on standardization, see also Zarecor 2011).

Figure 3.1   Housing Estate in Ostrava-South

Source: Author's photo, 2011.

In the popular imagination, the classic type of socialist city was the new city on cleared land,

such as the Soviet examples of Magnitogorsk or Togliatti, the auto-manufacturing city discussed

by Lewis Siegelbaum in this book (Kotkin 1995). As Siegelbaum (this volume) notes, the Soviet

Union built more new towns than any other country in the world, and continued the practice into

the 1970s. About one-third of the 900 Soviet cities built from 1926–1966 were "built from

scratch." The size of the Soviet Union, the distance between its cities, and the absolute secrecy

practiced at some sites created the circumstances in which these tabula rasa constructions made

sense, but this was not the case in most of the Eastern Bloc, which was generally more densely

populated and urbanized even before 1945. There were some early examples of new cities in the

region, including Eisenhüttenstadt in Germany and Nowa Huta in Poland from the 1950s, but the

more common type of urban development was the neighborhood extension within an existing

city. This is the pattern that best fits the Czech examples, including Ostrava, where the core of the

city has thirteenth-century origins.

Ostrava's Image

Any mention of Ostrava elicits strong emotions from people who know the city or its reputation.

The locals are loyal and fiercely proud, while many Praguers have never made the trip 350

kilometers to the east. Although not a well-known city outside of the region, it is the second

largest city by area in the Czech Republic and third largest in population with about 300,000

inhabitants; more than 1.2 million people live in the metropolitan area. During state socialism,

Ostrava's mines and ironworks were critical to the national economy, but it had a reputation for being dirty and smog-filled with drunks and hooligans roaming the streets. It was also a place where people could be forced to live—one of the punishments for people accused of minor transgressions against the government was to be sent to work in Ostrava. Many people stayed away and continue to do so.

At the same time, people kept arriving in the city looking for work and apartments. Access to much of the housing was controlled by large industrial enterprises that paid for the construction of units in particular housing developments, often in conjunction with the city government and local communist political committee. The enterprises and other sponsors then had the opportunity to assign the units they funded to their employees or other favored citizens. The offer of an apartment was often more enticing than the job itself, because many young people lived with their families, even after they were married, until they could obtain a housing unit of their own. To accommodate this growth, Ostrava extended its urban limits incrementally by incorporating smaller settlements into the city proper. A final expansion in the 1970s provided land for new neighborhoods of prefabricated panel buildings, significantly increasing the city's size and population. In addition to Czechs and Slovaks from all parts of the country, the newcomers included transplants from Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria, Vietnam, and Soviet Ukraine, a mix that is still perceptible today (Lipus 2006: 5, 7, 10).

Despite the city's reputation, much of the population was young and family-oriented. In 1966, 78 percent of all households in the large new neighborhoods of Poruba and Ostrava-South (today's Zábřeh, Výškovice, Hrabůvka, Dubina and Bělský Les) had children (Jiřík 1971: 445). Together these neighborhoods accounted for more than 150,000 people at the time, about half of the population (Rumpel et al. 2010: 53). Leisure time could be spent at local cultural centers, theaters, swimming pools, libraries, cinemas, museums, the zoo, the symphony, or the nearby Beskydy or Jeseníky Mountains. Much of this cultural and recreational infrastructure, which remains intact and popular today, was put in place in the 1950s to fulfill the promise of a better life through socialism. As documents in the Ostrava City Archives reveal, the local party apparatus

closely monitored the type of venues being operated, their yearly programming, and the ideological content of the offerings to ensure that they were properly promoting party goals and ideals.[6]

With the end of socialism, a new underground cultural scene began to develop in the early 1990s around cafes, galleries, and music clubs that opened in dilapidated buildings near a rail line in the city center. Today this district, Stodolní, has been gentrified with upscale restaurants, hotels, and night clubs that attract people from across the region. In 2007, a new rail station, Ostrava-Stodolní, was built to serve as a commuter stop for people heading downtown by train. In a familiar story, the intellectuals and artists who first inhabited its rundown storefronts have been forced to move elsewhere by rising rents and redevelopment, although there is enough available space in Ostrava that this has not caused conflict. There is also a growing interest in the city's industrial heritage among young professionals and intellectuals, with cultural events like film, music, and dance festivals taking place on the sites of former mines, ironworks, and factories.[7]

