

PREFABRICATED SOCIALIST ESTATE: DIVERGENT HOUSING MODEL AUGMENTED BY AN ATMOSPHERE OF BELONGING

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INTRODUCTION

Based on a personal experience growing up in a typical modular ferroconcrete plate construction located in Wroclaw, Poland, this paper studies fundamental housing issues related to externally imposed political and governance structures, their short- and long-term influence on the built environment, particularly in the light of substantial changes that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, and examines the evolution of divergent futures of similar housing developments in the region.

Additionally, the author discusses a set of converging factors that delineate the perceptual transformation of an “atmosphere of belonging” through his eyes while growing up within the confines of the prefabricated high-rise socialist estate. The analysis utilizes concepts of rationalization, nostalgic reunification, and a “home, sweet home” syndrome in order to isolate the changes within the estate and the evolution of the socio-economic system from the observer’s maturation process.

The cumulative result is an analysis of housing as a basic human necessity augmented by the feeling of belonging as a basic human desire.

Global influences

The role of high-rise modular estates in 20th century urban planning is well documented and closely linked to the deliberations of the 1933 International Congress on Modern Architecture and later the creation of the Athens Charter by LeCorbusier.¹ Since then, modified by international and local conditions, divergent models of design developed in various countries. While beyond the “Iron Curtain” the designs of high-rise estates generally evolved over time either by choice or through “a trial and error” methodology, socialist large block estates consistently displayed their monotonous personalities and over time began suffering from “multiple identities disorder”.² Polish interpretations and implementations of the ideas describing a “functional city” became quite simplistic and significantly exceeded the reactions of western nations that quickly recognized the disadvantages of uniformly designed and mass produced housing complexes.³ In that context, one can only wonder if the book titled “Can our Cities Survive?” written by Josep Lluís Sert and influenced by philosopher Ortega y Gasset relates equally well to the ideas promoted by Modernist Architects or the future of poorly designed dwelling complexes that struggled with the interpretations of the recommendations provided within the Athens Charter?⁴

The evolution of these divergent housing models resulting from a common set of influencing ideas is clearly visible by contrasting the outcomes of the well-known Pruitt-Igoe urban housing development

in St. Louis, Missouri with a fairly unknown, albeit of a similar size and design, socialist high-rise estate called Popowice, located in Wroclaw, Poland. While for a variety of external and internal reasons the buildings in St. Louis have already been demolished before the idea for Popowice was even conceived, the Polish estate lives on despite occasionally suffering from similar problems that brought the Pruitt-Igoe complex to its knees.⁵ The progression of these divergent futures illustrates an important point often ignored within the design and planning communities. Despite good intensions and international discussions among leading architects and urban planners, consultations with politicians and other stakeholders, any set of recommendations that comes out of such a process does not necessarily warrant a panacea for success.⁶ Even with today's computation and modelling techniques, it is certainly not possible to predict how these divergent futures would have evolved given a small change in external or internal circumstances. Therefore it is imperative to recognize that designing and planning for human condition must refrain from creating "one size fits all" final recipes, and instead employ approaches that emulate and encourage change.

External vs. national influences

While physical place, whether natural or man-made, evolves over time with or without the inputs of its inhabitants, there are two factors carrying a significant capacity for change over time: natural disasters and human-induced catastrophes. Both can accelerate or impede the rate of development, alter dwelling patterns, and shift the perception of an atmosphere of belonging among the inhabitants. For these reasons the analysis of a high-rise socialist estates in Poland must account for the greatest human-induced catastrophe of the 20th century – World War II. However, in addition to the tremendous scale of destruction of the housing stock resulting from the armed conflict, the need for the development of high-rise housing stock in Poland was equally, although over a longer period of time, influenced by the convergence of externally imposed and internally desired factors.

