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Czech paneláks are disappearing, but the housing estates remain / České paneláky miznú, ale sídliská zostávajú

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Czech paneláks are disappearing, but the housing estates remain / České paneláky miznú, ale sídliská zostávajú

Abstract

A common lament about the legacy of communism in Europe is the damage that it did to the built environment. Particular ire is directed at the concrete prefabricated housing blocks, known in Czech and Slovak as paneláks (structural panel buildings), groups of which were arranged in housing estates (sídlíště in Czech and sídlisko in Slovak) to create the region's characteristic postwar districts. Paneláks were not only signs of the increased production of new housing, but also indicated the acceleration of urbanization in the region as residents moved from rural areas to towns and cities for work. According to United Nations statistics, 75 percent of the Czech population lived in urban areas by 1980, compared to only 54 percent in 1950. These new residents were the first inhabitants of the panelák housing estates, and many of them and their families remain there today.

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Komunistickému režimu v Európe sa zvyčajne vyčíta, že poškodil výstavbu. Hnev vzbudzujú najmä betónové prefabrikované bloky domov, v Čechách a na Slovensku nazývané panelákmi, ktoré sa v povojnových štvrtiach miest zoskupovali do sídlisk. Masová výstavba týchto budov sa často pripisuje sovietskemu vplyvu, ale príslušné technológie a ich logika majú aj lokálny pôvod, a to najmä v Československu, kde stavebný priemysel v medzivojnovom období bol v rámci Európy dobre rozvinutý. V Českej republike v súčasnosti existuje okolo 1 165 000 bytov v 80 000 panelákoch. V panelákoch žije vyše 30 % obyvateľov krajiny (približne 3,1 miliónov ľudí), z toho 40 % obyvateľov Prahy. Sídliská sú extrémne štandardizované a nachádzajú sa vo všetkých mestách. Príspevok je venovaný otázke zaznamenávania a pamiatkovej ochrane tohto dedičstva komunizmu v súčasnej podobe v protiklade k spontánnemu procesu renovácie a zmien, ktorým v súčasnosti panelové domy prechádzajú.

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Slavic Languages and Societies

Comments

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Commercial center in Fifejdy Housing Estate, 2012
Obchodné centrum na sídlisku Fifejdy, 2012



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

CZECH PANELÁKS ARE DISAPPEARING, BUT THE HOUSING ESTATES REMAIN

ČESKÉ PANELÁKY MIZNÚ, ALE SÍDLISKÁ ZOSTÁVAJÚ

Komunistickému režimu v Európe sa zvyčajne vyčíta, že poškodil výstavbu. Hnev vzbudzujú najmä betónové prefabrikované bloky domov, v Čechách a na Slovensku nazývané panelákmi, ktoré sa v povojnových štvrtiach miest zoskupovali do sídlisk. Masová výstavba týchto budov sa často pripisuje sovietskemu vplyvu, ale príslušné technológie a ich logika majú aj lokálny pôvod, a to najmä v Československu, kde stavebný priemysel v medzivojnovom období bol v rámci Európy dobre rozvinutý. V Českej republike v súčasnosti existuje okolo 1 165 000 bytov v 80 000 paneládoch. V paneládoch žije vyše 30 % obyvateľov krajiny (približne 3,1 miliónov ľudí), z toho 40 % obyvateľov Prahy. Sídliská sú extrémne štandardizované a nachádzajú sa vo všetkých mestách. Príspevok je venovaný otázke zaznamenávania a pamiatkovej ochrane tohto dedičstva komunizmu v súčasnej podobe v protiklade k spontánnemu procesu renovácie a zmien, ktorým v súčasnosti panelové domy prechádzajú.

Existuje rozdiel medzi štandardizovanými budovami na sídliskách a ich urbanizmom. Štandardizácia budov nemusela nevyhnutne znamenať identickosť, ale možnosti boli obmedzené. Bytové jednotky a stavebné plány sa mohli prispôbiť lokálnym podmienkam a v niektorých prípadoch architekti mali prostriedky či povolenie na to, aby navrhli špecifické riešenie. Urbanizmus sídlisk však zodpovedal lokálnym podmienkam a populárnym predstavám o urbanizme, ktoré boli rozšírené v čase ich projektovania. Všetky sídliská zdieľali dve základné charakteristiky: obytné budovy boli postavené masovo podľa jednotnej urbanistickej koncepcie a ich architektúra zodpovedala štandardizovaným typom, ktoré boli v danom roku bežné.

