6. Large Housing Estates: A Place to Call "Home"

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The oddly titled Russian romantic comedy from the late 1970s, *Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath*—still a New Year's Eve favorite to watch in Russia—offers one of the most piercingly hilarious commentaries on the soul-wrenching monotony and drab uniformity of large socialist housing estates. The story begins with a group of friends celebrating New Year's Eve at a *banya* in Moscow, toasting also to the upcoming marriage of Zhenya, the main character. The vodka-soaked party culminates in confusion and the intoxicated protagonist—who was supposed to go home to celebrate with his soon to be wife—is shipped off by mistake to Leningrad (St. Petersburg). Zhenya is too drunk to notice that he is not in Moscow when he gets off the plane. He catches a taxi and gives his Moscow address to the driver. It turns out that in Leningrad there is also a street with the same name as his street in Moscow, and the building at the address looks exactly like Zhenya's. Thanks to the overarching standardization of housing construction, his key even fits into the standardized lock of the apartment. As the mass-produced furniture in the apartment is also nearly identical to Zhenya's, he dismisses minor differences and crashes out in the bedroom. When the actual tenant of the apartment, a young woman, comes home and finds a stranger sleeping in her bed, the screwball comedy truly takes off.

The film actually starts with a short animated sequence depicting how architects ended up with nondescript tower blocks as a result of unrelenting bureaucratic interventions and how these monstrous buildings took over the landscape. In the opening scenes, the narrator then highlights, tongue in cheek, the blessings of this brave new world: "In the past, when people found themselves in a strange city, they felt lost and lonely. Everything around was different: streets and buildings, even life. But now this has changed. A person comes to another city and immediately feels at home there"—given that everything looks exactly the same.

Although I grew up in an apartment block in a socialist new town in 1970s Hungary that was dominated by prefabricated housing estates, I never mixed up my block with another, not even as a small child. Ironically, however, an incident similar to the one in the film did occur to me in the United States, when I was a graduate student at Princeton University at the turn of the millennium. One year, I decided to stay for the summer and sublet a place in Butler Apartments, a university-owned development of single-story barracks-style units that was originally built in 1946/47 as temporary housing for students who enrolled at Princeton, thanks to the so-called G.I. Bill, which provided support to war veterans to pursue a university education. These buildings served as housing for graduate students and their families until 2012, when the university finally decided to tear them down. During the first week of my stay, I walked home in the afternoon and was caught by surprise when my key didn't open the front door of the bungalow. I tried to fiddle with the lock and force the key to work, getting increasingly irritated, when all of a sudden the door was opened by a frightened man—apparently the unit's tenant, who thought I was about to break into his home. It turned out that I was trying to get into the wrong building. The identical barracks, peppered on a large tract with no clear street structure, fooled me in a way socialist prefab apartment blocks had never done.

My personal experience is a reminder that large prefabricated housing developments are not unique to post-socialist cities. Though architecturally different, standardized prefabricated homes are also the staple of endless subdivisions stretching across the suburbs of American cities. Suburban model homes have received their share of criticism for their cookie-cutter looks, shoddy quality, and the alienating lifestyles they generate, as memorialized in the iconic song "Little Boxes" by folk and blues singer Malvina Reynolds. Her deceptively cheerful melody describes the "little boxes on the hillside" that are "made of ticky tacky" and "all look just the same," and they are full of people who "went to the university, where they were put in boxes, and they came out all the same."[1] Malvina Reynolds's political satire of the development of American suburbia, with its conformist, white middle class, is in fact not all that different from the political satire of Brezhnev-era public housing in the USSR put forward in *Irony of Fate*.

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1 The song's lyrics can be found at http://www.malvinareynolds.com/mr094.htm. The song has made a comeback in the early 2000s as the theme song of the popular TV show *Weeds*.