On the one hand the enacted shifting of administrative boundaries of the country in 1945 caused a wave of migrations from the east and repopulated newly acquired western cities with entirely new, albeit fairly homogeneous groups of people; after 1947 less than 10% of Wroclaw's residents were native to the area or resettled.⁷

On the other hand the gradually forced and occasionally reversed implementation of the centrally planned economic model on post-war Poland by the Soviet Union⁸, created a demand for "clean slate" approaches to urban design and helped to justify the realisation of the new social order by the ruling elite.⁹

The influences of each separate factor can be traced to the development of many socialist high-rise estates in Poland.¹⁰ However, the convergence of these two factors augmented by the exposure of Polish architects to western influences after the retrenchment of Stalin's regime¹¹, and later the wave of mandated "typification" of designs¹², the 1970's high-rise development of Popowice estate that initially attempted to follow the early modernist qualities of "functionalism, existential minimum, and maximum healthiness"¹³, resulted in a spatial arrangement that can currently be described as worth "less than the sum of its parts".¹⁴

Sense of place vs. an atmosphere of belonging

Between 1950 and 1988 over 4 million high-rise dwelling units were built in Polish cities, which represented a living style that accommodated up to 20% of the entire population of the country before socialism collapsed.¹⁵ The lack of cultural identity related to the new place of settlement and

minuscule ethnic diversity¹⁶ combined with very low housing style variety, created a fertile ground for social conditioning. As such, these factors contributed significantly to the early perception of an atmosphere of belonging among the migrants who at the time not only represented a very limited ethnic diversity but were also subjugated to a manufactured reality that pushed a series of myths designed to instil in their minds specific national identity.¹⁷ Their basic need for shelter has been fulfilled but their desire to feel a sense of belonging to their new reality never materialized.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH DIVERGENT FUTURES

At this point one could wonder if such sense of belonging has ever developed in the future generations that were born and raised within the confines of socialist high-rise estates? The following is an attempt to answer that question through personal experiences.

Home, sweet home

The sun has set and risen following the same pattern since I first stepped as a young child on the grounds of Popowicka estate in Wroclaw, Poland. During that time the property evolved both architecturally and socially, however not at the same rate.¹⁸ The overall urban concept remained almost intact, many building façades regularly changed their “makeup”, some flats became modernized, yet the open space transformed the most; the *natural* has overgrown like in Le Corbusier’s dream and the *artificial* expanded as a result of the hydrocarbon revolution.

Encoded through the eyes of a young child, the late seventies and the early eighties still feel like an application of a “classic chrome” film simulation on a digital camera. Somewhere in their grainy textures, the fading colors preserved sweaty summer warmth accumulating in the concrete walls of the estate. Not surprisingly, activating the process of nostalgic reunification, my brain forces the phrase “home, sweet home” to slowly roll off the tongue.

The experience of growing up in a particular location conditions the brain to recognize certain combinations of images, sounds, and aromas. It does encode a specific atmosphere of a place anchored in the fourth dimension - time. Through that process, a personal bond of belonging emerges, and lingers in the brain like a scent of perfume, ready to be recalled from the subconscious and activate the nostalgic feelings of the past.¹⁹

The perception of an atmosphere of belonging can have various levels of intensity and certainly is not equal among individuals growing up in the same vicinity. However, it is possible that particular sets of events from the past can evoke very similar reactions in people of comparable social and location backgrounds.²⁰

The atmosphere of belonging that emerged during my life in Poland can be divided into three phases. The first stage is centered on my memories that resulted from the interactions with the very rational, yet difficult to comprehend labyrinth-like layout of the estate. By layout, I do not only mean the disposition of individual buildings but also the internal configuration of the apartments and especially their clustering around a central circulation shaft. The next phase was heavily influenced by the change of the socio-economic system marked by the Marshal Law of 1981 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The last stage consisted of several extended visits to the estate after almost a decade of absence. During that time the environmental transformation instilled a form of a “multiple identities disorder” within the estate.²¹ Additionally, the time of my absence from the estate contributed significantly to

the perception of an atmosphere of belonging and its subsequent transformation.

A[maze]ing childhood

The Popowice estate of high-rise buildings is neatly organized in rows stretching from the southeast to the northwest at about 120 degrees. This layout stands in a stark contrast to the traditional dense fabric of the town center, featuring courtyards clustered around street blocks sparsely separated by greenery. Each 11-story building casts long shadows throughout the year. This pattern creates air tunnels that take advantage of the prevailing wind conditions. It was meant to increase the rate of natural ventilation, an idea that can be traced back to the early modernist qualities later represented by universal access to sunshine and cleansing winds, the ability to use “open green space” for improved wellbeing, and the idea of a “tabula rasa” in urban development.