Prvé sídliská boli vybudované na začiatku päťdesiatych rokov 20. storočia, ešte predtým, ako sa začali bežne uplatňovať technológie prefabrikácie. Tieto príklady socialistického realizmu zachovávali tradičnú štruktúru mestských blokov so systémom hlavných a vedľajších ulíc a čiastočne uzavretých nádvorí. Počas druhej polovice päťdesiatych rokov sa architektúra začala prikláňať k panelovej technológii a urbanistická štruktúra ulíc bola oslabená. Na začiatku šesťdesiatych rokov, v čase, keď sa

režim otváral medzinárodným kontaktom a verejným debatám, architekti začali bezprostredne reagovať na globálne trendy povojnového urbanizmu. Upustilo sa od tradičných diagramov mestských blokov s definovanými ulicami a paneláky sa stavali podľa voľných kompozícií v prirodzenom prostredí, tak, ako to predstavovali modernisti ako Le Corbusier. V sedemdesiatych a osemdesiatych rokoch 20. storočia sa paneláky stavali rýchlym tempom, ale ich kompozícia sa čoraz väčšími podriaďovala ekonomickým obmedzeniam a nepríhľadalo sa na zistené nedostatky stavieb. Architekti sa snažili reagovať na kritiku vzťahujúcu sa na anonymitu a monotónnosť stavieb, ktorým chýbal autentický mestský duch, a navrhovali pestrejšie plány so špecifickými charakteristikami; avšak len málokto z nich uspel pri prekonávaní spomenutých problémov.

Po udalostiach roku 1989 sa viacerí domnievali, že české paneláky budú nahradené novými stavbami, keďže sa nevyhnutne rozpadnú a pripomínajú ľuďom komunistickú minulosť, na ktorú by radi zabudli. Nestalo sa tak: obytné bloky komunistickej éry zostali nedotknuté a stále sa využívajú. Táto situácia nastoľuje pre architektov a pamiatkarov dva problémy: takýchto budov je veľa a je potrebné sa rozhodnúť, čo je dostatočne hodnotné pre zachovanie a ochranu. Súpis má hodnotu ako historický prameň, ale keď nemá za cieľ identifikáciu dedičstva, celoštátna inventarizácia panelových sídlisk by bola zbytočná, obťažná a drahá. Systém identifikácie a pamiatkovej ochrany budov v Českej republike je skôr byrokratický než participačný a ešte väčšími komplikuje situáciu, lebo neberie do úvahy verejnú mienku. Viacerí majitelia aktívne vystupujú proti tomu, aby sa budovy označili ako historické dedičstvo, lebo to zvyšuje náklady a vedie k neželanej kontrole plánovaných zlepšení.

Otázka vlastníctva ešte väčšími komplikuje veci. Paneláky boli postavené väčšinou socialistickým štátom, niekedy tiež bytovými družstvami, ktoré štát kontroloval, alebo štátnymi podnikmi, ktoré potom rozdeľovali byty svojim zamestnancom. Po roku 1989 sa domy a bytové jednotky prevádzali na obce, ktoré tento majetok postupne predávali, sprvu výhradne nájomníkom bytov,

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alebo ich spoločenstvám. Postupne sa predaj bytov a domov stal aj predmetom otvoreného trhu. Budovy v rámci jedného sídliska často patria rôznym vlastníckym štruktúram. Preto sídliská, ktoré boli naplánované a postavené ako celok, sú v súčasnosti rozdelené medzi mnohými majiteľmi a záujmovými skupinami a pokusy koordinovať či udržiavať sídliská ako kompletne celky alebo dostať pod ochranu všetky ich časti sa neuveriteľne komplikujú.

