

## 7. Images and Identities of the Post-Socialist Housing Estates in Ukraine vs. Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

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### **Introduction: Context of the Research**

Three decades of post-socialist transition from 1991 to 2021 in the countries of Eastern Europe still reveal the challenges in urban post-Soviet large housing estates, and Ukraine is amongst them. Prefabricated housing built in the 1950s to 1980s remains to be assessed and analyzed using new approaches for future changes. The environment of the living areas requires new images and identities as they occupy enormous territories in cities with large populations. The statistical data on construction of prefabricated housing using series (standardized) projects on the territory of the USSR shows they accounted for the following percentages: in 1958, 77 percent; in 1960, 88 percent; and in 1965, 95 percent. In Ukraine, a similar percentage of panel housing blocks of socialist “heritage” (from among all housing) were built in various cities, for instance in Kyiv: 63.8 percent; Donetsk: 81.8 percent; and Kharkiv: 85.2 percent. This means that the development of large housing estates with panel prefabricated buildings created a living environment that has monotonous and simple features, as they were built using series projects. One large housing estate could comprise the prefabricated housing for 130,000 inhabitants by using three to four series projects, so-called typical projects. Monotony and standardization in housing construction of post-socialist living areas demand attention today as they pose challenges to Ukrainian cities. Moreover, this problem is not on the agenda of city authorities in Ukraine, as there are many other economic, infrastructural, and societal problems in the cities. At the same time, the period of post-socialist transition has now reached thirty years and demands the implementation of new strategies based on deep research.

The existing investigations by architects, urban planners, sociologists, urban geographers, and anthropologists discuss the transformation of post-socialist large housing estates and societal challenges under the interdisciplinary framework covering the post-socialist East European countries (Zarecor 2011; Szafrńska 2014; Grossmann et al. 2015; Erőss 2013; Hess, Tammaru, van Ham 2018; Steiner 2014; Galuszka 2020; Šimáček et al. 2015; Tsenkova 2008). Ukraine is not fully represented in the international scientific debate (Otrishchenko 2017; Cherkes 2013, 2015; Habrel, Habrel, and Lysiak 2020).

Monotony, standardization, and exaggerated scale of typical series projects of prefabricated housing blocks became the core difficulty to overcome for positive achievements. Ongoing scientific debate is needed about what attempts need to be made to improve post-socialist large housing estates in Ukraine. Moreover, innovative nonstandard views should be involved in conceiving the research within the interdisciplinary frameworks. The approaches used most for the investigation of the urban environment in post-Soviet countries are based on post-Soviet theory (Sosnovskyy and Rusakova 2006). These methods have their roots in the time when urban planning in the USSR functioned according to the administrative planning and construction of new territories and even new cities, calculating prognoses for the quantities of future inhabitants of a residential area, microrayon, or city. The last thirty years of continuous usage of large housing estates do not fulfill the conditions of the old method of analysis and have to involve experts from other fields such as sociology, urban or social geography, and anthropology as well as urban activists' practices.

The main objective of the project was to reveal and add to the scientific field information about the existing conditions of the living environment in prefabricated post-socialist housing estates by analyzing their "images and identities," building the methodology of the research on the approaches described by Jane Jacobs in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. This world-renowned author had inspired citizens and researchers with her activism in the urban environment and her public position. The book gave directions for conducting research about housing environments and beyond in cities in different parts of the world, such as the Debar Maalo neighborhood in Skopje, North Macedonia (Velevska, Velevski, and Ognen 2016); Suzhou Industrial Park, China (He and Chen 2017); a residential district in Seoul, Korea (Sung and Lee 2015) and others. The Seoul case-study research analyzes the residential built environment and walking activity and reveals its relationship to Jacobs's six conditions for urban vitality, including land use mix, density,

block size, building age, accessibility, and border vacuums. The list of investigations based on the approaches described by Jane Jacobs (1961, 1993) does not comprise all the investigations done by researchers in different countries, but at the same time, it proves that the book and its ideas are actually firmly anchored in our time and could be implemented for diverse types of territories throughout the world.