Perhaps the most eloquent theorist of contemporary Ostrava culture is Radovan Lipus, a theater and television director, who moved to Ostrava in 1991 to run the Moravian-Silesian National Theater and was a critical force in the early local underground scene. Originally from Třinec, thirty miles southeast of Ostrava, but educated in Prague, Lipus (2006) recounts that he never imagined living in Ostrava, but soon found himself enthralled. His essays celebrate the city's capacity to be simultaneously gritty and poetic, vividly describing the city as dirty, frightening, exotic, chaotic, a "melting pot," animalistic, American, and, ultimately, indefinable (2006: 5, 7, 10). He also likens the space of the city to a series of medieval "mansion stages," decorated platforms that represent discrete rooms as settings for individual scenes. For Lipus, "every part of the city, through its setting, expresses a different part of the drama, but absolutely never, ever as neutral

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[6] On the monitoring of cultural activities, see Fond 153: *Městský národní výbor v Ostravě* (Municipal National Committee in Ostrava), cartons 732, 819–823, *Archiv města Ostravy* (Ostrava City Archives, henceforth AMO), Ostrava, Czech Republic.
[7] For example, the annual "Colours of Ostrava" festival attracts international musicians and more than 30,000 people. In 2012 and 2013, the main stages were at the former Vítkovice Ironworks. See http://www.colours.cz/.

and generic scenery." (2006: 74–75) The dissonant experience of the city's postmodern fragments, "without evident logic, and apparently without any context," are what make the city so attractive to Lipus and many other young cultural purveyors (ibid.).

Ostrava's Industrial Beginnings

Ostrava's industrial history began in the 1820s when a Habsburg Archduke established an ironworks on church land in the Ostrava neighborhood of Vítkovice, a few miles from the medieval city center (Strakoš 2009: 335–336). Local mines, which opened in the late eighteenth century, supplied coal. The city is on the southern edge of a large coal seam running through southern Poland into the northeast corner of Moravia. Soon Ostrava was transformed into a regional trading hub with a strong industrial base, a growing upper middle class, and a steady flow of new workers leaving the rural areas for economic opportunities in the city. People were arriving so quickly that Ostrava's population doubled every 20 years in the nineteenth century (Meduna 1951: 259). In the 1860s, now under the ownership of the prosperous Viennese Rothschild family, the ironworks was expanded and new mines opened (Strakoš 2009: 335–336). The company also built a model workers' colony close to the entrance gate with housing, shops, community buildings, and services for its employees. Historian Martin Jemelka, who is part of a team writing a comprehensive history of Ostrava's workers' colonies, considers the Vítkovice colony to be one of the most progressive in the Habsburg Empire at the time (Jemelka et al. 2011, 2012).

In the late nineteenth century, wealthy residents built speculative apartment houses and art nouveau villas near the city center, while workers' cottages and temporary barracks, often without plumbing or electricity, continued to appear around the ironworks, mines, and other industrial sites. Few offered any of the services available in the earlier Vítkovice settlement. By the early twentieth century, the city center included a large commercial square, churches, synagogues, cafes, schools, upscale apartment houses, and several department stores. Clusters of workers' colonies and villages surrounded the downtown. Ostrava still remained provincial in

relation to Prague and Brno, but the city experienced a similar building boom in the prosperous years following the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 (Vybíral 2003). The creation of 'Greater Ostrava' in 1924 brought seven smaller communities into the city proper. The limits were extended again during World War II under German control. In the 1970s, it reached its current size, sprawling across 83 square miles (214 square kilometers) and encompassing territory that had been 34 separate communities before 1924 (Korbelářová 2000).

Figure 3.2   Masaryk Square in the center of Ostrava

Source: Author's photo, 2011.

The abundance of jobs in the boom years of the 1920s contributed to housing shortages as more workers arrived and construction of new housing did not keep up with demand. Living conditions continued to deteriorate through the Great Depression and World War II with many families in the workers' colonies living without indoor plumbing or running water as late as the 1950s.[8] Starting in the 1930s, families began to divide single-family houses into apartments to accommodate renters. The growing working class in Ostrava, who experienced the difficult working and living conditions in the 1930s and during the war, later proved to be a natural base of support for the Communist Party, which was legal in Czechoslovakia from its inception in 1921. Unlike other parts of Czechoslovakia, Ostrava was liberated by the Red Army in 1945, and its presence was felt much more intensely here than in other regions. The Communist leadership used these local conditions to their advantage, blaming the housing shortage and poor living conditions on capitalist excess and the abuse of the working class. The Soviet system was portrayed as a better alternative. This argument found support among the inhabitants of Ostrava who voted 40.6 percent for the Communists in the 1946 democratic elections, more than any other party, and among the highest voting percentages that the communists received in the country (Sláma and Kaplan 1986: 118).