Na rozdiel od ochrany v iných kontextoch nikto nemá záujem o ochranu „pôvodnej hodnoty“ panelákov, keďže ich nedostatky boli zrejmé od začiatku ich existencie. Problém sa komplikuje rozsiahlou rekonštrukciou mnohých panelákových fasád, ktoré boli pokryté polystyrénom

a pomaľované výraznými farbami. Dokonca aj v prípade panelákov v najkvalitnejších sídliskách je ochrana problematická. Architekt Viktor Rudiš, jeden z tvorcov sídliska Lesná v Brne, verejne vystúpil proti jeho zaradeniu medzi pamiatky, lebo podľa neho sídlisko stratilo svoju architektonickú hodnotu kvôli rozsiahlej rekonštrukcii. Napriek tvrdeniam autorov, že národný súpis s cieľom zaradenia do zoznamu pamiatok nie je v Českej republike možný, budovy podliehajú ochrane v inom zmysle: poskytujú domov pre tri milióny ľudí. Ich demolácia nie je možná. Aj keď sa to, čo zostáva, líši od pôvodného návrhu, budovy stále plnia potreby svojich obyvateľov, čo môže byť najväčším prínosom hromadnej bytovej výstavby v Českej republike.

A common lament about the legacy of communism in Europe is the damage that it did to the built environment. Particular ire is directed at the concrete prefabricated housing blocks, known in Czech and Slovak as paneláks (structural panel buildings), groups of which were arranged in housing estates (sídliská in Czech and sídlisko in Slovak)

to create the region's characteristic postwar districts. Paneláks were not only signs of the increased production of new housing, but also indicated the acceleration of urbanization in the region as residents moved from rural areas to towns and cities for work. According to United Nations statistics, 75 percent of the Czech population lived in urban areas by 1980, compared to only 54 percent in 1950 ^[1]. These new residents were the first inhabitants of the panelák housing estates, and many of them and their families remain there today.

Scholars and the general public have long assumed that the Soviets were behind the spread of these buildings, but the technology and its logic had local origins as well. Some of the hallmarks of socialist-era architecture, such as prefabrication and mass production, predate state socialism by decades, especially in Czechoslovakia, where the interwar building industry was one of the most advanced in Europe. The specific panelák technology used in Czechoslovakia had direct ties to capitalist-era experimentation in the Building Department at the Bata Shoe Company in Zlín ^[2]. Although Stavoprojekt, a state-run system of architecture and engineering offices, replaced private practice in the late 1940s and changed the profession profoundly, the vast housing estates in many Czech and Slovak cities are, in fact, the fulfillment of an interwar vision of modernity that emphasized the right to housing at a minimum standard over the artistic qualities of individual buildings; in other words, function and efficiency over style. Thus, after World War II,

Panelák district
in Ostrava-Jih

Panelákové sídlisko
vo štvrti Ostrava-Jih



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

far from being pressured by Moscow to build standardized apartment blocks, many architects in Czechoslovakia, still inspired by the program of the interwar avant-garde, embraced the opportunity to build housing on a scale and at a pace previously unattainable. By the mid-1960s, paneláks were the norm and they remained the dominant new housing type until 1990.

Today there are 1,165,000 apartment units in 80,000 paneláks in the Czech Republic^{3/}. More than 30 percent of the country's inhabitants live in a panelák (approximately 3.1 million people) and 40 percent of Prague's inhabitants^{4/}. The inventory is highly standardized and located in all cities and towns – large and small, urban, suburban, and rural. As interest in the preservation and protection of modern architecture increases through the efforts of DOCOMOMO and other groups, statistics such as these indicate the complexity of talking about patrimonialization (listing or gaining heritage protection) for mass housing projects in the Czech Republic. These ubiquitous buildings are no longer associated with architecture in the sense of professionally-designed individual buildings, but rather have become part of the vernacular, or everyday landscape, often simply referred to as 'building'. This is true for a single apartment building that looks plain and undifferentiated from its neighbors, but it is also the case at the national scale where only fifty standardized panelák types were used for all 80,000 buildings^{5/}. This paper asks what, if anything, should be done to document or preserve the legacy of communist mass housing in Europe twenty-five years after the end of Communist Party rule.

What Remains: Paneláks or Housing Estates?