At the same time, the widely held assumption that large housing estates are overwhelmingly desolate places where it is hard to feel at home reveals important biases about the architecture, the neighborhoods, and the communities that inhabit them. It calls attention to how these estates have been predominantly investigated from a top-down perspective by architects, planners, social scientists, and policymakers (e.g., Csizmady 2003, 2008; Egedy 2000; Körner and Nagy 2006; van Kempen et al. 2005; Preisich 1998; Szelényi and Konrád 1969). It is usually outsiders who find it difficult to fathom how large housing estates can serve as a place to call home while residents often exhibit strong attachment to them. This in part reflects how large housing estates have tended to be examined from a bird's eye-view—a totalizing and detached perspective on the city, as described by Michel de Certeau (1984) in *The Practice of Everyday Life* using the view of Manhattan from the 100th floor of the former World Trade Center as an illustration. Large housing estates have always been considered a place to be acted on and to be dealt with: a utopian fantasy, a social engineering project, or a site of decay and social problems. Even the sporadic ethnographic studies that have tried to capture residents' lived experiences in the estates from below focus on them as hotbeds of pathological behavior and deviance: crime, drugs, gangs, and youth delinquency (e.g., Rácz and Hoyer 1995; Venkatesh 2002).[2]

In other words, large housing estates have been primarily understood as "spaces" rather than "places." The distinction between space and place is a key analytical tool in sociological and anthropological research. Place, in contrast with the abstract notion of space, is a "qualitative, historically specific configuration, incorporating a sense of individuals' rootedness in locale and the dependence of their memory on the particularities of the physical and cultural environment. Furthermore, place refers to the circumstances that agents are not merely located at a simple point in a grid, but occupy and define the world through unfolding practice" (Jordan 2003:31; see also Biernacki and Jordan 2002).[3] Place therefore is "space made meaningful," shedding light on how people appropriate spaces they inhabit through their subjective experiences and meaning making practices.

2 And more recently, in (former East) Germany they are seen as breeding grounds for right-wing extremism (Shoshan 2016).

3 There is also a large anthropological literature on place attachment (e.g., Low 1992, 2009).

Understanding large housing estates as "home" therefore requires a bottom-up approach that explores them from the natives'—that is, the residents'—point of view. Currently, there is a remarkable dearth of scholarly literature that goes beyond simplistic survey research in probing residents' perceptions of everyday life in these neighborhoods.[4] Interestingly, while social scientists have largely failed to provide balanced accounts of the social complexities of life in the estates, Central and Eastern European cinema has produced a range of popular and art house films that captured a more nuanced view of how life unfolded in socialist housing estates. Some of the early classics, like the Hungarian *Two Stories of Happiness*, were undoubtedly coopted by state propaganda efforts. But many of the films made in the 1970s and 1980s delivered uncompromising insights into the everyday joys and struggles of the inhabitants, as well as the mundane absurdities of "real existing socialism." Films in which the story centered around large prefabricated housing estates marked important milestones in the career of some of the true luminaries of Central European cinema, including Vera Chytilova, Jiři Menzel, Béla Tarr, and Krzysztof Kieślowski.[5] Similarly, *Szomszédok* (Neighbors), which followed the life of several families who lived in *Gazdagrét*, a large prefabricated Budapest housing estate, and spanned 331 episodes from 1987 to 1999, remains one of the longest-running soap operas in Hungarian television history.

The first step towards appreciating large housing estates as places involves treating them as singular and unique rather than simply individual exemplars of the same generic housing type. The large Budapest housing estate *Gazdagrét*, set in the hills of Buda, is vastly different from the stigmatized *Havanna* estate on the eastern fringes of the Pest side of the city, just as *Marzahn-Hellersdorf* in Berlin has little in common with the prefabricated high-rises on Fischerinsel in the immediate proximity of Berlin's historical center. Each estate is a historically specific configuration and needs to be understood in its distinct social, cultural, and urban context. This is all the more important because it is often precisely these idiosyncratic local features that are responsible for making the estates livable and creating a sense of identity and home. Architects and urban planners have, of course, tried to discern a set of parameters that help determine the value of housing estates and explain how this varies from one estate

4 For a notable exception, see Fehérváry (2013), although her focus is not exclusively on large housing estates.

5 Vera Chytilova's *Prefab Story*, Béla Tarr's *Family Nest* (*Családi Tűzfészek*), and Krzysztof Kieszlowski's *Dekalog* are key examples for this body of work.

to the other. The Hungarian urban planner Melinda Benkő (2015), for instance, devised the following "matrix of material values" that operate at three scales: building, neighborhood, and city (see Table 1).

