Revisiting urban planning during socialism: Views from the periphery. An introduction


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Although some of the substance of Communism is still active in all Communist countries – chiefly the one-party system and the party bureaucracy monopoly over the economy – the international relations and international position of each country differ so radically today from any other that to treat them all as the same would be the gravest conceivable mistake.

(Milovan Djilas, *The Unperfect Society*, 1969)

During the state socialism of the 20th century, the urban transformations of cities “have been quite different from those of neighbouring non-socialist countries” (Szelenyi 1983:1). The transformation of cities under socialism was often integrated with five-year plans and involved domination by the state in all activities (French and Hamilton 1979; Bater 1980; Szelenyi 1983; Andrusz 1984; Smith 1996; Musil 2005). Fisher writes that “city planning in socialist countries is integrated with the overall economic planning of the state” and highlights four principles for socialist city planning: standardisation; town sizing and its dependence on its productive function and the number of people employed; the city centre and its distinctive character as a political, cultural and administrative core; and the neighbourhood unit concept as a tool for construction of cities (Fisher 1962:251–3). Spatially, socialist cities were initially transformed through construction of large industrial complexes and housing estates that were amongst the first projects that were planned and built in cities during this period (Musil 1980; Szelenyi 1983; Meuser and Zadorin 2016; Zarecor 2018). In such setting, “[t]he task of the planner was clear. He had to prepare the physical environment for the fulfilment of specific objectives within a set time frame” (Bater 1980:26), the specific objectives mostly referring to the grand goals of building capable industrial cities.

Sotsgorod, a key concept for the development of the future socialist city, had a great impact on the transformation of cities across wider geographies during this period. In his seminal book “*Sotsgorod: The Problem of Building Socialist Cities*”, Miliutin (1974) proposes a new spatial vocabulary for the socialist city, a linear city, but also a reorganisation of the way of life in it throughout the settlement system:

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The reconstruction of our way of life on new socialist principles is the next problem facing the Soviet Union. Along with this, we are confronted with the overall problem of sanitary and health improvements in settlements throughout the USSR; nor can we allow the kind of criminal anarchy in construction procedures that characterizes the capitalist world. The Soviet village must be built in such a way as not to perpetuate the very conditions we are struggling against, but rather to create the basis for organization of a new socialist, collective way of life.

(Miliutin 1930/1974:50)

These changes followed the transformation of political, economic and social life based upon the Marxist-Leninist thinking and resulted with an unprecedented expansion of cities during the period of state socialism, fostering record levels of urbanisation in socialist countries but also making smaller settlements more urban.

Literature, to date, focuses on urban planning during socialism predominately from the perspective of the capital city, being the locality of political authorities and their centres, and adequately covering topics including planning, housing, industrialisation and population growth (Musil 1987; Gentile & Sjöberg 2013; Steinberg 2021; van der Straeten and Petrova 2022). Many authors have conducted work on socialist cities including book projects (Molnár 2013, Crowley and Reid 2002; DeHaan 2013; Hess and Tammaru, 2019) and journal special issues which adequately cover the topics of architectural and planning history of cities during socialism (Bocharnikova and Kurg 2019).

Yet, at the same time, clear research enquiries remain – most importantly into studies that explore socialist cities beyond the limits of the centre, challenging the generalised and often preconceived assumptions of cities during the period of state socialism and their social and spatial equality from the perspective of “periphery”. Throughout this book, we address this research gap using new case studies that enable further detailed exploration and comparative analysis of cities whose transformation is challenging the preconceived notions of the socialist city and its centre, as a considerably homogenous space, dominated by normative planning processes.

The term periphery assumes that wherever or whatever the periphery is, there is always a centre. In urban studies, periphery is often a spatial concept and therefore has spatial implications. The core-periphery model is often used to delineate uneven developments, spatial polarisation and inequality (Wellhofer 1989; McLoughlin 1994; Krugman 1998). The concept of peripheralisation in a spatial scale is also closely linked to the notion of marginalisation (Herrschel 2011; Danson and De Souza 2012), highlighting the link between peripheralisation and exclusion.

Wallerstein (1974) continues to be a critical source for scholarship on “modern world systems”, the importance of centre-periphery concepts and the tensions between them. He distinguishes three zones of the world
economy, namely, semiperiphery, the core and the periphery, where “periphery” means to be subordinated, while its resources tend to become redistributed to the core. Flint and Taylor (2018) have developed it further by integrating the global core-periphery politics across geographical scales and relating global processes to daily experiences. In this book, we make the argument that in the Eastern Bloc, the centre and the periphery together made state socialism and formed the concept of the socialist city, yet urban planning under state socialism is rarely analysed from the perspective of the system’s periphery.

