

“Bigness of Another Sort: The Challenge of a Mass Housing Inventory in Czechoslovakia”by **Kimberly Elman Zarecor** (Iowa State University)

‘BIGNESS, through its very independence of context, 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’etre’.

Rem Koolhaas, “Bigness and the Problem of the Large,” S,M,L,XL, 1995

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 what Hungarian historian Ivan T. Berend referred to in 1980 as “the expanding, greyish, prefabricated residential blocks” that constituted many post-war districts around the region. These buildings were not just signs of 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 much criticized industrially-produced panel building districts, 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 concrete apartment buildings, but as I show in my recent book, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960*,



1960s housing estate, Prague-Krč, Czech Republic. From Josef Pechar. Československá architektura, 1945-1977. Prague: Odeon, 1979

this technology had local origins as well. Some of the hallmarks of socialist-era architecture, such as prefabrication and mass production, actually predate state socialism by decades, especially in Czechoslovakia where the interwar building industry was among the most advanced in Europe. Panel building technology has direct ties to capitalist-era experimentation in the Building Department at the Baťa Shoe Company in Zlín. Although professional life changed profoundly when a state-run system of architecture and engineering offices replaced private practice in the late 1940s, the vast prefabricated neighbourhoods in many Czech and Slovak cities are, in fact, the fulfilment 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, far from being pressured by Moscow to build standardized apartment blocks, many architects in Czechoslovakia embraced the opportunity to build housing on a scale and at a pace previously unattainable. By the mid-1960s, what Czechs and Slovaks call paneláks—struc-

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Renovated 1970s panelák in the 8th district, Ostrava-Poruba, Czech Republic. Author's photo, 2011



Renovated 1970s panelák in the 8th district (same building type as above, only renovated with better material and color choices), Ostrava-Poruba, Czech Republic. Author's photo, 2011.

tural panel buildings constructed with panels and no structural skeleton—were the norm and they remained the dominant housing type until 1990.

Today there are 1,165,000 apartment units in 80,000 paneláks in the Czech Republic. 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. Statistics such as these indicate the complexity of talking about patrimonialization for mass housing projects in Eastern Europe—the buildings are so ubiquitous that they have no 'architectural' content but are simply buildings (to borrow from Stefan Muthesius's discussion of English housing). This is true for a single building which often looks plain and undifferentiated from its neighbours, but it is also the case at the national scale, since there were only sixteen standardized panelák types used for all 80,000 buildings. As I have learned from colleagues in Ostrava in the last few weeks, standardized did not necessarily mean identical. Façade detailing was more creative in some developments than others and, even within some neighbourhoods differences could be seen on individual buildings, likely the work of a local architect who wanted to leave a mark. The units were also adjusted in some cases for sun direction, so that the living spaces could take advantage of south light. Yet fundamentally the postwar mass housing stock in the former Czechoslovakia was highly standardized and repeated in cities and towns—large and small, urban, suburban, and rural.

For this reason, I would like to argue, perhaps controversially in this setting, that there may be no

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method or reason for patrimonialisation of most, if any, of the buildings. Thus a complete inventory is not necessary on a national scale in the Czech Republic or probably the other former Eastern Bloc countries. An inventory might be appropriate in a few large cities with the best examples of certain types, such as Prague or Bratislava as discussed in Henrieta Moravcikova's paper, but even then the number of buildings in situ versus the time it would take to do the full inventory may not make sense given what the value of the result will be for scholars and the public. As Henrieta concludes, a “selective approach” is needed to decide what has value for reconstruction and what might better be demolished. I would extend the idea of a ‘selective’ approach to the inventory itself and propose that discussing how to establish a process for making the selections might, in fact, be the most useful as we think about a transnational, European-wide research project on housing. There are simply too many of the same buildings on similar sites to make a full inventory worthwhile. In his opening remarks, Miles hints at this possibility when he questions whether or not the scale and “controversial connotations” of the housing developments mean that it is “impracticable” to do systematic preservation.

I entitled this presentation, “bigness of another sort,” because I was trying to imagine the truly big size of a comprehensive inventory in the Czech Republic and, with only sixteen panelák types constituting the vast majority of the sample, its inevitably repetitive quality. Rem Koolhaas's formulation of ‘Bigness’ seemed like an apt way to describe the sense of disorientation that occurs

when one contemplates the 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 or more stories by the 1970s. Like Koolhaas's ‘big’ buildings, many groups of paneláks were located on tabula rasa sites and they relied on infrastructural elements, such as roads, public transportation, shopping spaces, and elevators, for their organizational logic. 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. An effort that is disengaged from its context and becomes its own ‘raison d’être’ in the sense that the neighbourhoods created their own landscapes, essentially self-contained worlds of home and leisure life in dialectical tension with the productive spaces of work and industry (something discussed in more detail in my book).