Table 1: Matrix of Material Values in Three Scales.

City of Budapest	Neighborhood	Building
Location	Urban form	Apartment
Position within the city	Road network	Size
Natural characteristics	Land use	Spatial division
Proximity	Built volume	Wet area
Infrastructure	Facilities	Technology
Energy	Culture and education	Comfort
Water	Health and leisure activities	Panel structure
Waste	Commerce	Materials
Mobility	Open space use	Common spaces
Public transport	Territoriality	Doorway
Car	Green area	Staircase
Accessibility	Motorization	roof

Source: Melinda Benkő, 2015. "Budapest's Large Prefab Housing Estates: Urban Values of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow." Hungarian Studies 29(1/2):21–36.

Despite her nuanced contextual approach, she still surveys housing estates from above.[6] When urban planners pledge to take place-making practices more seriously in large housing estates, they mostly do so by advocating participatory planning in regeneration efforts (Benkő, Balla, and Hory 2018). Participatory paradigms were not really part of the urban planning repertoire of post-socialist countries until the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. Between 2004 and 2007, important changes were introduced into the urban planning codes of the new EU member states, making participatory planning a basic requirement in every project financed directly or indirectly

6 This approach also assumes that the physical characteristics of the estates can be decoupled from their social characteristics.

by the EU. Thus participatory planning is also launched as a top-down bureaucratic measure, thereby reinforcing the dominant approach to large housing estates.[7] Similarly, contemporary planners who care about large housing estates tend to focus primarily on sustainability as a progressive goal rather than livability (Benkő 2015; Benkő, Balla, and Hory 2018).

As described above, aptly capturing how large housing estates become a place to call home would require an ethnographic perspective that centers on residents' self-understandings of their relationship to this environment. Alas, in lieu of such first-hand empirical data, I can also only just tentatively outline a few key factors that I believe contribute to generating a sense of belonging in these residential areas in the post-socialist period. Drawing chiefly on the example of Hungary, I will discuss four such factors in the following sections: the impact of large-scale privatization of prefabricated apartments and how it has allowed for the individualization of the standardized units; the long-term stabilization and increasingly upward trend of the real estate value of prefabricated homes; the gradual upgrading of public open spaces; and the aesthetic dimension of energy efficiency upgrades to prefabricated buildings.

Home Improvements through Privatization and a Sense of Ownership

The swift and nearly all-encompassing privatization of the housing stock in Hungary in the early 1990s benefitted the sitting tenant and turned prefabricated housing blocks into self-governing condominiums (Bodnár 1996; Broulíková and Montag 2020).[8] Sitting tenants could purchase their residential units for about 10–15 percent of the market price, but they also became responsible for the full maintenance of the building as well as the general upkeep and improvements of collectively owned areas and facilities such as staircases, roofs, facades, and mechanical and electrical installations. Besides,

7 This attitude is also reflected in how planners scold residents for not being interested or active, "waiting for changes to be made by leaders," lamenting that the "real culture of participatory place-making is still missing in the post-Communist context" (Benkő, Balla, and Hory 2018:223).

8 In Hungary, the state actually already facilitated private home ownership with extensive state subsidies and mortgage schemes in the 1980s, before the collapse of socialism. The share of owner-occupied units in large housing estates could reach as high as 30% of all units (Benkő 2015:186).

they had to face escalating utility bills as price regulation was lifted and state-owned public utility companies were privatized as part of the post-socialist market transition. As a result of the rapid privatization, owner-occupied housing made up 90 percent of the Hungarian housing stock by 2000. This figure compares with 74 percent in Ireland, 68 percent in the US and 40 percent in Germany (Bohle 2014:923; Bodnár and Molnár 2010).

Sweeping privatization transformed Hungary into a "super home ownership" state, creating long-term ripple effects for the Hungarian housing market. Very high levels of private home ownership made Hungarian households vulnerable to financialization and a quickly emerging mortgage market that became dominated by foreign currency mortgages after 2004, as state subsidies were gradually phased out (Bohle 2014; Pellandini-Simányi, Hammer, and Vargha 2015). Expanding foreign currency mortgages exposed households to the vagaries of global financial markets and the financial crash of 2008 brought about Hungary's own "subprime mortgage crisis" with staggering levels of indebtedness and a flurry of foreclosures. The ensuing housing poverty became a cornerstone of social inequality in Hungary (Gagyi and Vigvari 2018).