In defining the periphery during state socialism in this book, we took as a starting point the notion of periphery as “situated on the fringe” (Kühn 2015) and the broad definition of periphery as “the distance in relation to the core, in terms of geographic, economic, political or social factors” (Bourne 2010). Here, we argue that the concept of periphery is about dependences and transversalities too, as well as developing an understanding of what the periphery is distant from. In addressing this, we take a closer look at how different notions of periphery impacted the development and transformation of cities during state socialism of the 20th century. We further argue that interrelating different notions of periphery or constructing relations amongst different concepts are necessary, thereby extending the focus and understanding of the notion of periphery beyond the solely spatial core-periphery configurations that are currently dominant in urban studies. These relationships may be complex and contested, yet they are critical to understanding the nature of the socialist city and urban planning under socialism.

It is in this context that we propose to address the concept of periphery during the period of state socialism – of relational approaches and connectivity of different conditions – political, economic, social and spatial, that highlight particularities beyond the sole hierarchical considerations of the core and the periphery as a spatial system. By using this notion of periphery, contributors in this book explore complex processes of production of space in socialist cities, and the chapters presented here also complement this notion of the concept of “periphery” in the socialist world in the 20th century.

At the core of our book, there are two arguments. First, we argue that the largely unfinished project of the socialist city, neither homogenous nor anticipated, contributes to defining its periphery: economic, political, social and spatial, sometimes changing the centre-periphery interrelations. Second, we argue that the periphery of the socialist city is highly diverse and heterogeneous and cities in any of the peripheries during state socialism were often places for visionary urban experimentations at different scales.

Chapters in this book address the asymmetries and preconceptions of socialist cities, providing detailed contextual evidence from the perspective of the periphery. Furthermore, the chapters in this book advance the state of the art of socialist cities in two areas: first, through the diversity of case studies and experiences from a wide area of socialist countries and second, through the construction of interrelations and juxtapositions of the notions of
periphery that extend discussions on cities during the period of state socialism of the 20th century. The studies presented in this book reveal spatial aspirations, experimentation and exchanges of architectural and planning ideas in the periphery during socialism. The studies also exhibit that in the complex mosaic of the socialist city, the periphery has functional properties too and articulate diverse urban experiences that contribute towards a renewed understanding of the socialist city that exceed regional geopolitical conceptualisations. The chapters furthermore encourage us to reflect on the significance of core-periphery, East-West and North-South polarities. It is in this context that the chapters in this book address the notion of periphery, embracing scholarship that inspires future urban studies with new concepts and theoretical considerations.

Recognising the complexities of the transformation of cities during the period of state socialism, we propose four takeaway messages on the notions of periphery in the socialist city as a future reference in urban studies. These takeaway messages are not exhaustive but provide critical thinking on the understanding of the concept of periphery during the period of state socialism in the 20th century, indicating interactions at different spatial scales and networks of power, beyond state institutions and beyond the centre as a place where “top decision makers are situated” (Langholm 1971:273).

1 The concept of periphery in the socialist city is created through multiple interrelated processes, and its diverse spatial configurations depend on the transversalities of political, economic and social phenomena.

The political, economic and social transformations during the period of state socialism had an impact on urban planning of cities and were intrinsic to every facet of urban space and life in socialist cities. These phenomena were intertwined, producing distinct forms and spaces in the socialist city that were not only spatial but also abstract accounts of the concept, resulting from the transversalities of political, economic and social relations.

In Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, a country at the spatial periphery of the USSR, a Virgin Lands campaign promoted by Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s displayed the complex relations between urban planning and politics in the periphery through the transformation of Tselinograd. Tselinograd, established as the capital of the Virgin Land Territory in 1961, shortly after became a showcase for new town planning concepts and standardisation of buildings in wider parts of Central Asia, contextualising the evolution of the city into a new socio-economic centrality (Talamini 2024).

Economic variables during socialism had an impact on the development of the socialist city. Wrocław, formerly Breslau, a city in the “Regained Lands” in Polish People’s Republic, during the period of state socialism, was transformed under a limited budget, in contrast to other cities in the country after WWII (Tomaszewicz and Majczyk 2024). Directly dependent on the finances from the centre – Warsaw, the projected multiple centres for
socialist Wroclaw were never realised. In the early 1960s priority in the city was assigned to the construction of residential estates and the reconstruction of the central district and not to any of the service centres located in the housing estates (cf. Leetmaa and Hess 2019), despite them being indicated in the post-WWII city development plans. This was seen also as a measure of marginalisation of the city on the national arena.

For the city of Bratislava, a city with a longstanding peripheral status within Czechoslovakia, the administrative confirmation of the city as the capital city of the Federative Republic of Slovakia in 1968 marked a period of the most ambitious development of the city. During this period the city grew nearly twice its size and new districts, infrastructures, as well as a renovation of the entire city centre were planned. Yet, most of these ambitious plans were realised only in fragments or remained only in the form of ambitious intentions as a result of financial constraints (Moravčíková, Szalay and Krišteková 2024).

