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Optimistic Suburbia II - Middle-Class Large Housing Complexes

Session 3: Publicness in middle-class large housing complexes as a new way to examine the premises of cultural encounters and social integration
Chairs: Dr. Marie Glaser and Prof. Ellen Braae

Social transformations of inhabited spaces in Sofia, Bulgaria

Bulgarian collective housing complexes, built after the Second World War and during the socialist period, present a singular aspect.

The research group on Bulgarian architecture from the Architecture School (ENSA) of Toulouse conducted surveys in Sofia, Varna and Plovdiv between 2011 and 2018. It sought to understand the planning and construction process of these housing complexes, based on archival sources, interviews with political actors and design architects. It also developed field surveys in order to observe the inhabitant's practices and the transformations of the interior and exterior spaces of the dwellings.

The studies carried out on the city of Sofia were the foundation of the entire scientific approach undertaken on the Bulgarian territory. They were conducted with colleagues from the University of Architecture Civil engineering and Geodesy (UACG), and in partnership with the French Institute of Bulgaria, where they were regularly presented.

A singular socialist planning

Located at the base of the Vitosha Mountain, Sofia was the object of successive urban planning after the Second World War, which considerably enlarged the urban territory by organizing the construction of gilo or micro-districts. These new districts, whose design is similar to the notion of neighborhood units, were intended to be autonomous: they have their own administrative centers, facilities and outdoor spaces. Planned and built at different times, they do not all have the same urban and architectural morphology.

The housing units built in these gilo and micro-districts also respond to an adapted vision of the Soviet economy: the "socialist" system put in place after the Second World War has indeed reserved the right for the inhabitants to own their housing, even if the land had been collectivized. The original property deeds even specify that the inhabitants own a percentage of this collective land, without this being spatialized. This percentage differs, however, between the gilo or the micro-districts, depending on the total surface of the development.

These dwellings were designed by Bulgarian architects who, very often, had the opportunity to do part of their studies abroad. USSR was of course the main destination, but from the 1970s, they also came to western Europe. Thus they mixed cultural models and housing typologies. Soon a diversity of collective dwellings started to emerge, whereas it was unheard in the former Eastern European countries with planned economy originated from Moscow.

In order to reduce construction costs, these dwellings were delivered unfinished. These state buildings provided the roofing and the underground networks. Each flat was also provided with water, gas and electricity supplies, but the interior finishing and the furnishing of the rooms (sanitary facilities, bathroom, and kitchen) was left to the owners, depending on the materials and furniture available.

Mass housing adapted by the residents

Therefore, the inhabitants participated in the interior design of their dwellings as soon as the buildings were delivered. The shortage of materials spread out these fittings over time and led the inhabitants to

use recycled materials from the renovation of buildings in the city center. Each flat was in fact individualized as soon as they moved in, even if the interior finishing work took many years.

The outdoor areas, which are collectively owned by the residents, were also delivered unfinished, apart from the areas dedicated to public facilities, street furniture and children's playgrounds, which were delivered and laid out according to models predefined by the State. During the socialist period, the inhabitants were obliged to arrange and maintain these outdoor spaces one day per month. Beyond this obligation, they developed common spaces, again using recycled materials and adapting the facilities to their needs.

Gradually, the inhabitants were also confronted with the maintenance of the common parts of the buildings. Here again, they organized themselves for routine repairs, cleaning. For major repairs, they called on the know-how of each person, by pooling skills, at the level of construction unit groups and buildings. Thus, the status of owners, combined with the heritage of Ottoman law and the socialist rules of land management, committed them to a process of collective management of the common spaces, both inside and outside.

The dwellings have been subject to visible external renovation since the beginning of their construction. The inhabitants have changed the windows, buying or using reused materials. Some have turned their balconies into an extra room. Others have repainted their flaking facades. And, in the context of energy renovations, many dwellings have been covered with insulation from the outside. This process doesn't apply to the whole building or stairwell. The installation of the insulation, as well as its thickness, depends on the economic resources of the inhabitants.

Therefore, each dwelling is individualized within the housing estate, with more or less extensive transformations to the façade. The micro-districts of the city of Sofia have different aspects, linked to their position in the city, their construction dates and the individual and collective skills of the inhabitants.