Despite the enormous risks, private home ownership remains a deeply ingrained cultural value in Hungarian society. While large-scale housing privatization has created a myriad of adverse effects and basically wiped out social housing, it also generated a sense of ownership that vested even residents of large prefabricated housing estates with individual agency to turn their apartments into homes of their own. As owners, it made sense for residents to invest in major renovations and modernizations, tailoring apartments to the actual needs of the dwellers. Residents also devised various strategies to extend the square footage of often-tiny apartments and create "defensible space" (Newman 1972) also in common areas.

Enclosing the apartment's balcony to gain some more habitable space became one of the most popular expansion strategies. A significant niche market developed among contractors to provide this service to residents of prefabricated apartments. These construction projects were commissioned by apartment owners and completed by different contractors using diverse materials, colors, and design. As a result, the facades of the buildings were transformed into a random patchwork of variously enclosed and unenclosed balconies, disrupting the standardized uniformity of the prefabricated exterior wall panels (fig. 1). These modifications are informal interventions by individual owners; they are not reviewed, regulated, or coordinated by the condominium. Although they contribute to creating a sense of place from the point of view of

residents, they often give a makeshift and disorderly impression to outsiders, reinforcing a negative image of prefabricated housing estates (see also Benkő, Balla, and Hory 2018). Architects and urban planners have been particularly critical and condescending of these practices, continuing a long tradition in these professions in Hungary that has regarded efforts by ordinary citizens to personalize their homes with elitist derision (Molnár 2013).

Figure 1: Informal balcony enclosures.

Source: https://erkelybeepitespecs.hu/#erk%C3%A9ly-ablakokkal.

In some cases, residents embarked on carving out communal spaces for a children's playroom, event space, or a DIY workshop, but more frequently they created private enclosures in communal areas. Gating off an area in front of the entrance of an apartment to create some storage space and extra security became a common way to "privatize" parts of the building hallway. These individ-

ual appropriations were informal, technically illegal, but generally tolerated, though certainly a constant source of tension among neighbors.

Real Estate Value and Quality of Life

The 1990s were dominated by doom-and-gloom scenarios regarding the future of large housing estates. Planners, sociologists, and real estate professionals predicted a downward spiral for the residents, the buildings, and the neighborhoods, due to the financial precarity of the tenants-turned-owners, rising utility costs, difficulties with properly maintaining the condominium from owners' contributions, and the lack of financial reserves, loans, and state grants for modernizing building infrastructure. News media incessantly perpetuated a negative image of large housing estates, describing them as a "prefab trap" (*panelcsapda*) that offered only a dead end to new buyers and old residents. Real estate advice columns appeared with headings such as: "A prefab apartment will push you into misery and abject poverty, run as far away as you can!"[9] The pejorative connotations of prefabricated housing were even incorporated into the larger symbolic vocabulary of the transition: "the losers" of the post-socialist transition, facing downward social mobility, were often referred to simply as *panelproli*, that is, a "prole from the prefab projects." The bleak outlook continued into the 2000s, when a new housing type, the so-called residential park appeared in Budapest (Bodnár and Molnár 2010). This high-density residential newcomer was in many ways the upgraded and upscaled, twenty-first century version of the large housing estate: newly built with modern materials, "American" kitchens, spacious balconies, underground parking, offering a range of amenities including 24-hour security surveillance, and—in many cases—physical gates. Theses new developments were projected to siphon off the remaining better-off residents from socialist era housing estates, leaving only the poor and struggling behind. And then, in 2008, the global financial meltdown, which left the Hungarian housing market in tatters and pushed homeowners holding foreign currency mortgages into foreclosures and personal bankruptcy, appeared to deliver the last blow to large housing estates.