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[8] The Ministry of the Interior prepared a detailed report about the state of the Ostrava region for the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1950. See Ministry of Interior (1950: 1–112) especially pages 22–24. Fond 1261/2/20: *Ústřední kulturně propagační komise a kulturně propagační oddělení UV KSČ* (Central Cultural-Propaganda Commission and the Cultural-Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), carton 28, *Národní archiv* (National Archives, henceforth NA), Prague, Czech Republic.

Given this history, Ostrava is a useful case study for considering the effects of infrastructural thinking after World War II. It has a long history as an industrial city. By the 1940s, Ostrava had been a mining and steel-producing city for more than 100 years and, even before state socialism, its urban planning was influenced by its industries and the needs of industrial workers. In 1951, a proposal was even put forward to tear down the historic center and build a whole new city to the west after valuable coal deposits were detected beneath it. This proved too expensive and difficult to execute, but the result was a new large residential district west of the historic center where one third of the city's residents now live. Large avenues that carry buses, trams, trucks and automobiles connect this new district, called Poruba, to the historic center, creating one of the city's major transportation corridors. Finally, since 1989, Ostrava has gone through a major transformation, including losing much of its industrial base, only to regain its footing in the last few years by adding information technology, media, real estate, and skilled industrial jobs. The long-term sustainability of these industries remains unknown, but in 2011, Ostrava, and the Moravian-Silesian region as a whole, had the second-fastest economic growth rate in the country (behind Prague) and, with the exception of a struggling real estate market, the effects of the economic downturn have not been drastic (City of Ostrava December 2011). This may change, however, if the current recession continues to drive up unemployment in the coming years.

One critical, but potentially risky, aspect of this redevelopment strategy is an emphasis on industrial heritage as an economic driver for the future. The most vocal proponent of this strategy is the Vítkovice Machinery Group, which still operates factories in Ostrava, but no longer makes steel. The company has invested significant capital in the preservation and redevelopment of its historic sites including the shuttered ironworks and a local mine that is now a museum. Well-known Prague-based architect Josef Pleskot converted a former gas storage tank at the ironworks into a large multi-use auditorium that opened to great fanfare in 2012. A viewing platform on top of one of the 12-story-high blast furnaces also opened to the public recently. An interactive technology museum is currently under construction at the site and additional projects are

planned. Thus the nodes of the socialist scaffold are coming alive again. As these plans come to fruition in the next few years, the spatial logic of Ostrava as a socialist city is transforming. Its nodes are not mines and ironworks anymore, but cultural venues, office buildings, hotels, and shopping malls—for better or worse, these are the new symbols of economic prosperity in Eastern Europe.

Housing in New "Socialist" Ostrava

More than 30 percent of the housing stock in the northern part of the Ostrava region was destroyed or damaged in World War II (Plaček 1987: 97). Combined with shortages from the 1930s, the housing situation in the region was dire after 1945; Ostrava itself was one of the most densely populated cities in the country by 1950 (Ministry of Interior 1950: 3). After the Communist Party took control in 1948, the government devoted significant resources to heavy industry and, as a result, to new housing for industrial workers who were needed in the industrial zones. This marked a transition from small-scale speculative real estate development in interwar Czechoslovakia to large-scale state-sponsored housing initiatives after 1948.

To combat the prolonged housing shortages, a comprehensive design strategy was developed in the early 1950s. New neighborhoods were envisioned as the logical and pure result of efficiently designed urban systems including public transportation and utility lines like water, sewer, and electricity. Resources would be in dense and incrementally-spaced settlements as opposed to the dispersed suburban patterns or uncontrolled growth that could be found in other parts of the world at the time. The new strategy was not much different from the nineteenth century when residential settlements clustered around industrial sites such as the Vítkovice Ironworks around which grew the neighborhood of Vítkovice, one of the seven communities that became Greater Ostrava in 1924. The difference in the socialist period was the scale and speed of the transition.

The first government-sponsored housing project in postwar Ostrava was part of the Model Housing Development program. In 1946, with start-up funds from the United Nations, the

Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs set out to "build two or three housing developments, which would be tested and worked through in practical terms as examples for further building projects around the country" (Pilát 1948: 204). Three Czech industrial cities were chosen as the pilot sites: Most, Kladno, and Ostrava. All were industrial cities with strong communist party operations even before 1948. In each city, a local association was responsible for developing housing specifications and budgets, as well as choosing architects for the master plan and standardized apartment buildings. The building sites were chosen for their proximity to local industries and the potential to connect to existing city utility and transportation infrastructure. Kladno and Most were planned for 5,000 people in 1,200 units and Ostrava for 7,500 residents in 1,800 units. All three were neighborhood-scale interventions into the existing urban fabric.

