What constitutes “mass” in mass housing? In the context of this conference and its aim to bring more precision to the notion of mass housing, I will contribute some remarks not so much about the specific building types used to house vast portions of Bucharest’s population in the 1950s and 1960s; but instead, about the organization of these buildings into well-defined architectural ensembles.

Although my discussion is based on the case of Bucharest in the early 1960s, I wish to frame it with a set of interconnected propositions that could concern mass housing in general. My main proposition is that mass housing is best understood not as a series of buildings, but as a strategy to claim, delineate, and organize territory. Mass housing operated as a territorial category as much as a functional or programmatic one. In the context of the Eastern Bloc, the notion of microraion illustrates clearly how the research and debate about mass housing was situated firmly at the city scale, and how these highly structured territorial units were considered more than a series of buildings, and instead architectural artifacts of their own.

Secondly, the shift in scale I am proposing from buildings to territorial units goes to the heart of one of the difficulties of the historical inquiry in socialist contexts: the fact that the buildings themselves seem to lack visual appeal – standardized, uniform, blank, serialized across geographies and national contexts, they are, taken individually, rather poor carriers of meaning. However, when considered as ensembles, their arrangements reveal instead formal complexity, variation, and a search for experiential qualities. In other words, architectural, cultural and social agendas become legible on the territorial level.

Finally, I believe that it is on the level of the planning of the territory (both in the vastness of the territorial intervention, and in the integration of different scales) that the most interesting differences emerge between the socialist and western context. Microraion, I argue, while formally linked to western developments, is specific to a socialist context. In response to Miles Glendinning’s invitation to establish lines of comparison, I would like to suggest that it is units of territory such as the microraion, that can best help us trace differences between capitalist and socialist approaches to mass housing.

**Romania**

Between 1955 and 1960, Romania’s new socialist government commissioned the construction of a staggering 340,000 dwelling units, most of them in the capital, Bucharest, in response to an almost twofold increase of the urban population after 1945 (1&2). The breakneck pace of construction only accelerated in the following 5-year plans. The hundreds of thousands of new housing units, assembled into thousands of blocks of flats, became the defining feature of Bucharest, their recognizable silhouette rapidly transforming the cityscape. Much discussion surrounded the construction technologies and the typologies of these buildings, but the organization of these buildings into coherent ensembles throughout the territory of the city drew an equal amount of
attention, both in professional and political circles. By 1960, the particular notion of the microraion had become the planning device of choice in Romania, as it had also in the entire Soviet Bloc.

What was the microraion? The word is a Soviet technical term (mikrorayon), adopted into Romanian (and, I suspect, into the professional vocabulary of other languages of the Soviet Bloc) to indicate the smallest administrative unit in the socialist reorganization of the urban territory. Throughout the 1960s, it constituted the planning device of choice in Romania’s territorial policies, and was repeatedly touted as a socialist spatial answer to the ideological and practical imperatives of a new society.

It is tempting, when looking at examples of microraions, with their modernist towers sitting amidst vast green spaces (Fig. 1), to see the notion as but a variation of the CIAM/Radiant City-inspired models that were starting to appear throughout Western Europe in the 1950s (such as Lyon, 1957, Harlow, 1957). Like many American and Western European models circulating in the 1940s and 1950s, the microraion is a residential ensemble conceived so as to constitute an organic unity, aimed at connecting its inhabitants through the everyday use of shared social and cultural institutions (among which schools and daycare centers figure prominently) and of parks and green spaces. The microraion was meant to occupy a clearly defined territory, delimited by streets with intense traffic or by other strong dividing elements. To achieve a certain functional and experiential cohesion, its territory was not to be crossed by important streets, and pedestrian and car traffic were to be, preferably, separated inside the microraion. The maximum distance between any dwelling, service, and public transportation should not be more than 500 m. The size of the microraion was not go beyond 10 000 inhabitants, although it could also be smaller numbers (3).

A matter of names

Despite the familiarity of these principles, the microraion resists a direct, limpid translation into conventional planning terms (such as neighbourhood unit, superblock, urban sector, or, in French, nouvel ensemble urbain, cite neuve, grande operation, etc) or softer terms (such as suburb, neighbourhood). Most of these terms do exist in Romanian, but it is the term microraion that is systematically used at the time, signaling a desire to differentiate it from seemingly equivalent notions. The aim, here, then, is to track those
features of the microrayon that are not translatable into a more familiar categories, and which may point to some of the irreducible qualities of socialist experience.