The proximity to the city center or the existence of a public transport network (tramway, trolley bus or metro) facilitates the movement of reused materials from the city center to the periphery. The micro-districts built later, in the 1980s, are only just beginning to undergo individual transformations: better designed, according to the architects, they do not require energy rehabilitation. But some of Sofia's micro-districts offer different scales of common spaces, both in the rehabilitation of the buildings and in the design of the external spaces.

A hierarchy of Common spaces

Three micro-districts are representative of the way people share collective spaces: Lozenets, to the south of the city center, Drujba, to the east of the city, and Lyulin, located to the west.

The micro-district of Lozenets is part of the continuity of the historical urban fabric: it shapes the urban fabric of a suburb where several periods of construction are represented. This urban fabric is made up of individual houses, apartment buildings and facilities: it appears as a green district with many parks and gardens, a forest crossed by the tramway and the city zoo.

In the 17th century, Lozenets was a small village on the outskirts of Sofia, surrounded by forests. It had many Catholic and Orthodox temples, the remains of which still exist at the edge of the district. Deforestation began at the beginning of the 19th century and, gradually, individual houses were replaced by multi-storey brick and concrete buildings. After the Second World War, the infrastructure was built and allowed better communication with the neighboring districts and the old center. And the heart of the district was restructured by one of the first micro-district of the city.



Fig.1 – Photographic survey of the inhabitants' interventions in Lozenets
by Emilie Calvet, Master 1 thesis, ENSA Toulouse

Today, numerous developments are appearing in the areas between two construction unit blocks and the ground floor of the buildings are being occupied. Several parts of the exterior areas have been privatized by the inhabitants. This privatization is marked by painted wooden fences which enclose a space that is generally furnished with self-built garden furniture, well-tended plantations and a floor covering borrowed from town center public spaces.

Sometimes the whole collective space is open to the view of the passerby, with hierarchical arrangements, as found out around the "VIP club". The outdoor space is not really delimited, but it is composed of vegetable gardens, storage spaces and rest areas. A do-it-yourself path leads to the central shelter, made by the inhabitants with recycled materials. It hosts several social groups depending on the time of day: women in the morning, men in the early afternoon, children in the late afternoon and young people in the evening.

The Drujba 1 micro-district is part of the gilo-district of the same name, and was built in the east of the city center. It consists of 170 housing complexes built between 1965 and 1984 and it is surrounded by major roads, including the road from Sofia to Plovdiv. It shows a diversity of buildings, whose design and construction were spread over a long period of time: several typologies of buildings and housing shape the territory, from the artificial lake to the large boulevards.

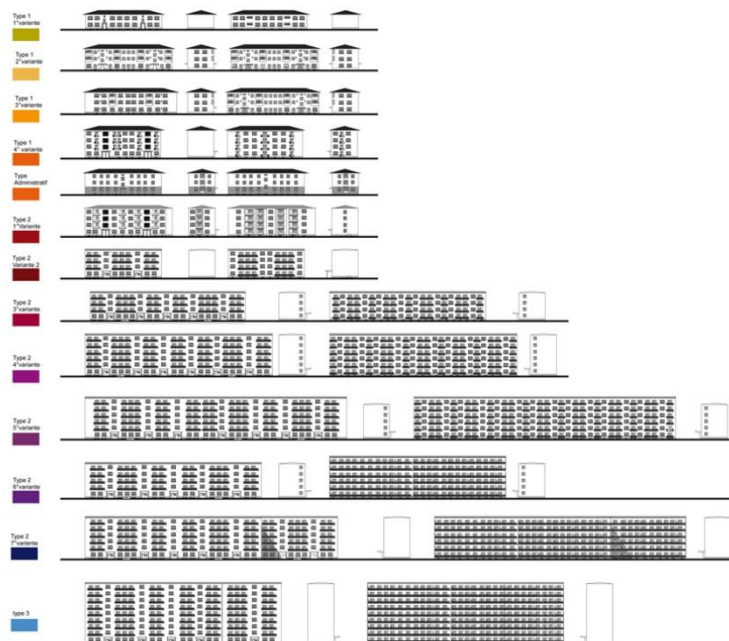


Fig.2 – Building typologies in Drujba 1,
by Florie Medus, Master 1 thesis, ENSA Toulouse

As in Lozenets, the outdoor spaces are developed, maintained and managed by the inhabitants. The distribution of the different types of buildings according to their functions, and the very location of the residential buildings in relation to each other, create a more or less intimate spaces. Inhabitants' occupations are systematically located close to the buildings: they are concentrated in the grassy areas in-between construction units, which stand as an extension of the dwellings.