Figure 3.3   Apartment building in the Model Housing Development, Ostrava

Source: Author's photo, 2008.

Like later socialist city projects, these plans were comprehensive in their visions. Each proposal included housing, schools, shopping areas, community centers, health clinics, parks and open green spaces, garages, fire stations and mass transportation to local industries and urban centers. In Ostrava, there was also a hotel, dormitory, and youth center on the main square. In the proposals, housing was provided in a mix of single-family homes, row houses, and two- to five-story apartment buildings with a few taller buildings, although only apartment buildings of various sizes were built in the end (Havlíček 1964, Pilát 1948: 201–206; Štursa 1948a: 207–209, 1948b: 210–213). Services were distributed systematically throughout the new neighborhoods including butchers, hairstylists, tailors, grocery stores, a department store and schools for children of different ages (Štursa 1948b: 210). There was also a conscious effort to make the apartments equidistant from other amenities. As planned, residents would walk no more than three minutes from their apartment to shop and ten minutes to a tram stop (Pilát 1948: 203).

The program, however, failed to provide a model that could be replicated around the country. Material and labor shortages, general disorganization, and a lack of urgency meant that little was accomplished at the three sites in 1947 and 1948. In Ostrava, only 15 of the 70

apartment buildings planned for the first phase were started by 1948 (Strakoš 2003a, 2003b). No community buildings, schools, or commercial businesses were under construction in the first phase. They were built in the 1950s and 1960s along with the remaining apartment buildings, in the end constructed using standardized designs instead of the one-off projects prepared by the first architects. Since 1989, there has been decline in parts of the neighborhood, now called Zábřeh-Bělský Les (in Ostrava-South), with some of the original buildings still unrenovated and occupied by poorer residents, including Roma families. Overall, though, most of the neighborhood is in good condition, having been improved with new facades, new windows, and repairs to the public pathways. Many of the area's original businesses are still operational, including a department store, a cultural center, hotel, health clinic, post office, café, and grocery. The original plan for a recreational area behind the cultural center has been achieved with the construction of a water park and restaurant complex. The neighborhood is in transition, however, as the nearby shopping malls and new entertainment options threaten the holdover businesses from the pre-1989 era. The neighborhood's infrastructure, including the department store space, cafes and older restaurants, can still be remade into competitive businesses, but only if the logic of the residential neighborhood, with its local commercial core, continues to hold strong.

Poruba

The country's first major city building initiative after the 1948 Communist takeover was the project for Nová Ostrava (New Ostrava). In an August 1951 speech in Ostrava, the Minister of Heavy Industry announced the government's plan to make Ostrava the country's "first socialist city," (*Prace*, Aug. 12, 1951: 1) what he called the "steel heart" of Czechoslovakia (*Lidová Democracie*, Aug. 12, 1951: 3). The plans included building a new, larger ironworks on the outskirts of the city, expanding mining operations in the region, and increasing production capacity at the 125-year-old Vítkovice Ironworks. The final and most newsworthy item on the list was the announcement of plans to build Nová Ostrava on land adjacent to the existing city of Ostrava. The new settlement was proposed as a civic and administrative center with housing for

195,000 people in 50,000 apartments that would be completed by 1963 (Meduna 1951: 262).[9] As architectural historian and preservationist Martin Strakoš notes in his recent guide to Ostrava architecture, the initial proposal was to tear down the city center and move all of its people and businesses to the new site in order to mine the coal located underneath it (Strakoš 2009: 35). When this proved too difficult and costly, the idea was abandoned, but plans continued for the new settlement, Poruba, which would now be primarily housing.

The location of Poruba, five miles west of the historic center, had been selected for several reasons. It was close to the industries in the Vítkovice neighborhood, adjacent to forests that could provide green space and recreation, and out of the path of the industrial pollution that was carried east by the wind. Perhaps most importantly, the chosen land lay just outside of the boundary of the Ostrava-Karviná coal basin, the area designated for coal mining. This was established through numerous maps and geological surveys done in the early 1950s to look at the quality of the coal deposits in the region and the existing pattern of industrial sites including mines. One map showed plans for 50 years of underground mining and another documented the land to the east of Ostrava that was already degraded. There were maps of highways and roads, train service, and proposed new neighborhoods, most of which clustered along the outside edges of the designated mining zones. Rather than focusing on the city center, the transportation networks were designed to bring people from the residential neighborhoods to the large industrial sites including Vítkovice and the New Ironworks (Nová Huť) at Kunčice in Ostrava-South, which was announced in 1951 at the same time as the project for Poruba. This situation remains today, as many trams and buses in Ostrava do not connect the outskirts to the city center, but instead move from edge location to edge location.[10]

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[9] For a complete set of documents related to the plans for Nová Ostrava in 1952, see "Postavíme města socialismu," undated (after Jan. 2, 1952), pp. A1-A67, C1-C13, D1-D3, E1, F1-F2, G3/1-G20/4, H1-H20. Fond 315: *Úřad předsednictva vlády—vládní výbor pro výstavbu* (Office of the Prime Minister—Government Committee for Construction, henceforth VVV), carton 126, NA.