I think the point about the term microrayon is not only its declared connection to soviet practices (though that is important too); unlike neighborhood unit, urban sector, or superblock, microrayon, or micro-district, signifies the existence of larger units of order (the raion). Although the microrayon is similar in size to the neighborhood unit, for instance, the word micro implies planning of a radically different scale, one that engulfs the entirety of the national territory, and of which the microrayon is but one small constitutive part. It functioned as a planning device specific to the territorial policies of centrally-planned economies, and therefore distinct from capitalist applications.

From cvartal to microrayon

In Romania, the microrayon as a term and a technique appears in the late 50s, when architects radically reorient their planning practices from relatively small housing projects called cvartal (also a word borrowed from Russian) and towards the organization of the entire territory of the city, a city that is now conceived, planned and developed as a totality. It is as if the scope of planning had shifted from a city made of parts to a city as single entity.

Before the microrayon, the cvartal had been a timid attempt to order the chaotic 19th century city. Most of Bucharest’s urban fabric had developed organically, without the rationalization of the grid or of the straight axis, and the cvartal emerged, in the 1940s and 50s, as a short-lived experimentation with orthogonal, or at least geometrical alignments. Such was, for instance, the small housing development of Floreasca (1956-58), which organized identical apartment buildings into regular patterns aligned with the street grid. But as early as 1960, the discourse shifts from the efficiency and economy of the cvartal, to something that could be called a newly found formal playfulness. Larger housing estates appear, characterized by picturesque, unpredictable arrangements of buildings of various heights and footprints. This new norm for urban development functioned as an explicit criticism of the cvartal’s uniformity and monotony (Floreasca, for instance, was deemed “monotonous and without personality.” (4)) (Fig. 2)

But much deeper shifts are at work. Another difference between the 1950s – the age of the cvartal and the 1960s – the age of the microrayon,
is that the construction of housing migrates from
the existing city toward less-densely built areas
around the center, and, with it, the goal of reforming
and re-ordering the capitalist city becomes that of
an alternative utopia encircling the historic center.
There, it seems, the planner could think of urban
space as limitless and abstract, and avoid any
significant entanglement with the preexisting city,
which it seeks to fully replace. This change in
scope is implied in the photographs – the cvartal
is often photographed from up close; the micro-
raion, from further afar, with a newly found sense
of conquest over the land.

The progression from cvartal to microraion also
seems to mobilize new techniques of enclosure
and autonomy from the rest of the city. In that
regard, the microraion functions as the reverse
of the cvartal: large streets forcefully mark its
perimeter, while the interior develops with great
freedom and flexibility. The cvartal, by contrast,
rigidly aligned housing blocs with the street grid,
rann wide monumental axes through its center,
and defined its boundaries with much less clarity.
While the microraion called for a break in the
fabric, the edges of the cvartal seem to invite
continuity and repetition of the street pattern.
The cvartal was formed through the addition
of identical elements and therefore could be
endlessly extended; by contrast, the microraion is
a fully constituted, unbreakable, and finite entity
inside of which each housing bloc stands as a
singular, irreplaceable component.

Balta Albă

Finally, the most important point about the micro-
raion is that it fits within a tightly orchestrated
hierarchy of increasingly larger spatial units, which
distinguishes it not only from its local precedent,
the cvartal, but also from the better-known notions
of neighborhood unit and superblock. To illus-
trate this point, I will use the example of one
of the most emblematic projects of the 1960s,
Balta Albă (a vast district developed at lightening
speed between 1961 and 1966, during which 36
000 apartments, or 1 087 000 square meters of
built surface, housing 100 000 inhabitants, were
constructed).

The district borders a vast industrial complex
to the East, the site of major steel factories that
had been built between the wars, and which
had played a central role in the modernization
and industrialization of Romania well before the
advent of the communist regime. After 1948, the
factories had become the property of the socialist
state, and the regime was eager to symbolically
re-code them as belonging to the new political
order. Balta Albă as a whole was thus meant to
not only supply housing for the workers, but also
to provide a new visual and spatial context for the
factories; for the thousands of workers streaming
in and out, the district would frame everyday life
with vast, orderly vistas, lush greenery, and, most
important, it would have offered a stark contrast
to the small, irregular streets and heterogeneous
buildings of the 19th century city that bordered the
district on all other sides.
But Balta Albă was much more than factory housing. Only a quarter of its inhabitants were factory workers, so that the district reached well beyond the needs of the industrial complex. In fact, the district as a whole, and each microrain in particular, functioned like a small version of the ideal socialist city. It urbanized the workers, many of whom had come from the countryside, by accustoming them to new spatial tropes they would come to associate with socialism. And it operated as a device of social integration, distributing the workers among a larger population, with the aim, so it was thought, of actively blurring class distinction.