Why has this book been chosen for the investigation of Ukrainian post-socialist living areas? Firstly, this is a book that becomes extremely important for the degraded post-socialist large housing estates on post-Soviet territory, in Ukraine in particular, because Jacobs expresses many challenges, and their underlying causes, that we may trace as a parallel comparison in post-socialist housing areas. Secondly, this book was unknown on the territory of Soviet Ukraine and the whole USSR until the later years of post-socialist transition—and it was recently translated into Ukrainian and published in Ukraine (Jacobs 2011). Finally, it is still referenced rarely in architectural education in Ukraine, although interdisciplinary programs such as urban studies have started to use and mention the book in their course plans. We sought to commemorate 2021, which marked thirty years of post-socialist transition (1991–2021), by taking a walk, with Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in our hands, around the post-socialist housing estates in Ukraine in search of "images and identities." The project was conducted from September to December 2020 within the course Norms and Typologies (3rd year) at the Faculty of Architecture, Kharkiv National University of Civil Engineering and Architecture. The intention was to acquaint the students of the course with Jane Jacobs's book and to investigate her concepts in a post-socialist city. The students were assigned tasks in several stages: study, research, and synthesis. This paper focuses on the integration of applied pedagogical methodologies for the studies of large post-socialist housing estates in the interdisciplinary framework of fundamental urban literature.

## Post-Socialist Large Housing Estates: Framework of Earlier Studies

The previous stages of the research comprised the investigation and analysis of challenges of post-socialist transition and perspectives of urban regeneration of post-socialist large housing estates in Ukraine, the historical background of prefabricated mass housing typology in industrialized construction, and the

ideological influences of the socialist era on the construction of Soviet housing from 1917 to 1991 (Chabanyuk 2020).

The historical background of post-socialist large housing estates in Ukraine summarizes the prefabricated mass housing typology of industrialized construction in Ukraine during the second part of the twentieth century: (1) 1955–1969: planning of the first new housing estates with spacious layout of the residential area using a microdistrict approach, construction of 5- to 9-story slab housing, design of standardized projects (series) for housing prefabrication; and (2) 1970–1989: construction of the residential areas of mass housing estates using regular and non-regular planning types, design of building-block parts, semi-block parts, and block elements, design of prefabricated housing with different plan configurations and high-rise towers. Industrialized construction led to a faceless image for most of the new housing areas with primitive planning, to the poor appearance of useless spaces in the living environment, and to a decrease of consumer quality of post-socialist large housing estates built in Ukraine. These approaches had not achieved the desired result because the inhabitants were not considered as participants of life in the living environment. The previous stages of the research also included stigmergic studies of self-organization (Chabanyuk and Fonseca 2019; Fonseca and Chabanyuk 2019) in the urban contexts of case studies of post-Soviet prefabricated housing estates in Ukraine, focusing on the formal and informal non-systematic transformations of residential function to commerce on the ground floors of multistory housing blocks, which is widespread in the large-scale housing estates of prefabricated construction in the cities of Ukraine.

## Methodology of the Research

The research methodology uses the didactical approach as the research had been implemented in the architectural education lecture and practice course Norms and Typologies (3rd year) at the Faculty of Architecture, Kharkiv National University of Civil Engineering and Architecture. The project was built with the following stages:

- (1) The practical sessions of the course were transferred to distance learning because of COVID-19 restrictions in Ukraine from September through December, 2020. The online studies allowed us to cover cases of post-socialist

housing estates in different Ukrainian cities, such as Kharkiv, Sumy, Mariupol, Poltava, Nikopol, and Melitopol; urban diversity was a positive result of the online studies because the students had to choose the area in their home city.

- (2) Study stage—getting acquainted with and reading the Jane Jacobs book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (2011); searching for concepts in the book that describe characteristics of residential areas that are similar to those chosen by the students.
- (3) Research stage—making parallels between the chosen cases in Ukrainian cities and the concepts in the book by J. Jacobs; discussion about the chosen cases in Ukrainian cities, research on the concepts' elements, and search for the contemporary "images and identities" of the cases.
- (4) Synthesis stage—how Jacobs's concepts of diversity in functions, short blocks, variety in buildings' age and condition, and secure living environment in the area may help to improve the acceptance of cases of post-socialist housing estates and develop new images and identities there, and thus attract citizens to post-socialist large housing estates in the cities.