[10] An extensive set of maps detailing the regional transportation systems and the geological conditions of the area was prepared in 1953. See "Mapy: General revíru ostravsko-karvinských dolů (Maps: General Mining Area of the Ostrava-Karvinna Mines)," Mar. 10, 1953, VVV, carton 593, NA.

Given the importance of Poruba to the government's propaganda efforts, the architecture had to make a bold statement (see also Zarecor 2011: 150–176). Its construction coincided with a shift in official aesthetics from functionalism to socialist realism. The project's lead designer, Vladimír Meduna, was an ambitious and young Sovietophile architect who worked at the Ostrava branch of the state-run system of architecture offices, Stavoprojekt. In the journal *Architektura ČSR*, Meduna described Ostrava at that time as being the result of capitalism, which left "a tangle of factories, railway cars and workers' colonies heaped up in a mess, smothered by clouds of smoke and dust without a trace of greenery or freshness" (Meduna 1951: 262). Meduna stressed that his project for Nová Ostrava was not only an economic endeavor, but also "a creative plan, a plan of beauty, of a serene environment for the working man living in the city" (ibid.: 263).

The first design for Nová Ostrava, published with Meduna's essay in *Architektura ČSR*, was a grandiose project at the massive scale characteristic of Soviet socialist realist projects. A tall administrative building, inspired by Moscow "wedding cake" skyscrapers of the period, sat at the end of a long street axis, 260 feet wide, and flanked by palace-like apartment buildings. On the opposite end of the boulevard, a smaller tower was planned as the focal point for a proposed university campus. Throughout the text, he stressed the benefits of the development's large size and careful planning. Infrastructure such as public transportation to and from local industrial enterprises would be more cost-effective and efficient in a large development than in multiple smaller settlements. In addition to the monumental primary axis in the central district, the site would have three additional residential neighborhoods separated from each other by green zones and wide avenues. Most of the apartment blocks in each of the four neighborhoods were organized around courtyards with shared open spaces. As the project developed, its size was scaled down and only two of the four districts were pursued as planned. Even so, Poruba remained larger in scope than all other housing projects in Czechoslovakia at the time. Today more than 71,000 people live in Poruba, down from a peak of more than 93,000 in 1980, a change that geographers attribute in part to grown children leaving their parents' apartments, rather than empty units (Rumpel et al. 2010: 53).

When work began on Poruba, the site was not empty. There was a late medieval church, a Baroque manor house, and an eighteenth-century village on part of it. In 1948, a group of miners' cottages had been built nearby after a new tramline began service in the area. Then in 1949, plans were made for 45 three-story apartment buildings to house additional workers on the site; they were completed in the early 1950s using standardized types. Meduna and his team decided to wrap the first district of Poruba around the existing apartment buildings and along the edge of the already occupied land. The new master plan was laid out on a grid running at a 45-degree angle to the rows of 1949 buildings and counter to the curve of the main village street. The most difficult task, linking the old with the new, was accomplished with the "oblouk" (meaning arch in Czech), a large curved apartment building, half-circle in plan, with a tall tower at its western end and two large archways cut into its facade to allow traffic to pass under and through the building along the existing roads. It functioned as a monumental gateway to the neighborhood while masking the older buildings behind it. In plan, it also rationalized the relationship of the 45-degree angle of the existing street with the new edge of the Poruba master plan.

The second organizing feature of the site was the central boulevard, called Lenin Street (now Main Street), which was the monumental axis in Meduna's master plan. In order to bring people to the center of the neighborhood, they passed through the oblouk's central opening, following the diagonal rows of apartment buildings up the hill, to the intersection of Poruba Street and Lenin Street at the top of the slope. Lenin Street was flanked by monumental apartment buildings, decorated with multi-story columns, ornamental balconies, and giant archways leading to small residential streets and courtyards beyond. The first district was to the southwest of Lenin Street and the second, only partially completed according to the original master plan, to the northeast (Strakoš 2009: 252–253).