In discussions of standardized and industrially produced housing and housing estates, it is important to differentiate between the standardized buildings and the urban plan into which they were situated. One can see differences between the urbanism in housing estates and also among individual standardized buildings within each estate. For buildings, standardized did not necessarily mean identical, but there were a limited range of options. The building layouts and individual units could be adjusted for site conditions, so that the living spaces could take advantage of site-derived



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

benefits such as south light or prevailing winds. This adjustment was primarily the work of housing designers at the regional branches of Stavoprojekt. In some circumstances, architects had the opportunity to design individual solutions for facades or other details, such as when the budget allowed, if it was a high-profile commission, or if the office negotiated a special deal with a local supplier for unique components. An individual architect's invention or creativity, their interest in fighting for their own proposal, and a bit of luck certainly also played a role. Yet although paneláks were generally similar to one another, the urbanism of the housing estates was not. Each one was laid out individually according to local site conditions, such as topography or the location of existing buildings, as well as the popular ideas about urbanism circulating at the time of the design. Among housing estates, the urban forms and organizational structures varied widely, some were entire separate city districts with their own centers, and others were small groups of buildings set among older housing stock.

„Tower in the Park“
urbanism in Ostrava-Zábřeh
Urbanizmus „Veže v parku“
vo štvrti Ostrava-Zábřeh

Housing estates all shared two characteristics – the apartment buildings within them were built en masse according to a single urban conception and the architecture depended on the standardized types current in a given year. The use of the term housing estate predates the invention of panelák technology itself, although many people assume that they are synonymous. The estates planned in the era of “Socialist Realism” (nicknamed *sorela* in Czech and Slovak) preserved the traditional structure of the urban block with a system of primary and secondary streets and partially-closed courtyards^{6/}. The apartment buildings were also still built using

typical masonry construction methods. Often the ground floor of the buildings had small shops and businesses along the primary streets and community spaces and schools for young children in the quieter zones in courtyards or between blocks. A well-known example of this period is the Poruba neighborhood in Ostrava^{7/}. In the second half of the 1950s, the architecture of apartment buildings started to conform to the requirements of panel technology and the urban street structure weakened. There was a gradual transition from the historicist architecture of the early 1950s to international style buildings a few years later. In the transitional period,



Panelák built in the 1980s among Socialist Realist blocks from the 1950s, Karviná

Panelák postavený v osemdesiatych rokoch 20. storočia. Patrí k socialisticko-realistickým blokom päťdesiatych rokov 20. storočia, Karviná

Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

some panel buildings (including structural panel buildings and others skeleton-frame variations) still had stucco facades with colored panels or details that recalled the more decorative style of Socialist Realism.

At the start of the 1960s, at a time when the regime was opening itself up to more international contact and public debate, architects began responding more directly to global trends in postwar urbanism. They fully abandoned the traditional urban block diagram with defined streets and instead located paneláks, often built at a very large scale, into free compositions within the natural settings envisioned by modernists like Le Corbusier. The most prominent example was the housing estate of Lesná in Brno by Viktor Rudiš, František Zounek, Miroslav Dufek, and Ladislav Volák; similar examples can be found in other Czech cities such as the Hranice estate in Karviná. In this generation of paneláks, the structural system was fully expressed through the panel grid, a pattern that became its characteristic visual image. The buildings also incorporated ribbon windows, or large panes of glass in the hallways and entrances, to achieve a sense of transparency that was important in the postwar International Style. In the era of 'normalization' in the 1970s, panelák housing estates were still being built, but their compositions were increasingly subjected to economic restraints. Construction deficiencies were well-known already, but the socialist economy failed to appropriately respond to them and the need for housing was never fully met. Especially in this period, paneláks appeared outside of the large new planned housing estates, very often in other parts of cities including historic centers, or on unbuilt sites within older estates. In the 1980s, some Czech and Slovak architects tried to respond to the problems of the estates, particularly to the criticism of their anonymity, monotony, and lack of authentic urbanity, by proposing designs with more color and unique characteristics ¹⁸¹. Given the economic constraints of the time, with only the minimum of resources devoted to housing, few of these late examples succeeded in overcoming the problems. Some of the few noteworthy experiments occurred in Bratislava, as detailed by Henrieta Moravčíková and her research team in their recent study of Bratislava's estates ¹⁸².



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

Are Paneláks Worth Preserving or Protecting?