Yet, the tide turned quite unexpectedly in the 2010s, and large prefabricated estates have been experiencing a remarkable renaissance in the past five

9 "A panellakás nyomorba dönt, meneküljön ki merre lát!" https://www.penzcentrum.hu/otthon/a-panel-nyomorba-dont-menekuljon-ki-merre-lat.99918.html

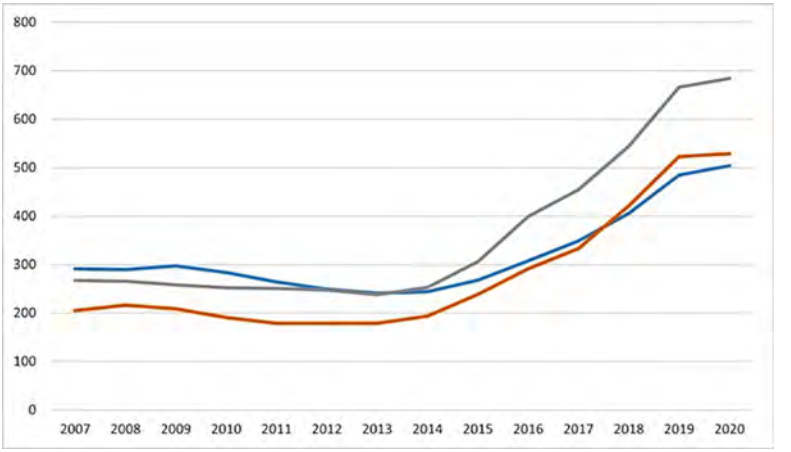
to six years. This comeback is reflected, for instance, in the sharp rise of real estate prices in this housing segment (fig. 2). Given the general characteristics of the Budapest housing market and the high levels of owner-occupied housing in Hungary, real estate prices do convey meaningful information about the quality of life housing estates offer. Figure 2 shows that the steep appreciation of prefabricated apartments began in 2014, and prices have increased in the double digits every year, by roughly 17–30 percent in the past six years. The two most popular apartment types—a studio (35 m^2) and a one-bedroom (53 m^2)—have nearly tripled in value. The average price of a studio went from 6.4 million HUF in 2013 to 19.7 million HUF in 2020 and the price of the one-bedroom went from 8.5 million HUF in 2013 to 24.7 million HUF in 2020.[10] The price, of course, varies by the physical condition of the apartment and the location of the estate, but generally the average price per square meter in Budapest ranges from 450 to 650 thousand HUF.[11] Despite setbacks inflicted by the pandemic, apartments in prefabricated housing estates remain one of the most popular housing types on the market.

Thus homes in large housing estates have become increasingly marketable, signaling palpable demand from buyers who find them an attractive housing option. Affordability is, undoubtedly, one of the key selling points, but not the only one. Most housing estates in Budapest are well connected to the city center by public transportation. Buildings are surrounded by parks and playgrounds. Basic services such as grocery stores or drug stores as well as day care centers and public schools can be reached within walking distance. In addition, larger shopping malls and discount big-box stores that burgeoned in the post-socialist period were built in close proximity to large housing estates, improving the availability of shopping and service options. State-sponsored schemes launched in 2000 made subsidies available to condominiums for upgrading the energy efficiency of buildings, thereby significantly lowering utility bills and maintenance costs. Apartments tend to be small but have functional layouts, unlike many of their counterparts in prewar apartment buildings in the city center. As a result, large housing estates have emerged as a viable option for starter homes for singles or young families or as popular rentals for university students.

10 https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/06/11/ingatlan_lakaspiac_panellakas

11 Predictably, the real estate market was disrupted by the pandemic and prices started to drop across the board, but for prefabricated apartments, prices had gone down by only 2% by the end of 2020.

Figure 2: Price of Pre-Owned Homes in Budapest, 2007–2020 by square meter in thousand Hungarian Forints (HUF).



Source: Compiled by Ágnes Szanyi, based on housing market data from the Central Statistical Office of Hungary.

Rising real estate prices have also contributed to important shifts in the cultural representation and reputation of large housing estates. In sharp contrast to the 1990s, today housing estates are not portrayed exclusively with derision. These days, home and design magazines frequently publish home makeover stories featuring prefabricated apartments in housing estates, depicting them as "youthful," "adaptable," "modern and livable homes." And interestingly, younger generations, born after 1989, tend to be less prejudiced against living in housing estates than their parents' generation, which still closely associates prefabricated apartments with alienation and social decline.