Despite the scale of its Soviet precedents and Meduna's initial designs, Poruba was built at a pedestrian scale. There are shops and restaurants lining the ground floors of the apartment buildings along Main Street.

Figure 3.4   View down Main Street, Ostrava-Poruba

Walking paths are nestled among the buildings, accessed from openings along the streets, passing under the apartment buildings into park-like interior courtyards. Sculptures were also commissioned for the public spaces in the neighborhood and, rather than classical nude figures, the series features everyday imagery of mothers with their children and industrial workers holding the tools of their trade. Like many socialist neighborhoods across the region, the buildings are arranged in ensembles around courtyards. A different team of architects designed the details of each set of buildings, although all worked from standardized apartment building types in use at the Stavoprojekt offices around the country.

Given the struggles to complete the Model Housing Developments and other building projects in the first years of the Communist regime, Poruba was a successful project that provided a sense of optimism to people in the Ostrava region and around the country. Although for the first few years, its residents had to trek through mud where sidewalks should have been and many of the stores were slow to open, by 1958 the neighborhood was ready to show off to the media. Photographs of its finished buildings appeared in publications including *Architektura ČSR*, the souvenir book from the Czechoslovak Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, *Housing in Czechoslovakia* (1958), and *Ostrava Socialistická* (1971) (see Jiřík 1971).

The success was not only in the minds of the propagandists. Many of the neighborhood's new residents arrived to their apartments from dilapidated miners' cottages and workers' colonies. For them, these large, elegant buildings represented progress and the attainment of a lifestyle not previously available to them. Not only did the buildings look like palaces, but they also offered indoor plumbing, hot water, and central heat. Historians have started to collect oral histories from families who moved into Poruba and other new workers' districts near Ostrava in the 1950s; many still live in their original apartments or handed them down to their children. These accounts confirm that many residents were happy with their new surroundings and remain so to this day (for examples, see Jemelka 2009 and Jílková 2007). They praised the size and quality of the apartments, the availability of washing and drying rooms for clothes, and the sense of

community among the residents who were often of similar ages and parents to small children. In this sense, Poruba is the socialist equivalent to the mass-produced American suburbs of the 1950s like Levittown, New York, and Lakewood, California, where residents bonded over a shared lifestyle and aspirations for a better life.

Urban Expansion after 1960

Architects and planners working at Stavoprojekt completed a 20-volume master plan for Ostrava in 1955 that set an agenda for its future expansion, particularly its growth to the south and west.[11] In the 1960s, development moved south from the area of the Ostrava Model Housing Development and the New Ironworks at Kunčice. To the northwest, Poruba grew with the addition of another six districts added from the 1960s to the 1980s, including the campus of the mining university, VŠB- Technical University, and a large hospital complex (Strakoš 2009: 241–266). But the architectural style of the later districts in Poruba, mostly built in the familiar grey concrete of the typical socialist city, was not the same as the socialist realist districts, now called Old Poruba (Stará Poruba) by locals. Starting in the early 1960s, most new housing in the country was prefabricated, including many high-rise towers to maximize efficiency. Ostrava, however, lacks the very large prefabricated housing districts that were built in other cities. Its piecemeal neighborhood development and qualities of being an "urban agglomeration," where residential quarters were fitted between industrial sites and existing road and utility infrastructure, left no large undeveloped tracts for a housing district on the scale of Jižní Město in Prague (pop. 80,000) or Petržalka in Bratislava (pop. 117,000).

Ostrava-South, which started with the Model Housing Development in Zábřeh and expanded south, is the closest that the city has to a large panel building district when taken as a whole. Yet its neighborhoods also contain single-family houses and older apartment buildings that predate the area's incorporation into the city of Ostrava, as well as post-war buildings

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[11] The 20 volumes of the 1955 master plan and later updates are available in Fond 153: *Městský národní výbor v Ostravě*, carton 645, AMO.

constructed with traditional masonry like those in the Model Housing Development. This creates unexpected juxtapositions, such as a nineteenth-century cemetery next to a group of concrete panel buildings or small family houses on one side of a street and tall buildings on the other. The influence of infrastructural thinking in Ostrava-South is apparent with its hierarchical transportation corridors, distributed commercial services, and 'tower in the park' urbanism (tall apartment buildings in open green space). One of the geographically central spaces in Ostrava-South is, in fact, a large urban green space called Bělský Forest (Bělský Les). The Model Housing Development is adjacent to the forest on the west side and newer panel building districts occupy the spaces to the east and south. Village remnants with older single-family houses still exist in pockets throughout the area. Because of this fragmentary development and the post-1960 emphasis on building as many apartments as quickly as possible, Ostrava-South lacks a central urban square or spatial focal point.