Immediately following 1989, many people thought that paneláks would be replaced with newer, higher-quality construction; both out of necessity because they would fall apart and symbolic desire to rid cities of their communist past. This did not occur, for reasons that included the overwhelming costs of replacement, the satisfactory structural and interior condition of most buildings, and people's attachments to their homes ¹⁸⁰. Therefore the communist-era housing stock in the Czech Republic remains intact and in use, although renovations to facades and entrances are changing the exterior qualities of many buildings. This situation poses two challenges – scale and what is valuable enough to preserve or protect. Given the repetitiveness of the housing estates, there may be no method or reason for patrimonialization of most, if any, of the individual buildings. As a historical record, a complete inventory of postwar housing stock is certainly valuable, but without the goal of patrimonialization, a nationwide survey is probably unnecessary, and logistically difficult. Documenting

Tower Block in
Ostrava-Poruba
Obytný blok s vežou
v Ostrave-Porube

examples in a few large cities or locating the best examples of certain types might be one strategy, but even then, the cost to undertake the survey when compared to the value of the results to scholars and the public may make it impractical except in the most advantageous financial situation. The bureaucratic, rather than participatory, system of identifying and protecting buildings in the Czech Republic adds further complications to the pro-

cess, since no public input is sought on such decisions. Instead, the local preservation office makes its case for patrimonialization through a scientific report that is reviewed by the city, but which never constitutes a binding recommendation. In many cases, the current owners are against the designation and actively work to dissuade officials from assigning it, since patrimonialization adds costs and unwanted oversight to improvements planned for listed properties.

Ownership issues also add complications. Paneláks in housing estates were built mainly by the socialist state, but sometimes also by state-controlled housing cooperatives, or state-owned enterprises, which then allocated the flats to their employees. After the transition from socialism to a capitalist economic system, the state transferred ownership of the apartments under its control, most of which had never been renovated, to municipalities. But these cities and towns did not have the resources to manage and rehabilitate the housing stock, so they began to sell the properties to tenants and other buyers who then had to invest significant resources in renovations to kitchens, bathrooms, and systems such as wiring and heating. In the early years, the prices were often at below-market rate and enticing for owners who had spent decades in the units and wanted to stay. As the housing market has matured, however, the cost for these municipal apartments, which are still coming onto the private market, is no longer as cheap and some are being sold at discounts after remaining unsold for months or even years. The majority of these new owners have formed small housing cooperatives in individual buildings; some have since transitioned to private ownership of individual apartments, similar to American condominiums.

In the last twenty years, a large percentage of renters have become owners in panelák housing estates through these processes. Thus the estates, which were designed and built as a single urban unit, are now divided among many different owners and interest groups, sometimes even within a single continuous structure where some units might still be rentals and others are owner-occupied ^{11/}. For the most part, building associations renovate the interiors and exteriors of their own building independently. During the decision-making about the façade redesign, the

Lesná Housing Estate in Brno
Sídliště Lesná v Brně



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

Hranice Housing Estate in Karviná
Sídliště Hranice, Karviná



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

tenants, the repair management company, and the contractors come to a decision together about what the color and pattern will be on the new façade. Only in exceptional cases is an architect involved, which creates a true DIY (Do-It-Yourself) landscape of stripes, diagonals, color blocks, and gaudy colors that many people find refreshing in contrast to the grey of the communist years, but which become problematic when every building

on a street is painted with different colors and patterns ^{12/}. The commercial buildings in the housing estates were also sold in the so-called “small privatization” (the privatization of small state-owned businesses through public auction) and are often redeveloped one by one, although many are underutilized or abandoned in marginal or less populated estates ^{13/}. A similar lack of participation by design professionals, and thus the making



Renovated and
 unrenovated towers
 in Ostrava-Zábřeh

Renovované
 a nerenovované vežiaky
 v štvrti Ostrava-Zábřeh



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

Newly painted
paneláks in Karviná
Nanovo vymalované
paneláky, Karviná

of questionable architectural decisions, are typical in the commercial spaces, which are increasingly being converted by national and international chains into brand-name stores covered in signage and advertising.