Building orientation of the estate certainly contributes to the rate of ventilation, however it does not have a truly positive effect throughout the year. The variations in atmospheric pressure caused by the shadows and combined with the prevailing wind direction, make it almost impossible to simultaneously open windows on the opposite elevations because the vortex created by the pressure differential wrecks havoc on the interiors of the flats. Additionally, the concrete finished south elevation traps heat throughout the warm summer days and releases it after the sun set, making the living rooms difficult to enjoy in the evening hours.

Despite fairly significant spacing between individual buildings, the lower floors have quite limited access to winter sunshine. At the same time the upper floors enjoy generous amounts of daylight but are constantly battered by the gusty conditions of the wind tunnels.

The above mentioned analysis of the estate might certainly be a result of my professional training, however the unsettling feeling of an incorrectly design human environment has been present in my mind since the very early days of childhood. The first terrifying experience that I can recall, has its roots in the homogeneity of the estate’s architectural expression, composed of randomly painted, horizontal concrete panels separated by narrow bands of windows and elusively interrupted by vertical shafts of staircases. My horror begun with an inability to identify an entryway of the cluster leading to my apartment because at that time the doorway was only discernable by its fairly small street number sign. The experience of standing outside and crying for help in hope to identify my mother’s face in the maze of identical windows stretching several hundred feet haunted me in my dreams for a long time. Perhaps not surprisingly, to this day a quick look at a crossword puzzle in a newspaper brings back the residual of those memories.

The change

As human beings we adapt quickly and dismiss from our conscience the underlining cause of the problem. However, our subconscious mind longs for a solution.²² From the standpoint of the architectural concept, the Popowice estate functioned fairly well in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s because the material situation of the vast majority of the society was comparably low and homogeneous. Therefore, the building elevations remained true to the original intent. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the period of excessive material culture ensued and the flats became too small to accommodate the new consumption habits facilitated by the free market economy. Every square foot was needed and used to its maximum potential. In the absence of easy access to personal

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green space the narrow balconies became oasis of “tranquility” or simply put three-season porches with shading devices, custom glazing, and extended planters. For some, they served as storage units protecting expensive bicycles and for others as an extension to their living rooms.

This change in the exterior elevation colors, finishes, and its function, marks a significant shift from an atmosphere of controlled material and psychological “austerity” imposed by the previous socio-economic system, to an atmosphere of uncontrolled individual expression tampered only by the lack of tools and skills that if present, had a potential to take this phenomena to a higher level. As an example, during my travels to western parts of Germany during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, I observed many mid- and high-rise estates that functioned exceptionally well despite higher levels of personal wealth among their residents. This was due to several factors: in the west the regulations favored minimum apartment sizes as opposed to a maximum that was enforced in socialist Poland. Additionally, the ability to move from a smaller apartment to a larger one due to a change in the family status was easier in the west but almost impossible back at home even after the new system took hold. Lastly, unlike the rigid and preconfigured socialist flat plate high-rise construction, the buildings of the west had more flexible floor plans allowing individual apartments to be adapted to changing socio-economic conditions.

The in-between

My time away from the country was marked by extensive travels throughout the North American continent. Those experiences have reinforced my lack of interest in the conscious analysis of the differences in the environments that I lived in during that time and the place where I grew up. It was not until I settled abroad and begun a family that a subtle nostalgic sensation emerged in my conscious mind. During the decade of absence, my experience with the socialist estate became quasi-virtual.

The feeling of belonging is comparable to wearing comfortable shoes. It takes time to adjust them into the shape of the feet. However, once the break-in period ends, they disappear from the wearer’s conscious perception. In my case the new “shoes” did not fit perfectly. Despite being excited about the new environment that I have settled in, it took a considerable amount of time to adjust to the daily routine, and the question of belonging to the larger context kept “rising to the surface”. While my absence was not a result of a displacement, rather a conscious and rational choice, these symptoms amounted to a nostalgic feeling about the past and grew in strength over time. More specifically, the process of rationalization gradually shifted my perspective on the less than positive aspects of the socialist estate. For instance, the labyrinth of buildings and the apartments clustered around the circulation spine became in my mind a model for a safe and coherent living arrangements. Nostalgia, as originally defined in medical terms by Johannes Hofer, was to “produce erroneous representations that caused the afflicted to lose touch with reality”. Fortunately, despite being able to qualify the sentiments for my “home, sweet home” in the most rational terms, I became incapable of crossing into the territory of more passionate feelings about it. All hope was still not lost. I have accepted this self-diagnosis and opted for melancholy instead; a feeling of sadness without a particular reason - despite actually having a reason.