Given the size of the sample in Eastern Europe, there are a few methodological issues that I would like to address directly and propose as points of discussion for the group. Firstly, we may want to adjust the DOCOMOMO working definition of mass housing: “large-scale housing programs for low or middle incomes, backed in some way or another by the state, and whose built form involves large aggregates of buildings laid out in the diverse ways allowed for in the modern movement.” The concept of low or middle income simply breaks down in the Eastern European context. While it is true that the citizens of all Communist countries could be classified as low or middle in-

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come depending on how those terms are defined, the housing was not tied to income status in the same way as in Western Europe. Your access to the housing might have been linked to your employer, your performance at your place of work, the number of children in your family, or your political connections (although this was less common than might be expected since the Czechoslovak Communist Party was quite large). The low cost of occupying the 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 this sense, I want to reiterate Mart Kalm’s point that rent was largely symbolic in the communist countries. In the Czech case, for example, the already low rent did not increase from 1964 to 1990 and many people still live in apartments with regulated rents that remain on average about 50% of the market rate after several controversial rate hikes.

Buildings were also not necessarily in large aggregates, some paneláks stood alone in an older neighbourhood or even on a town square in some smaller cities. As I argue in my book, 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 affect in the United States in the sense that Levitt pioneered a method of making stick frame wood houses quickly and efficiently, lead-

ing most of the industry to adopt these techniques regardless of the design intent or even size of the house. For this reason, I would prefer to uncouple the formal implications of defining mass housing as adhering to urban schemes “allowed for in the modern movement” and shift toward a definition that is about building method and design process such as the implications of standardized building plans and the use of prefabricated architectural elements for construction—a practice shared with at least some parts of western Europe.

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 in Eastern Europe, and if so, on what scale and in what way might we begin? Despite the conceptual idea that all the housing developments from this period could become known and then inventorised, even if they did not have architectural value to take to the third step of patrimonialisation, we are, in fact, always talking about the exceptional cases when we discuss protecting particular examples. Therefore the strongest response that I have to the question of how much of the inventory should be completed is to begin by finding only the exceptional examples even before any analysis is done. In other words, work backwards through the process, knowing that almost all of the housing has no potential for conservation.

There are some obvious places to start in the Czech Republic, including the one-off and unusual projects of their day. The only protected post-

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war housing development to date is Invalidovna in Prague, which has some experimental building types and avant-garde influences. It was also heavily damaged in the 2003 floods, giving residents the opportunity to think about the method of reconstruction. Lesná in Brno is one of the other famous examples from the period. It is a place where the paneláks and public spaces are successfully integrated into the sloped site in a way reminiscent of Scandinavian projects (and similar to some Estonian examples discussed in Mart’s paper). 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 neighbourhood residents tried to protect the site through patrimonialisation in 2010, an effort that seems to have failed, because their website has not been updated since April 2010. 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 Brno press in January 2010 as being against patrimonialisation because the development had already undergone too many changes. According to Rudiš, “the development is not worth conserving in its current state,” it has become “a really dead structure that only serves as a place to live.” 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 neighbourhood protected about eight years earlier, before most of the changes had occurred. His opposition to the new plans must also be considered 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.

This brings me to the final part of my paper and the issue of ongoing renovations and rehabilitation of postwar buildings in the Czech Republic. 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 colours chosen by the owners of the buildings, both corporate and cooperative, as well as new



1970s panelák in the midst of renovation, Karviná-Hranice, Czech Republic. Author’s photo, 2011.

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elevators, doors, windows, and balcony enclosures, often in bright colours and coordinated with the bright paint colours 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 led me to consider what should be preserved through the process of patrimonialisation. 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.

For me, the question has to do with the value of the designation itself. Is patrimonialisation a process of protecting against demolition? In what ways does a building that is not threatened with demolition benefit from being designated? If a designation means that the people living in the buildings cannot renovate their units to improve basic quality of life issues such as draughty walls, small rooms, or the lack of an elevator in a six-storey building, then what is its value to the residents?

Perhaps mass housing, more than any other building type, brings out these questions since people are not just visiting the building for its architectural qualities, but rather living within its spaces everyday. This means that there must be a 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. These buildings are protected in one sense 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 determined how the building could change. Perhaps Eastern European mass housing, because it largely remains in use, should not be subject to such a process, and should 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.