In such circumstances, attempts to coordinate or maintain the housing estate as a complete design, or in some cases to achieve heritage protection for all or part of the complex, becomes impossibly complicated. Most residents, many of whom are now apartment owners, place priority on increasing the value of their individual units. They want quick repairs, especially new windows and insulation. Even when the units have been sold off, the public spaces in the neighborhoods are still city-owned and the municipality is responsible for their maintenance and rehabilitation; funds for such work are often a low priority in budget-constrained circumstances like the current economic downturn. There are also few opportunities for public input about how best to rehabilitate or even maintain these public spaces; most just have the lawn mowed, plants trimmed, and in the best situations,

the street furniture like benches are repaired and modern playgrounds installed. The lack of public money and dialogue results in unengaged residents who do not take pride in their immediate built environment, or know how to organize to demand these improvements from municipalities.

Unlike preservation in many other contexts, no one in these situations has an interest in protecting the 'original value' of the panelák. Residents decide on their choices of colors and materials mainly on personal preference, price, and the recommendations of the construction and management companies that dominate the local market. When a local municipal building office does try to coordinate some of these efforts and put guidelines in place, homeowners consider such rules to be interfering with their rights as property owners^{14/}. Spontaneous interest in protecting the existing state of a building arises only when it is under serious threat, such as the possible destruction of the original shopping center to make space for new construction within the estate, and even then only rarely, since many people are enthusiastic about new construction even when poorly designed. Once again the bureaucratic nature of the patrimonialization process affects the process. If the owners meet the basic legal and technical requirements for a building, mainly if no one complains about the architectural quality of the construction documents, then the owners have maximum freedom to do what they want.

The Panelák Landscape

In approaching the question of what may be worthy of patrimonialization, and how to approach the cataloguing of sites, one can revisit Rem Koolhaas's famous formulation of architectural 'bigness' in his 1995 book, *S, M, L, XL*. For Koolhaas, bigness "is the one architecture that can survive, even exploit, the new-global condition of the tabula rasa: it does not take its inspiration from givens too often squeezed for the last drop of meaning; it gravitates opportunistically to locations of maximum infrastructural promise, it is, finally, its own *raison d'être*"^{15/}. This formulation eschews site, deemphasizes cultural context, and prioritizes infrastructure. Although it is anachronistic to apply this thinking to panelák housing estates, which were being built as early as 1955, this is an apt way to describe

the sense of disorientation that occurs while contemplating the experiential shift from the individual buildings of the interwar years to the mass production of millions of apartments – both in terms of the overall number of units and the dimensions of the new buildings, which were often fourteen stories or higher by the 1970s. Like Koolhaas's 'big' buildings, many groups of paneláks were located on tabula rasa sites and relied heavily on the logic of the infrastructural scale of systems such as new highways, expanded public transportation networks, a distributed network of shopping spaces, and building systems such as elevators and centralized heating and cooling.

One panelák might not be so 'big', but a development of dozens of buildings starts to take on the character of a massive single architectural effort. One that is disengaged from its context and site, and becomes its own 'raison d'être' in the sense that the neighborhoods created their own landscapes, essentially self-contained worlds of home and leisure life in dialectical tension with the productive spaces of work and industry. In fact, the residents of more successful housing estates, such as Lesná in Brno, Novodvorská in Prague, Sítná in Kladno, or Hranice in Karviná, still value these unique big landscapes, even as other options are becoming available, and many do want to protect them against unwanted new construction in the open spaces.

The low cost of occupying an apartment also meant that income was not a defining factor in where you lived – most people could have afforded the rent on most apartments, it was the access and availability that was a problem. In fact, rent was largely symbolic in the communist countries as part of the social contract between the state and its workers. In the Czech case, for example, the already low rent did not increase from 1964 to 1990¹⁶. Many people still live in apartments with regulated rents that remain below market rates, although the price differential between regulated and unregulated rent is diminishing after several controversial recent rate hikes. Paneláks and other forms of industrialized housing were first and foremost about a technological shift in architectural practice, a change in the way that buildings were designed and built. Therefore, even when a single new building was needed, it was still a panelák, because this

was how things were done. It is a change that can be compared to the Levittown effect in the United States in the sense that Levitt pioneered a method of making stick frame wood houses quickly and efficiently, leading most of the industry to adopt these techniques regardless of the design intent or even size of the house.