The return

The final evolutionary stage of my perception of an atmosphere of belonging consists of several extended visits to the estate after almost a decade of absence during which the environmental

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transformation instilled a form of a “multiple identities disorder” within the property. During that time some building elevations begun reverting to the original design while the rest produced an even greater visual cacophony. A new form of environmental signage appeared and the green space gave way to automobiles. More importantly, the gentrification process, both in human and real estate terms, began stifling an ability to introduce meaningful change into the estate.

It is difficult to imagine the evolution of my feelings without the subsequent return to the estate. I will probably never discover if in due time, I would have developed symptoms matching the original definition of nostalgia. However, it is certain that the homecoming prompted me to study the “home, sweet home” condition as something more than just a temporary circumstance.

The ensuing immersion in the environment of the estate brought back my childhood memories. Despite being surrounded by mature landscape of matching proportions, the buildings looked as tall and overwhelming as I remembered them. Not much has changed, yet so much has changed. Still, encoded in my memories and reconstructed through bodily chemical reactions, I have once again experienced my personal atmosphere of belonging seemingly engrained within the estate. The feeling was joyous and authentic but quickly verified by the reality of the situation. Staircases felt really tight and uninviting. The wind tunnels and layers of deep shadows affected not only my physical presence but to a larger degree my subconscious desire to improve the shortcomings of the original urban planning idea. Perhaps “old problems die hard” and their perception becomes a function of the time away and the quality of new location.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the internal analysis of my experiences at the estate was on going, as it often happens, an unexpected situation prompted me to research the theme of an atmosphere of belonging from a much broader perspective. I sat on a plain, traveling thousands of feet in the air next to a passenger who grew up in the same neighborhood. We chatted briefly about our childhood and growing up in the socialist high-rise estates. It turned out that our life experiences marked many similarities including a prolonged time away from the estate and a subsequent return. This event prompted me to research the phenomena of “a sense of place” or an atmosphere of belonging in more detail. Over the last 18 months I was able to identify 7 people who’s life experiences parallel mine to a significant degree. These individuals grew up in the same estate, were born within 5 years of each other, left abroad in the late 1990s and were absent for 6-10 years before returning. Two settled in USA, 2 in Canada, 1 in England, 1 in Germany and 1 in France. My two control groups consist of individuals that only relocated within the country either to another high-rise estate or to a significantly different type of a residential establishment and than returned within 5 to 10 years.

While the subject pool of my research is still small, I am quite encouraged by the results. There is a strong correlation among the group of people who developed nostalgic feelings that idealize the shortcomings of the estate while living abroad. However, such position only develops after the period of settling down and establishing a family. On the contrary, the subjects in the control group who left the estate to a comparable residential environment and returned after a significant period of absence have not developed such a condition, regardless of their domestic status. Furthermore, the group of subjects living at a significantly different residential environment had a weak correlation of exhibiting the kinds of nostalgic feelings that idealize the shortcomings of the socialist estate also regardless of

their domestic status. The results of this study may point to a future condition that immigration is a significant contributing factor to the evolution of personal perception of an atmosphere of belonging. Additionally, it is becoming apparent that either the more permanent settlement abroad and/or the change in the domestic status, invoke within the subjects stronger desire for nostalgic rationalization. As such the phrase “Home, sweet home” could become more symptomatic than just a temporary occurrence and characteristic to the generations that were raised in the socialist estates as opposed to the generations transplanted to them after World War II.

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¹⁷ Kamila Dolinska and Julita Makaro, *O Wielokulturowosci Monokulturowego Wroclawia* (Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wroclawskiego, 2013), 75-76.

¹⁸ Explain how architecture evolved through a series of environmental decisions and socially an entire generation grew up in it

¹⁹ Personal interpretation of human development process based on the psychosocial theory of human development established by Erik Erikson.

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²² Based on Freud's definition of the unconscious mind responsible for the access to the repository of seemingly forgotten memories or automatic thoughts, which in turn can be seen as the locus of implicit knowledge.