In the southern Hungarian city of Pécs, the Marcel Breuer Doctoral School of Architecture at the University of Pécs, working in collaboration with the local company that supplies heat to large housing estates (PÉTÁV kft.), organized a competition in 2014 titled "Creative Prefab" (*Kreatív Panel*). They invited residents of large prefabricated housing estates to submit design tips and remodeling solutions they had implemented to make their apartments more habitable. The award winners were interviewed to share their thoughts on what made them feel at home in a housing estate. One of them stressed that "a lot depends on where the apartment actually is. A place where residents make up

a mindful community, where the hallways are kept clean and residents respect each other, will be a nice place to live." Moreover, "the apartment is only one factor, the other key factor is carefully planned, high quality public areas that surround the apartments, which in turn shape the residents. [. . .] The renewal of public spaces fosters a reevaluation of social relations, creating sustainable synapses [. . .] Something as simple as fixing the street and adding a bicycle lane can provide incentive to residents to think about what they can do to improve their own personal environment within their apartment." To him the "main prize" is "when the community's sense of well-being improves and everyone feels at home in their apartments" (Panelkommandó 2015).[12]

Similarly, a father of three children, who received a special prize for designing a multifunctional children's room, has lived in large housing estates all his life. He notes that for his family, the main advantage of living in a prefab estate is the residential community that offers plenty of stimuli: "we live in a place that is enclosed by buildings, there are two playgrounds right in front of us where every day we interact with residents, adults as much as children, who live in the area. We don't live cut off from others by walls and fences; we can be part of a community here" (Panelkommandó 2015). In his view, people who live in large housing estates pick their homes primarily based on the neighborhood, on the availability of grocery stores, drug stores, school, daycare, access to public transportation, and public safety. His family would also ideally prefer to live in a spacious single family home and keep domestic animals. But as "we cannot afford this, we are trying to enjoy ourselves at home. This is why we are doing our best to turn our apartment into a home."

Another special award recipient was relatively new to large housing estates, having grown up in a single family home. Not having to mow the lawn was certainly a plus in his view. To the question of how he saw the changing public image of housing estates, he replied: "I have yet to meet someone who is dying to live in a prefab estate. And I second this position. But prefab homes can be made livable" (Panelkommandó 2015). He added that he was impressed by the competition entries and would gladly move into any of the apartments he saw. He thought the competition was a good way to motivate homeowners to make improvements to their apartments.

The responses of the participants in the "Creative Prefab" competition underscore how hard it is to generalize across housing estates about what

12 For this and other quotations originally made in Hungarian: English translation by author.

works and what does not. Quality of life in large housing estates differs along many characteristics as shown in Table 1 (Benkő 2015). These contextual differences are increasingly reflected in real estate prices with a growing gap between lower and higher status estates.[13] At the same time, it is ironical, for instance, that even the new residential parks that threatened to undermine prefabricated housing estates ended up contributing to their appreciation. Namely, these new residential parks were often erected near prefabricated estates, increasing the location's real estate value, from which the latter also benefited.

Playgrounds as a Catalyst for Upgrading Public Spaces

Many of the residents quoted in the previous section stressed how integral high quality public spaces are to the sense of well-being in housing estates. The built-up area in large prefabricated housing estates is about 20–25 percent in Hungary, following the Soviet standard of the times in which they were constructed. In the course of privatization in the 1990s, residential buildings plus the so-called floating plot (a one-meter strip around the building) became private while the remainder of the land was kept public or semipublic (Benkő, Balla, and Hory 2018). The public areas, as well as public institutions—schools, daycare centers, nursing homes, cultural centers—are maintained by the local government. The lack of proper upkeep of public spaces was a concern under socialism and increasingly so after 1989. In many large housing estates, public spaces continued to decline in tandem with the buildings throughout the 1990s, increasingly raising alarm about public safety in these neighborhoods. Things started to turn around in the early 2000s and one impetus for change arose from the need to upgrade public playgrounds. In fact, bringing playgrounds in compliance with European Union standards became an unlikely catalyst for the renewal of public spaces in large housing estates.