To be more precise, these occupations of space are organized by stairwell. The inhabitants informally elect a "stairwell manager" who manages the budget, maintenance and repairs. A local tax is collected by the town hall of the gilo-district and is officially redistributed to each building and then informally to each stairwell. The inhabitants who have more financial means add a share to these taxes which can represent a large amount of the fund raised. This extra money is reflected by the quality of the renovations and the exterior fittings.

The diversity of architectural adaptations is also visible on the facades, where patchworks of coverings, with disparate paints and thicknesses are randomly distributed according to the position of the flats. The transformation of the original balconies is also a common phenomenon: in order to increase the interior surface of the dwelling, many inhabitants choose to fill in their balcony, transforming it into a veranda, a loggia, or an additional room. This proliferation of individual and collective interventions thus organizes a heterogeneous urban landscape. The hierarchy of the occupation of those shared spaces, is structured from the family unit to the group of houses.

The Lyulin gilo-district, in the west of the city center, is the largest in the Bulgarian capital. In the late 1960s, the Sofia Design Bureau (Sofprojekt) received a state order to build a socialist housing complex for 120,000 inhabitants on the site of the small village of Lyulin. The master plan was completed in 1969 and provided for the organization of the gilo-district into eleven micro-districts distributed along a cardo and a decumanus and a "green corridor", linking the "modern center" to the Zapaden park located to the south. This gilo-district was partly built in the seventies and eighties. Constructions kept built after the fall of the socialist regime, but in a haphazard manner and were often left to private investors.



Fig.3 – Transformations of a residential building in Lyulin, photograph by Clara Sandrini

The studies carried out in the residential part of the micro-district number 6 of Lyulin have highlighted an attitude of "laissez-faire" of the public authorities. The project was not carried out as a whole: the buildings that were supposed to face the green space connecting Zapaden Park to the modern center were never built, creating thresholds between residential and green space filled by wastelands and

"modern ruins". The green corridor is only a dream plan on paper, as it is now occupied by a landfill, a private car park, a shopping center and slums next to empty luxury buildings.

Within the residential spaces, however, the transformations of public space, common space and private space are taken over by the inhabitants, individually or collectively. The consensus between residents allows them to pool resources to renovate spaces. Tacit rules are created at different levels, as in Drujba : those of the landing, the stairwell, the building or the space in-between the construction units. Several inhabitants can thus establish a common project to install new insulation on the façade, others refurbish a cellar on the ground floor to set up a café while others repair the benches at the entrance to the building.

This care given to the spaces allows the inhabitants to overcome the abandonment of the places by the public authorities since the fall of the socialist regime. It testifies the involvement of the inhabitants in the development of the space and a form of participation, posteriori to the construction of the apartment buildings.

A division of space

The uniqueness of the city of Sofia lies in its cultural heritage, characterized by a heterotopia linked to communist planning and the legacy of Ottoman rules with a particular system of social organizations. The appropriation and the ephemeral, temporary or durable occupations of collective spaces create the conditions for sharing space and characterize it as the product of an interaction between the collectives of actors who conceived the city, those who built it and those who now occupy it.

The implementation of models throughout the territory according to communist planning, as well as the system of distribution of housing and land, have structured an urban space that seems uniform everywhere. However, each of the districts has a typological diversity which suggests that the Soviet model transposed to Bulgaria has been appropriated by the political authorities and by Bulgarian architects.

In addition, this uniformity is matched by the appropriation of different spaces, from the most collective to the most private, which implies coordination in the implementation of occupations. The social practices indicate an appropriation of individual and collective space linked to a system of ownership of the habitat which includes part of the exterior spaces. The exteriors are thus divided up in space and time of day to allow all the inhabitant groups to use them. They are punctuated by ephemeral, temporary or durable facilities, the construction of which is part of a process of reuse on the scale of the city, and the layout of which shows several levels of privatization.

The result is a social logic: the sofiote space, private, common and public, is thus the representation of a superposition of the coordinated actions of the different collectives of actors opposing the space conceived, planned and built, to the space lived, diverted and occupied. The collective housing complexes thus present a participatory aesthetic which articulates state constructions and private interventions. They show a common space, product of a collective hijacking of the designed space which characterizes an a posteriori participation of the construction, and which shows the different levels of coordination of the users and inhabitants.

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