It is in the attempt to replace economic class with other, new and spatialized forms of collectivity, that I suggest the microrain fully finds its specific definition. The district is organized through a gradation of progressively smaller urban units that nest inside each other - with the microrain as the smallest. Because of this, the settlement pattern in Balta Albă, which, in plans and photographs may seem relatively uniform, in fact offers the inhabitants finely tuned, fully orchestrated spatial and functional steps from small to large scale, and from the familiar to the abstract, and, in the process, trying to replace old elements of reference (such as class, ethnicity, place of origin) with new, physical and visual ones.

Balta Albă, for instance, contained 6 residential neighborhoods (cartiere), each subdivided into smaller microrains, and all of them served by a cultural and administrative center and a large recreation area around two central lakes. Although subsumed into larger urban conglomerates, each microrain enjoyed a significant amount of functional autonomy, with its own small-scale commercial center, nurseries, school, and park. Differences in size, plan, and building types between microrains suggest a search for a distinct, recognizable character, and a clear stance against visual monotony. These steps in complexity and size were meant to correspond to a similar hierarchy of social relations, so that the district provided the stage for a range of encounters, from the most intimate and everyday, to those occurring in a larger, less familiar community. Within it, the microrain, which was not too big to be abstract and ungraspable, nor too small to become too intimate, was to function as the realm of basic associations and identification.

The building no longer stands in relationship to a street, but to the neighborhood.

Much of the microrain’s character is determined by the demise of the street as the main place of urban experience; instead, large, collective green spaces that occupy most of the non-built surface now constitute the places of social interaction. Indeed, along with the street itself, the traditional opposition between public space and private property is transformed, and the land surrounding the residential buildings is now no longer private nor public, but of an intermediary, collective, nature.

Socialist planning also revises the traditional relationship between architecture and city, as buildings no longer encounter the city immediately, through
street facades, but only through the mediation of the microrayon and the district. It follows that in a socialist microrayon, a single building has little capacity to accrue meaning by itself, but signifies only through larger territorial relationships, and is never understood (or represented) as a single, autonomous entity. The generic, impersonal buildings are not only a direct consequence of industrialized, rationalized building techniques, but correspond to an effort to dislocate signification away from the single architectural object, and towards larger spatial units. It is tempting to find in such ‘collectivization’ of buildings a spatial metaphor for their inhabitants’ own overcoming of individualism.

The city as work of art

The examination of some of the ideas associated with the microrayon – the shift in the scale of architectural intervention in the city, the demise of the street in favour of the organic unity of the architectural ensemble, the agenda of social transformation and integration – has shown that the microrayon was in part a search to enrich, even transcend, the inflexible rationality of standardized mass housing construction. Therefore, the attempt to discuss socialist mass housing as more than grimly functional buildings is perhaps best concluded by pointing at the intense effort, in the theoretical writings on architecture of the late 1950s and early 1960s, to give the socialist housing district the status of a work of art.

Far from being considered a purely scientific, objective product, mass housing was also one of the most cherished demonstrations of the artistic capacities of architecture. While architecture’s aim under socialism was to satisfy practical needs rather than procure “aesthetic moments,” it was able to surpass its utilitarian definition and reach into the “ideological and artistic realm” through compositions at the city scale. It is by planning and designing large housing ensembles, some architects argued, that architectural practice became an artistic form.

The abstraction of the facades, their lack of decoration and differentiation, the austerity of standardized construction, are easily, and often, perceived as a refusal to signify. But while each residential building, taken individually, might be devoid of affective qualities, it could reach expressive attributes collectively. Aesthetic and ideological content, it was argued, had shifted away from the standardized component, and towards the result of their complex combination. The essays of aesthetic theory published throughout the 1950s, bore titles that militantly stated this idea: “The housing district – a superior step of architectural artfulness,” or “On the aesthetic qualities of mass construction.” Their content is equally clear: “In mass constructions, the dialectical unity between the utilitarian side and the ideological-artistic one manifests itself not in each single construction – which, taken separately, might not be a work of art – but in the comprehensive solution to urbanistic problems” (5). It is also why commentators, by the 1960s, could consider that the views and photographs of Balta Albă possessed uplifting qualities, suggested optimism, and were appropriate for visual consumption.
Among solutions for mass housing, the microrayon aimed to offer its inhabitants an affective experience, to create a new social order, and to arouse a sense of collectivity – in socialist terms, these were the ultimate qualities of a work of art.

Notes