In the discussion of patrimonialization, there is also the question of the representative type and the exception. At issue is whether or not it will be possible to initiate the three step process of analysis, documentation, and conservation for mass housing



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

in Eastern Europe, and if so, on what scale and in what way might one begin? Despite the conceptual idea that all the housing developments from this period could become known and then inventoried, even if they did not have architectural value to take to the third step of patrimonialization, one is, in fact, always talking about the exceptional cases when discussing protecting particular examples. It is simply not reasonable to imagine surveying all 80,000 paneláks on site, especially since only fifty varieties

New playground that has not been maintained in Ostrava-Jih

Nové ihrisko na sídliski Ostrava-Jih, ktoré sa neudržiava



Poor condition of newly landscaped public space in Fifejdy Housing Estate, Ostrava

Zlý stav nového verejného priestoru na sídlisku Fifejdy, Ostrava

Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

would be represented. The problem is now compounded by the ubiquitous reconstruction of panelák facades, a large majority of which have been covered, painted, and significantly altered already. Those in their original state are in disrepair, even in the best cases, and residents would not support the idea of halting renovations for the purposes of inventory and documentation once they have the financial resources for reconstruction.

There are some obvious places to start in the Czech Republic, including the one-off and unusual projects of their day. The only protected postwar housing development to date is Invalidovna in Prague, which has some experimental building types and avant-garde influences. It was also heav-

ily damaged in the 2003 floods, giving residents the opportunity to think about the method of reconstruction. Historian and critic Rostislav Švácha has identified Novodvorská in Prague, Sítná in Kladno and Lesná in Brno as the three best housing estates in the Czech Republic¹⁷⁷. Lesná in Brno is a place where the paneláks and public spaces are successfully integrated into the sloped site in a way reminiscent of Scandinavian projects. In the case of Lesná, it would be the urbanism and overall effect of the buildings in the landscape that would be worthy of a designation. In fact, Lesná is currently the only postwar housing that the Czech DOCOMOMO chapter has included on its list of significant modern buildings.

A group of neighborhood residents tried to protect the site through patrimonialization in 2010, an effort that ultimately failed. To complicate matters, one of the original architects of the development, Viktor Rudiš, who remains a beloved figure on the local architecture scene, was quoted in the press as being against patrimonialization because the development had already undergone too many changes. According to Rudiš, *“the development is not worth preserving in its current state”*, it has become *“a really dead structure that only serves as a place to live”*¹⁸¹. In the communist period, it was a community with public buildings, schools, and services, many of which have been torn down or abandoned to Rudiš's great disappointment. There were also architectural changes to the buildings' balconies, new penthouse stories have been added, and the facades have been painted, all changes that architecturally devalue it in Rudiš's opinion. Rudiš also talked about his own failed attempt to have the neighborhood protected about eight years earlier, before most of the changes had occurred. His opposition to the efforts is certainly a response to the lack of support he received years earlier when it would still have been possible to restore features of the old buildings, rather than trying to protect a significantly altered project.

Paneláks Are Disappearing, but the Housing Estates Remain

The single most critical issue facing architects and preservationists with an interest in postwar mass housing is the acceleration of renovations on a vast majority of postwar buildings. These improvements include new façades made of polystyrene covered with stucco and then painted in colors chosen by the owners of the buildings, both corporate and cooperative, as well as new elevators, doors, windows, and balcony enclosures, often in bright colors and coordinated with the bright paint colors of the façade. These renovations are the external signs of changes, similar transformations have occurred in the interiors where many apartments have new kitchens, bathrooms, and laminate wood floors. All of which leads to the question of what could be preserved through the process of patrimonialization. Once a building has a new façade and the units on the interior have been rebuilt, what is left? Viktor Rudiš believes that

there is a point at which a development is no longer worth preserving.

A fundamental question is the value of the designation itself. In a country that depends mainly on private investors to pay for the rehabilitation of listed properties, what is the value of patrimonialization? Is the goal to protect against demolition of significant properties? If a building is not threatened with demolition, which is the case for almost all paneláks, what are the benefits of being designated beyond the symbolic recognition of the building's original design? If a designation means that people who live in the buildings cannot renovate their units to improve basic quality of life issues such as drafty walls or the lack of an elevator in a six-story building, then one must certainly question the process. Perhaps mass housing, more than any other building type, brings out these concerns since people are not just admiring a building for its architectural qualities, but also living within its spaces every day. This means placing greater emphasis on the usability and comfort of the space, rather than on the fundamental architectural qualities of its original design and whether or not it has been changed.