Ostrava after 1989

In the years just after 1989, Ostrava's future seemed bleak. Government subsidies for heavy industry ended and competition drove companies out of business when they could not compete on the open market. Within 15 years, all of the mines closed and only one blast furnace site remained open for steel production, now operated by the controversial international conglomerate ArcelorMittal. Unemployment shot up over 20 percent in the region in the 1990s. There was little investment in city buildings and infrastructure. People left for other Czech cities or to go abroad, especially young people who went to Prague or Brno for university and did not return. Many of the city's unemployed, particularly older industrial workers, had to survive on small pensions, government subsidies, and odd jobs. Even in 2002, when I visited the city for the first time, it felt eerily untouched by the economic boom around Prague. There were few new buildings under construction or revitalization efforts. Industrial sites were derelict. People were making do because of the low cost of living, but the city felt like it was at a standstill.

Yet despite the experiences of the 1990s and the dire predictions, Ostrava has prospered since the Czech Republic joined the European Union. Although the region consistently has some of the highest unemployment in the country, currently at 12 percent, the number has declined significantly since the mid-1990s and was as low as 8 percent in 2008. Demographers classify it as only a "slightly shrinking city," with the potential to stop future population loss due to its proactive municipal government, strong economic development initiatives, robust transportation infrastructure, and educated workforce (Rumpel et al. 2010). In fact, recent data compiled by local geographers shows that most people who leave Ostrava proper move to suburbs or neighboring smaller cities, rather than leaving the region (Hruška-Tvrdý 2010).

The young intellectuals who helped to revive the downtown Stodolní neighborhood continue their activities through local bookstores, art galleries, theaters, cinemas, and cultural centers. This generation, born in the 1970s and educated after 1989, is leading the efforts. Young professionals in the city mobilized an impressive campaign in 2010 to earn Ostrava the title of European Capital of Culture for 2015 (when the rotating title will be held by a Czech city). Ostrava eventually lost to Plzen in a politically contentious vote, but the effects of the campaign can be felt all around the city, which now has a robust marketing program and tourism infrastructure, including a website and informational publications in English.[12]

The city's stable and affordable housing stock has been a strong anchor for the city, since many residents have chosen to stay because they own a house or apartment that they cannot or do not want to leave. This is not accidental. Housing policy since 1989 has encouraged many people to buy the rental units they already occupied for below-market prices and remain there paying low monthly expenses (Zaracor 2012). Now young families are moving into units left to them by grandparents, or purchased from the original owners or their estates for affordable prices. Much of the new housing built recently has proven unpopular because of high prices and small floor plans. Buildings such as the Ostrava Gate and Amoeba Residences, new condominiums

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[12] The city hired graphic designers to rethink its "brand." They created logos, promotional materials, and a new website, see http://www.ostrava.cz/en.

in the historic center, remain virtually empty several years after completion.[13] This is not only a problem of optimistic real estate developers, but also the result of the relatively high-quality and low prices of postwar options in the city. In this sense, if the Ostrava example teaches anything, it is that housing is the true scaffold of the socialist city and an enduring presence in communities, both physically and culturally.

Poruba, with its abundant green spaces, shopping, and services, remains a popular, and relatively expensive, place to live. Main Street functions as the heart of the neighborhood with busy cafes, shops, salons, and banks. Despite the presence of numerous chain supermarkets in the immediate area, many residents continue to do their daily shopping in the neighborhood's numerous butcher shops, bakeries, and small groceries. The university and hospital both continue to expand and renovate their buildings. The university itself has proven to be an adaptable institution that has prospered since 1989, especially with European Union funding after 2004. A new university auditorium building opened in 2006 on a very prominent site in Poruba—the termination point of Main Street where a tower would have been in the original plan. Unfortunately, it is a mediocre piece of architecture without a strong silhouette, so it does not provide the dramatic focal point originally intended for the western end of the boulevard, but from inside the building a large glass window offers a dramatic view down Main Street.