In the city of Skopje, a capital city in the most southern republic of SFR Yugoslavia, the reconstruction following the 1963 earthquake was a delicate international game of Cold War politics (Babić 2024). The reconstruction was led by local and Yugoslav architects that introduced the city as an international blueprint of modernist planning, facilitated through transfer of knowledge that was sponsored by the UN and global collaborations established by the Yugoslavs. The technological advancement of the Yugoslav and Macedonian construction industry and the know-how of the architects were on full display in the city, where throughout the 1970s and 1980s brutalist constructs exemplified its urban identity.

Complex social relations and structures, in relation to the division of labour, produced specific spatial relations in Budapest during the period of state socialism. The construction of housing and the urban renewal of the city can be asserted to the decay of the historical housing during socialism in Budapest’s second urban belt, contributing to the segregation of working-class communities in the city as new mass housing estates were predominantly inhabited by middle-class families (Kiss 2024). As a result, the working-class in the case of Budapest, although being central to state propaganda during socialism, remained on the social peripheries in Hungary during this period.

2 The role of the architect and the planner during socialism is often seen as one that fulfils the requirements set by the state. Yet, architects and urban planners that found themselves at any of the peripheries were often “freed” from meeting specific requirements set by the state, professionally challenging the spatial East-West, North-South, core-periphery divides and that of the periphery viewed as a disadvantaged space.

Urban planners that found themselves at any of the peripheries of the socialist city often applied globally trendy theories for the future socialist city
and were in close communication with their Western colleagues (Ferenčuhová 2021), for example, visiting them on various exchange trips even during the tensest periods of international relations. The location of housing estates and their construction was one of the main tasks for the architects and urban planners during the period of state socialism, turning political propaganda into spatial reality.

In socialist Yugoslavia, the interrelationship between planning and citizen participation served as a tool for pursuing self-management socialism in the country which was considered peripheral to both the West and the East (Perić and Blagojević 2024). In order to foster local community needs, public participation in the country was introduced through national planning acts, which also established the roles of different actors in the planning processes. Within it, the role of the planner was a neutral professional service, contributing significantly to the societal emancipation, modernisation and welfare.

The ability of countries to adapt space to military needs is always prioritised over conventional spatial planning; this mostly happens when there is no direct war and the countries are in deterrence mode. As the period of state socialism of the 20th century coincided with the accumulation of international tensions, allocating land and reserving the locations for military use diverged from regular spatial planning – in many cities, “white areas”, so to speak, were on the map for the planner. Leetmaa et al. (2024) present the case of a small peripheral Estonian-Latvian border town of Valga/Valka, which, due to the influence of Cold War priorities – the need to place medium-range missiles within firing range – shaped an insignificant “small place” into an important location on the world map due to the influence of a global “large issue”. Gobova’s chapter in Part IV of this book also refers to the need to adapt socialist urban planning to the country’s military needs that always serve as priorities (Gobova 2024).

Individualised design approaches and regional differences to Soviet mass housing and standardised architecture of large housing estates also existed during the period of state socialism (cf. Drėmaite 2019; Leetmaa and Hess 2019; Drėmaite 2024). In the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, a Western periphery of the Soviet Union, the aspirations of local professional architects were taken into consideration and architects enjoyed greater freedom compared with other creative professions during this period. Architects were regarded as experts and specialists, and despite standardisation, there were numerous attempts to improve the design of housing estates and neighbourhood planning, often with strong regionalist approaches in architecture in residential neighbourhoods.

3 Production and reproduction of places for everyday life in the socialist city were often dependent on social equity, therefore defining the complex notions of periphery through the non-politics of socio-spatial relations.
The transformation of everyday life in the socialist city was one of the targets in the organisation of the socialist state, ideologically positioning equal distribution of resources and national socio-spatial ambitions. Places for everyday life, processes and activities enabled citizens to experience the socialist city, and through the design of places for everyday life activities, architects and town planners directly impacted the organisation of the socialist state and its commitment to equity. Symbolically, the places for everyday life in the socialist city were situated between ideological meaning and social equity.

Planning for spaces for everyday life in Ukrainian large ordinary cities, considered as a political periphery in the Soviet Union’s urban network, was conditioned by standardisation (Mezentsev, Provotar and Gnatiuk 2024). In the large ordinary cities of Vinnytsia and Cherkasy, the desire of the Soviet authorities to establish certain patterns of planning organisation on the use of public spaces was met with reaction from the local residents. They accepted the city squares as places of power, while their collective interests were displayed in cities central parks and courtyards of large residential estates which remained oases for allowed freedom during the period of state socialism of the 20th century.