EU child safety standards for playgrounds were first introduced in Hungary in 1999. At the time, they were not yet legally binding but merely recommendations in anticipation of Hungary's impending accession into the European Union. Then, after 2004 when Hungary joined the EU, the new standards acquired legal force and had to be implemented. The EU gave a four-year grace

13 https://g7.hu/adat/20190621/ketteszakadt-a-budapesti-panelmezony-mar-nem-a-pok-utca-a-legdragabb-lakotelep/

period, eventually extended to six years, to bring all playgrounds up to EU standards. Playgrounds that failed to meet these new standards by 2010 had to be dismantled. These new regulations forced local municipal governments to invest in redesigning and rebuilding old playgrounds, mostly relics from the socialist era.

Playgrounds in socialist times had little concern for child safety. They were paved with gravel, or even concrete, swings were too close to each other with unsafe seats, and slides were too steep and too narrow. Playground equipment in the 1970s was overwhelmingly made of tubular metal, with a space rocket and a globe-shaped climbing structure being among the most popular fixtures (fig. 3). The tubular metal gave way to elaborately themed playground structures made of wood in the 1980s—like the "Indian village" (i.e., Native American) in the Tahi street housing estate in Budapest, catering to teenagers raised on Karl May's pulp fiction novels of the American Wild West. Wooden equipment, however, quickly deteriorated due to wear and tear, and due to weather, exposing children to all sorts of lurking physical dangers.

Hence, the implementation of new EU standards required a complete overhaul of playground design and equipment. The new rules, for instance, only permit soft groundcover, such as rubber tiles or sand, to cushion children from falls. Materials used for playground structures, and their placement, are closely regulated; playground equipment, in fact, has to be certified piece by piece (fig. 4). Funds from the state and the EU to support remodeling efforts were limited, so local governments had to prioritize resources for the rebuilding of playgrounds. In the case of Budapest, for instance, local district governments were desperately short of funding for this purpose, so the central Budapest city government had to provide relief and mobilize funds to facilitate the upgrading process.[14] Inadvertently, playground renovations produced a spillover effect for public space renewal. Local governments increasingly tried to combine these projects with other improvements to the public areas of housing estates, including fixing sidewalks and streets, regenerating green areas, adding flower beds, introducing sprinkler systems and other irrigation solutions for these areas, or reorganizing traffic and parking patterns to better serve residents. Comprehensive projects became the norm by the 2010s, coinciding with and

14 In 2006, for instance, the Budapest city government spent 1.2 billion HUF helping local district governments to bring playgrounds in compliance with EU standards, a task normally not within its jurisdiction.

reinforcing rising real estate prices for prefabricated apartments and the general upward trend of this segment in the housing market.[15]

Figure 3: Space rocket climbing structure in a socialist-era playground in Újpalota, Budapest, in the 1970s.
Figure 4: The "EU-conform" version of the space rocket in a playground opened in Csepel, Budapest, in 2020.

Source: https://fokert150.hu/2017/08/24/raketa-maszoka-regen-es-ma/.
Source: https://budapestkornyeke.hu/felmilliardos-szupermodern-jatszoteret-adtak-at-csepelen-wifi-es-uv-sugarzas-kijelzot-is-van/.

The Aesthetics of Energy Efficiency

In the first decade of the post-socialist era, forecasts for the trajectory of large housing estates were grim in large part because there was little hope that the physically (and socially) deteriorating estates would be modernized. This was especially true for much needed but costly investments in energy efficiency upgrades, given that former tenants who bought the apartments generally lacked the resources to fund projects beyond covering basic maintenance costs.

It was not until 2000 that the Hungarian government established the so-called "Panel Program" (*Panelprogram*) to provide financial support for tech-

15 https://www.budapest13.hu/2016/07/08/tovabb-szepulnek-a-lakotelepi-kozteruleteink/

nical renovations to prefabricated buildings. The goal was to improve energy efficiency by installing exterior insulation, replacing windows, and modernizing heating systems. This program was updated in 2005 under the new moniker "Panel Plusz," which proceeded in three consecutive phases launched in 2008, 2009, and 2014, respectively. By 2015, about one third of the prefabricated housing stock was renovated through this program (Benkő 2015). Financing followed the "one-third rule," referring to a cofinancing scheme according to which one third of the costs are born by the Panel Program, one-third (if feasible) by the local municipal government, and one third by the condominium (Szabó and Bene 2019).[16]