The most fluid sites in Ostrava are the non-residential spaces. The real estate boom of the mid-2000s promised to make a significant impact on this segment of the city's built environment, particularly in filling in gaps in the city's socialist-era infrastructure. New shopping malls, office complexes, industrial parks, hotels, and big box stores have appeared throughout the city in recent years. International retailers, including IKEA, Bauhaus, Globus, Interspar, and Tesco, have all built new stores in Ostrava. Many are embedded in large postwar residential neighborhoods such as Poruba and Ostrava-South where high concentrations of middle-class shoppers reside. Czechs are statistically reliable consumers; they spend among the highest percentage of their

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[13] Ostravská Brana has won awards but its units have proven hard to sell. See http://www.mestskabrana.cz/. Rezidence Améba has sold better, but its postmodern style is not as elegant. See http://www.rezidenceameba.cz/.

income on consumer goods in the former Eastern Bloc and Soviet countries (Chandra and Sojkowska 2012).[14]

Unfortunately, in terms of design, some of the city's best projects were scaled-back or abandoned after the global recession hit in 2009. One of the decade's most beloved, but unbuilt,projects is the Black Cube (Černá Kostka), the winning entry in a 2004 public competition for a regional science library (a building needed since the 1950s and never built). Designed by Brno architects, Ladislav Kuba and Tomáš Pilař, the building is an elegant minimalist cubic volume that appears to float in a pool of water. The project was abandoned, even after a redesign, due to political maneuvering and concerns about cost—much to the disgust of the local cultural elite who saw this as the first high-quality new building designed for Ostrava since 1989.[15] Another disappointment was the failure of the Black Meadow Cluster (Černá Louka), the redevelopment proposal for an exhibition grounds and riverfront park in the city center that was the centerpiece of Ostrava's bid for the European Capital of Culture title. Without the European Union financing promised to the winning city, the project is on hold indefinitely.

Figure 3.5   The Black Cube (Černá kostka), Ostrava, Kuba & Pilař architekti, 2004

Source: Courtesy of Kuba & Pilař architekti.

One design that has been built is New Karolina, which opened in March 2012 immediately adjacent to the historic city center. This 300-million-dollar brownfield redevelopment project on the site of a former coke plant includes a one-million-square-foot retail complex, as well as office buildings, a sports facility, and 200 apartments. Rem Koolhaas and OMA won the 2007 competition for the masterplan, but to the great disappointment of many in the city, this design was abandoned and local architects were commissioned for the project instead. The retail portion of New Karolina looks like a conventional American shopping mall with a large footprint and uninviting windowless walls. Its appearance has led to many complaints in the local media and

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[14] In 2004, a Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda film that played on this hyper consumerism, *Český sen*, covered a fake advertising campaign for a new store that did not exist. The campaign lured more than 4,000 eager shoppers to an empty green field on a Saturday morning where they found a fake building façade and nothing else.

[15] Local activists have waged a battle with the regional government over the project since its cancellation was announced. Over 4,000 people signed a petition to support the project in 2010. See http://cernakostka.cz.

even protests outside the building in the days leading up to its opening, although all too late to affect the outcome.

Figure 3.6   Shopping mall at New Karolina, Ostrava

Source: Author's photo, 2012.

The transformation of this site into a shopping mall, where one of the city's most visible (and polluting) industrial operations once stood, illustrates in the clearest terms how Ostrava's socialist-era scaffold can accommodate change. Its infrastructure is still organized around the same nodes, including transportation connections such as the city bus terminal which is adjacent to the New Karolina mall, and thus the site continues to draw development, now of a wholly different sort.

Conclusion

Ostrava's socialist-era scaffold developed its most significant characteristics in the 1950s. Projects from this period included a comprehensive regional master plan drafted in 1955, the later phases of construction at the Model Housing Development, and the completion of the first two districts in Poruba. Later neighborhoods were built with taller and less original buildings, but these 1950s neighborhoods and the nodes around which they were organized remain embedded in the city's urban fabric in fundamental ways. In the decades since, Ostrava has shown its capacity to be reinhabited, reimagined, and redrawn. New daily practices that have emerged from the cultural, social, and economic changes after 1989 give new meanings to the experiences of the spaces that are independent of the political system in which they were conceived. This chapter argues that Ostrava's strong underlying infrastructure, its scaffold, was conceived, like those in many socialist cities, to accommodate for the city's future growth, and this planning has aided in its transformative capacities.

Certainly infrastructural thinking was not limited to state socialism; it was integral to modernism and twentieth-century urban planning across the world. The distinctions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Bloc were the authoritarian nature of state power and the absence of

market forces, a combination that allowed plans to be executed and controlled much more fully than in cities with capitalist, free market systems in which private ownership and financial incentives often derailed master plans no matter how intelligent, necessary, or ill-conceived they might have been. Ostrava is not a model that can be copied in its totality, nor is it even an aspirational example. The value of a close study of Ostrava is in understanding why the inevitable has not happened, why this industrial city was able to transition to a postindustrial identity, instead of declining as predicted. Its resilience and adaptability may offer new insights on the successes of the modernist city, so often written off as a failed experiment.