The project aimed to introduce students to the famous American author, a journalist and urban activist, Jane Jacobs; to study her concepts; and to motivate thinking about the problems of local Ukrainian large housing estates. The research allowed us to analyze the prefabricated neighborhoods from a new perspective and apply a new point of view.

## Case Study Analysis: Study, Research, and Synthesis

The study stage aimed to acquaint the students with the Jane Jacobs book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (2011), analyzing it by searching for concepts that describe similarities and problems that are noticed in the residential areas chosen by students. The main difficulty for the students was to understand and accept the book, which describes living areas in American cities, in a different location and context. At the same time, deeper study of the book showed that there are concepts—such as using sidewalks and parks, diversity of functions, short blocks, and others—to build the theoretical framework for the analysis of a sample living area or neighborhood. The discussions, which were held online in Google Meet within the Google Classroom course, gave a deeper understanding of the interdisciplinary content of the urban environment and of approaches to identifying the challenges in each case study. Ob-

servations were made by students in their chosen case studies in their home cities, which allowed us to cover the typological diversity of post-socialist housing estates in Ukraine.

The research stage of the project aimed to find and discuss the parallels between the chosen cases in Ukrainian cities and the concepts in the book by Jane Jacobs. The discussion enabled us to identify the elements of Jacobs concepts that are present in the chosen case studies and to search for contemporary “images and identities.”

*Figure 1: Aerial view of Microrayon #5 in the post-socialist large housing estate Pavlove Pole, built in the 1960s.*



Source: Still image from the video “Zasnezhennoe Pavlovo Pole, Khar’kov, Ukraina – Zima 2021” [Snowy Pavlovo Pole, Kharkiv, Ukraine – Winter 2021], Posted on YouTube by Skyline Walker, Jan. 18, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6i2W-29yKI&t=2s>.

One of the project’s case studies is the case of Microrayon #5 (fig. 1) in the post-socialist large housing estate Pavlove Pole in Kharkiv, built in the 1960s. Five-story housing blocks constitute the main typology of the housing, which created a monotonous built environment. Our research of the book allowed us to identify several conceptual elements that are present in the case study. The problem of diversity is described by Jacobs as “No one way is a good way

to house a city neighborhood; no mere two or three ways are good. The more variations there can be, the better. As soon as the range and number of variations in buildings decline, the diversity of population and enterprises is too apt to stay static or decline, instead of increasing. [ . . . ] This is a kind of chaos" (Jacobs 1961: 214, 224), where the homogeneity becomes the characteristic element of the monotonous built environment and "chaos" erases the identity of the housing estate. Moreover, the monotonous built environment is a result of duplication of typical series projects of residential blocks and duplication of the function over the whole territory of Microrayon #5. According to the book, "differences, not duplications, make for cross-use" (Jacobs 1961: 130). Thus, *diversity* is the conceptual element that may become the aim for the housing estate in future development and stimulate cross-use of the territory.

*Figure 2: Microrayon #5 in the post-socialist large housing estate Pavlove Pole, Kharkiv, Ukraine. View from 23rd of August Street (left).*

*Figure 3: A five-story residential building inside Microrayon #5 (right).*



Source: Author, 2021.

The research identifies diversity as the opposite element to monotony, and it triggers renewal of a housing estate's "images and identities." Monotony spreads over the whole territory of the case study except for the high-rise towers that boost the concentration of dwellers. Microrayon [microdistrict] #5 consists of two project series of nine- and five-story housing blocks (fig. 2) that can also be found in other residential areas of the city, along with fourteen-story residential buildings that are united on the ground floor by various large retail shops. These towers create a memorable silhouette as accents for the

entire residential area (fig. 2). The authors of the solution were the architects G. M. Sokolovsky, L. N. Loevskaia, and V. S. Vasiliev.