While the renewal of open spaces and of public institutions were also supported in later phases of the program, regeneration efforts focused chiefly on improving the energy efficiency of buildings. Comprehensive urban regeneration programs that were launched in Western Europe for social housing in large estates (e.g., Droste et al. 2014) could not be replicated in Hungary, not just because of the shortage of resources but because of the ownership structure, that is, the high levels of private ownership and condominium form. Owners of the apartments all have to support the renovation and contribute to the costs based on their respective ownership share in the condominium. In the largest prefabricated building in the country—situated along the bank of the Danube on the Buda side in Budapest and nicknamed the "Village House"—there were 886 owners who had to agree to and participate in the renovation efforts. This has also meant that improvements realized through the Panel Program can be felt primarily at the scale of the building, not at the scale of the housing estate or the neighborhood (see also Benkő 2015).

One exception to this rule is the aesthetic effect achieved by the installation of exterior insulation, which also involves revamping the facade of the building: covering the gray precast concrete slabs by plastering the facade (fig. 5). The new, plastered surface often incorporates decorative patterns composed of various colors to enliven the buildings and light up the mood in the neighborhood. It has to be noted, though, that these renovations are done on very tight budgets and the aesthetic composition of the facade is not a priority budget item. In fact, the color scheme used might be a pragmatic function of what leftover paint colors the contractor has available at the time of the job. Facades

16 In Phase II, the state relied on its carbon-emission quota to fund this program and state subsidies could reach as high as 60% of the costs. In Phase III, EU funds were also made available to complement carbon emission revenue (Szabó and Bence 2019).

are also often painted with lighter colors because the paint for them is cheaper than for darker colors (which would otherwise be more durable as they would withstand the effects of pollution longer). Yet, this camouflage technique significantly improves the perception of housing estates among their residents as well as members of the larger public, who might only get a glimpse of the buildings while riding by in a car or on the suburban rail. After decades of radiating grayness onto the cityscape, the colorful blocks now appear more livable and relatable; a place that could even be called a home.

Figure 5: Installing the exterior insulation on the largest prefabricated building in Hungary, the so-called Village House in Óbuda, Budapest.

Source: https://24.hu/tudomany/2016/11/18/igy-is-csokkentheti-rezsijet-tippek-regi-lakasok-szamara/, *photo:* MTI / Barnabás Honéczy.

Conclusion

Asking what makes large prefabricated housing estates feel like a home is important because it forces a change of perspective from a dominantly top-bottom to a bottom-up view of this housing type and its urban ecosystem. It calls for treating large housing estates as unique historical and social configurations—as places rather than spaces—and giving voice to residents, not just to architects and policymakers. Residents' voices must be captured through ethnographic approaches, oral history, and storytelling. The architect Esra Akcan's work on open architecture in Kreuzberg, Berlin, in the context of the urban renewal of the IBA 1984/87 project shows a promising example of how this can be done (2018). The shift of perspective also helps to shed some critical light on the role of architects, urban planners, sociologists, and policymakers. These professions have actively shaped the image and perception of large housing estates for the state, media, and the public at large, often contributing to the stigmatization of this housing form and its residents. Paying more attention to the "native's point of view" will provide a much-needed corrective to the largely totalizing gaze through which these estates are still viewed.

The examples surveyed in this analysis highlight key structural conditions (e.g., privatization, high ratio of private ownership) and some small-scale interventions (e.g., informal enclosure of balconies) that have influenced a sense of home in large prefabricated housing estates. Informal and small-scale interventions are especially significant in the post-socialist context in general and in Hungary in particular because the ownership structure imposes serious constraints on changes to the physical environment. So, for instance, as impressive and inspiring as the public housing regeneration efforts of recent Pritzker prize winners Anne Lacaton and Jean Phillippe Vassal are—such as the overhaul of a 1960s social housing project with 530 dwellings in Bordeaux—similar comprehensive projects are not conceivable in many countries of Eastern Europe where the rapid, extensive, and reckless privatization of the housing stock has left the new owners of prefabricated apartments with limited options.

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