Experimental prefabricated
building in Invalidovna
Housing Estate, Prague

Experimentálna
prefabrikovaná budova na
sídlisku Invalidovna, Praha



Photo Foto: Kimberly Elman Zarecor

These buildings are protected in one way by virtue of being home to more than 3 million people – demolition is simply not possible – but what remains and what will be, is different from the original designs. In this sense, the buildings are organisms that adapt and adjust. A landmark designation would impose a fixed condition in time and space, and a set of rules that would determine how the building could change. Perhaps Czech and Slovak

mass housing, because it largely remains in use, should not be subject to such a process and instead continue its transformation into the future based on the needs of its inhabitants, even if their needs are in conflict with the original intent. Such a decision would in no way diminish the best work of the period, but rather it would reflect the success of this industrialized housing stock in becoming part of the fabric of evolving Czech and Slovak cities.

NOTES POZNÁMKY

¹ Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2011 Revision*. Country Profile: Czech Republic. http://esa.un.org/unup/unup/index_panel3.html, (accessed October 28, 2012).

² ZARECOR, Kimberly Elman: *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945 – 1960*. Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press 2011.

³ GALDA, Zdeněk – KUBENKOVÁ, Kateřina: *Housing Stock in the Czech Republic – Maintenance and Modernization*. In: *European Network for Housing Research International Conference on Sustainable Urban Areas*, Rotterdam 2007, pp. 1 – 8; MAIER, Karel: *Czech Housing Estates: Recent Changes and New Challenges*. *Geographia Polonica* 78, Spring 2005, 1, pp. 39 – 51.

⁴ MAIER, Karel: *Sídliště: problém a multikriteriální analýza jako součást přípravy k jeho řešení*. (Housing Developments: The Problem and Multi-Criteria Analysis as a Component of the Preparation to Solve It) *Sociologický časopis* 39, 2003, 5, pp. 653 – 666.

⁵ See KUBEČKOVÁ-SKULINOVÁ, Darja: *Vady a poruchy panelové bytové výstavby*. Habilitation Project Summary. Ostrava, *Vysoká škola báňská – Technická univerzita Ostrava* 2003.

⁶ On the origins of the term *sorela*, see ZARECOR, Kimberly Elman: *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia 1945 – 1960*, p. 114.

⁷ On Poruba, see STRAKOŠ, Martin: *Nová Ostrava a její satelity: Kapitoly z dějin architektury 30. – 50. let 20. století*. Národní památkový ústav, územní odborné pracoviště v Ostravě, Ostrava 2010.

⁸ Because of concerns about the effects of these environments on people, sociologists researched life in housing estates in the 1970s and 1980s, see for example Jiří Musil's work including *Líde a sídliště*. Prague, Svoboda 1985. Recently conferences at VŠB – Technical University in Ostrava have also examined the issue from contemporary and historical perspectives, *Architektura: Představy a skutečnost*. Ed. Eva Špačková and Martina Peřinková. *Vysoká škola báňská – Technická univerzita Ostrava* 2009; *Lidé a prostor v perspektivě*. Ed. Eva Špačková and Martina Peřinková. *Vysoká škola báňská – Technická univerzita Ostrava* 2010; *Architektura v perspektivě: minulost, místo, každodennost*. Ed. Eva Špačková and Martina Peřinková. *Vysoká škola báňská – Technická univerzita Ostrava*, Gasset 2011.

⁹ For examples on late experimentation, see the 1980s examples in MORAVČÍKOVÁ, Henrieta et al: *Bratislava: Atlas sídlisk / Atlas of Mass Housing*. Bratislava, Slovart 2011.

¹⁰ Current research shows that the long-term viability is very dependent on local conditions, see for example, TEMELOVÁ, Jana et al.: *Housing Estates in the Czech Republic after Socialism: Various Trajectories and Inner Differentiation*. *Urban Studies* 48, 2011, 9, pp. 1811 – 1834; ZARECOR, Kimberly Elman: *Socialist Neighborhoods after Socialism: The Past, Present, and Future of Postwar Housing in the Czech Republic*. *East European Politics and Societies* 26, August 2012, 3, pp. 486 – 509.