However, “no concentration of residents, however high it may be, is ‘sufficient’ if diversity is suppressed or thwarted by other insufficiencies” (Jacobs 1961: 205). A conceptual element as a generator of diversity in the case study deals with the street network, where “frequent streets are not an end in themselves. They are a means toward an end [. . .] of many people besides planners” (Jacobs 1961: 186). Even though the street network consists of frequent roads, these roads mostly provide access to each building and do not constitute the frequent street network, and hence they do not generate diversity for people (fig. 4). The inhabitants use the usual routes across the area and the case study does not exhibit “a mixture of people on a street at one time [that bears] some reasonably proportionate relationship to people there at other times of day” (Jacobs 1961: 164). The lack of diversity and cross-use on the territory cause the uneven use of streets.

Figure 4: Case study: Microrayon #5 in Kharkiv. Aerial view (left).

Figure 5: structural diagram (right) with long housing blocks (orange), short housing blocks (red), and existing transit network (yellow).



Source: Google Maps + Author, 2020.

"Images and identities" of the case study form the identified conceptual elements. Identities of the case study are underdeveloped, lack diversity in cross-use, and confront homogeneity. The synthesis stage of the project continues the research of "images and identities."

Figure 6 + 7: Level of safety in the living environment of Microrayon #5, Kharkiv. Program for intervention: streets with the lowest level of safety in the microdistrict in need of improved lighting; potential locations for new functions in the area; privatization of land around the housing blocks by owners' associations.



Source: aerial view – Google Maps; graphic analysis – Chabanyuk O., 2020.

The main objective of the synthesis stage was to show how Jacobs's concepts of functional diversity, short blocks, variety in buildings' age and condition, and a secure living environment may help to improve the cases of post-socialist housing estates and develop new images and identities there, attracting citizens to post-socialist large housing estates in the cities.

*Figure 8: Large post-socialist housing estate Microrayon #5, Pavlove Pole, Kharkiv, Ukraine. View inside the microdistrict.*



Source: Author 2021.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The analysis of Microrayon #5, Pavlove Pole, Kharkiv, reveals the need for mixed primary use on the territory. The functions that were planned in the project for the construction of the housing area comprised implementation of the planning system with services inside the microdistrict, such as kindergartens, a school, and the shopping area on the southern perimeter of the housing estate. However, after the collapse of the USSR and due to the population crisis in the 1990s, half of the kindergarten facilities were not under demand and were thus transformed to other non-social functions, such as private offices, and one building was reconstructed into a residential block. New functions did not

stimulate inhabitants to take up an active presence in their living areas. Moreover, the demand for kindergartens increased drastically after 2010, since no new facilities had been built in the large housing estate. Since the primary use of the kindergarten buildings in the microdistrict has been lost between the time of construction and the present, the functions now need to be restored, along with the introduction of new functions on the territory to promote diversity. "Differences, not duplication, make for cross-use" (Jacobs 1961: 130). The case of the post-socialist microdistrict also has a problem of duplication of buildings not only with a residential function, but also with a public function. This means the kindergartens are all buildings constructed according to one project series. This kind of "duplication" does not organize diversity in the territory. The type of diversity of new functions that has to be introduced into the area is the kind that may bring "the mixture of people on a street" (Jacobs 1961: 164) and the active presence of inhabitants.

The concept of short blocks may foresee the organization of smaller neighborhoods in a microdistrict. As the size of the microdistrict is not small and it cannot be compared with a micro-space in the living environment, the territory of the microdistrict does not work as a neighborhood. The Soviet urban planning theory substituted the meaning of neighborhood with a large planning residential unit with 7,000–10,000 residents, or up to 17,500 residents in cities with a population of more than one million people, like the city of Kharkiv. The larger scale of microrayon erased the neighboring connections between inhabitants. A smaller scale inside the microdistrict could be achieved using the concept of short blocks and frequent streets: "Frequent streets [. . .] generate diversity" (Jacobs 1961: 186). In addition, one of the conditions for generating diversity summarizes the necessity of short blocks, stating that "streets and opportunities to turn corners must be frequent" (Jacobs 1961: 150).