During the period of state socialism, the outer parts of cities and natural areas outside urban territories remained peripheral in post-war planning inquiries. In the spatial periphery of Tallinn in the 1960s, a peri-urban zone envisioned also in “The Project for Greater Tallinn” became a place for a new lifestyle for the city’s residents and a site for family life (Lankots 2024). In this regard, the spatial periphery of the city had a strategic role in the planning of the socialist city where summer house settlements operated as an extension to the everyday urban environment, while not only providing places for relaxation but also becoming sites for family life, domestic duties as well as freedom and self-realisation in the socialist city (cf. Nuga et al. 2016).

Mass housing estates dominated the urban landscapes of socialist cities. Gldani, a mass housing neighbourhood at the northern edge of Tbilisi, was developed by the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic to meet the city’s growing population (Gogishvili 2024). The neighbourhood, designed by Bochorishvili, although developed according to strict standards of Soviet urban planning, had original features too. Yet, the experimental elements in the plan, including social spaces, public halls, recreational areas and the vertical axis, were never fully realised due to lack of funding but also due to the prioritisation of Soviet building standards and economic principles over the more idealistic architectural visions.

Environmental and ecological consciousness under state socialism highlights moral disengagement with political reasoning at different scales.

In order to maximise economic growth, natural resources during state socialism were often exploited while industrial growth contributed to the
growth of cities during this period (Whitehead, 2005). Bater (1986) writes that the environmental context of the Soviet city was tantalisingly elusive. Yet, at the same time, environmental concerns and incorporation of nature in the city during this period were challenging the political structures and the industrial assets of the socialist city.

For cities in the spatial periphery in the USSR, growth was supported by the growth of their industrial enterprises, causing also ecological problems (Gobova 2024). In the Urals, contrary to the notions of centrally planned cities during state socialism, urban planning in Yekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk) in the 1960s also took into consideration ecological and environmental influences, revealing also different narratives of power relations in the city planning process. In this spatial periphery of the USSR, architects and planners in the 1960s–80s took into consideration the growing industrial enterprises in the city, ensuring to reduce their negative ecological and environmental impact and setting up standards for future ecological and functional planning of industrial and residential districts.

Departing from Marxist ecological critique of capitalism as well as Soviet ecological thought, studies on Soviet unofficial architecture provide valuable insights on the environmental movements that emerged during late socialism (Panteleyeva 2024). This is linked with the emerging understanding of architecture as environment as well as its formal “identification” with the concept of nature which triggered the conceptualisation of “national” landscape and “nature” itself as agencies of political change. Architecture collectives, such as NER group’s visions for the city, embraced new Soviet material models and realities, suggesting also reconciliation of urbanism with the natural domain through formal experimentations.

During the period of socialism in Albania, a country that was extremely isolated even within the Eastern Bloc, the conceptions of “environment” and “nature” served the government propaganda. Analysis of literature, film, music and painting of this period reveals some of the official conceptions of “nature” and “the environment” in the country (Pojani and Pojani 2024). The analysis of these symbolic products reveals emerging environmental consciousness and ideas under socialism through the theoretical lens of ecofeminism, incorporating notions of environmental exploitation and women’s oppression.

Further research

Contributions in this book highlight different notions of periphery and peripheral in cities during the period of state socialism and their interrelations and transversalities – political, economic, social and spatial, contributing therefore indirectly to the understanding of the notion of the centre during this period too. These novel contributions present multiple experiences from socialist cities across wider geographies and social realities of the socialist world. The book aims to inspire a renewed research agenda on the socialist
city, focusing on understanding its periphery as a considerably different urban scene compared to the centre (and its conventional case studies in urban research on socialist city). The different trajectories that are presented in this book outline some ideas for such future studies and enhance our appreciation of the socialist city through architectural and urban planning considerations. These perspectives also call for revisiting of the existing centre-periphery definitions in socialist cities and beyond. The case study cities presented in this book also aim in contributing to a wider scholarship in other contexts and provide a foundation for further research on cities whose transformation is pervasive and whose peripheries are in flux.

Finally, we would like to emphasise the timing of the completion of this book. When launching the collection in 2021, our initial goal was to highlight a specific and also an understudied chapter of the history of urban planning, namely, views from the periphery on urban planning under socialism. During the evolution of the book, however, global uncertainties have come about with the war in Ukraine – the future, nature and duration of which none of us unfortunately has still a precise idea about. Therefore, the case studies presented in this book are of special value. Very likely for some time, fieldwork (like the work with archival materials) will be limited for researchers in some of the cities represented in this collection. However, the material presented here uniquely reflects what the specific features of cities were in one urban system dictated by the ideological, political, social and economic motivations. We assume that the views on the history of urban planning presented on these pages also favour an understanding of cities that we may have the opportunity to explore more closely in the future.

References