Jacobs's concept of generators of diversity in large cities is stated as the focus of the book. The need to fulfill conditions of diversity is the most important thesis presented in the book by Jane Jacobs (2011: 162). These conditions are very important for the case study of Microrayon #5 in Kharkiv because the post-socialist housing area faces similar issues and problems in how it functions. "The district, and indeed as many of its internal parts as possible, must serve more than one primary function; preferably more than two" (Jacobs 1961: 150). The typical dispersion of the functions within the territory of the microdistrict includes no more than two functions in any particular zone: residential and commerce in the perimeter of the area, residential and education in the middle of the microdistrict, and residential and low-quality recreation between the

housing blocks. The diversity of functions “must insure the presence of people who go outdoors on different schedules and are in the place for different purposes, but who are able to use many facilities in common” (Jacobs 1961: 150). However, the existing primary functions in the case study do not stimulate the presence of inhabitants in the streets within the area. “There must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people, for whatever purposes they may be there. This includes dense concentration in the case of people who are there because of residence.” (Jacobs 1961: 151).

The problem of an insecure living environment appears in the case study in places with a small concentration of residents within the microdistrict. Thus, the need to concentrate residents becomes as important as ensuring the diversity of functions and having short blocks. As a residential area of prefabricated housing, the case study site has been planned according to the concept of free planning following the rules of lateral orientation. The buildings erected here typically have some sides without windows. The streets may be planned in such a way that buildings face the streets and have side facades without windows. This type of planning causes problems with safety on the streets. This type of planning mostly appears inside the microdistricts near buildings with other primary functions, such as schools or kindergartens. These streets and sidewalks need a greater concentration of people. “No concentration of residents, however high it may be, is ‘sufficient’ if diversity is suppressed or thwarted by other insufficiencies.” (Jacobs 1961: 205).

Jane Jacobs declares “the task is to promote the city life of city people, housed, let us hope, in concentrations both dense enough and diverse enough to offer them a decent chance at developing city life” (1961: 221). This statement pertains to contemporary post-socialist large housing estates because the architectural monotony diminishes the development of the residential areas while simultaneously fostering new chaotic functions. A next stage of development could be introduced in the area, starting with the complex renovation of buildings and complex interventions in the residential area. A concept of regeneration should be developed for large post-socialist housing estates that is based on the principles needed to bring about a new level of quality in the environment.

This research shows one of the ways for creating a concept of regeneration that fosters the development of images and identities of Ukraine’s post-socialist housing estates by building on analysis based on Jane Jacobs’s book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. To summarize, the research and analysis of the case studies of the large post-socialist estate in Kharkiv, carried

out on the basis of Jane Jacobs's concepts, led to the following conclusions: (a) diversity in functions—could stimulate new images of active presence of inhabitants in their living areas, adding new functions to the microdistrict; (b) short blocks—may develop opportunities for frequent strolls in microrayons, and trigger new identities for smaller communities within the microdistricts; (c) generators of diversity, variety in buildings' age and condition—density increases when new housing blocks are built in the large housing estate, while the post-socialist prefab housing continues to be of low quality, thus negatively impacting otherwise positive images and identities; and (d) more secure living environment and resuscitation of living areas—the large housing estates need renewal of the functions along the sidewalks, local parks for higher security, and communication as positive social aspects for the people in the prefabricated neighborhoods.

This paper focuses on the development of new methodologies for the studies of large post-socialist housing estates within the interdisciplinary framework of fundamental urban literature. The socialist approach to the urban planning of residential areas aimed to use prefabricated apartment blocks as a low-cost construction method that resulted in monotony and total replication of typical projects. Now we see that this approach does not work for the city in terms of reaching the goal of diversity. "No one way is a good way to house a city neighborhood; no mere two or three ways are good. The more variations there can be, the better." (Jacobs 1961: 214).

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