

# 14. Reimagining Housing Estates and the Nexus of Planning and Policy

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## Introduction

This contribution focuses on the future of postwar housing estates and provides a compelling rationale for the need to mobilize economic and social capital to reinvent these places into vibrant neighborhoods. The issue is particularly critical for the post-socialist world of cities, where 53 million apartments in large housing estates are the home of 170 million people. These suburbs, planned according to modernist planning principles, were the flagship of socialist housing and planning policies. The paper highlights the importance of housing estates in the spatial structure of post-socialist cities and argues for a strategic approach to their revitalization. It explores some of the challenges of the spatial and social evolution in the housing estates in the context of rapid transition to markets and democracy.

The research views the housing estates as a spatial arena of adjustment where transition imperatives of structural reforms, private sector growth, and fiscal austerity crowded out efforts to maintain housing as an important element of the welfare state. The practical implementation of the reforms across countries, mirrored in their macroeconomic performance and prolonged recessions, resulted in mass privatization of housing in the estates, runaway house-price inflation, deterioration, and nonexistent housing management. In the privatization aftermath, the transformation of housing estates in post-socialist cities is a complex urban challenge that reflects social, economic, and institutional drivers of change in these societies. The final section of the paper outlines an important strategy for the revitalization of post-socialist housing estates that builds on the planning-policy partnership nexus. Recognizing that different housing estates have distinct characteristics, this framework

offers a blueprint for diverse implementation through action planning and the opportunity to transition from ad hoc project-based intervention to strategic management of revitalization programs and plans in post-socialist cities.

## **Housing Estates in Post-Socialist Cities: Asset or Liability**

Post-socialist cities have a very distinct residential environment dominated by a high share of high-density prefabricated multifamily housing built in the urban periphery (Bertaud and Renaud 1997). It makes up 70 percent of all housing in Bucharest, 45 percent in Sofia, and 20 percent in Ljubljana. By comparison, in Western European cities fewer than 7 percent of the people live in housing estates (EAUE 2003). This was the flagship of socialist housing policies of state-funded, highly subsidized provision of public housing for rent or sale. A standardized method of construction, economies of scale, and higher density characterize these uniform urban environments, as shown in Figure 1. These areas also lack retail and employment opportunities, so residents make long commutes to centers of employment. The contrast with traditional housing in the older villages annexed to the urban territory is stark.

At the same time, another characteristic feature of post-socialist cities is the high proportion of home ownership. In most of the capital cities, home ownership exceeds 75 percent; cities such as Tirana have reached 98 percent. While Riga and Prague have been the exceptions, privatization in the last five years has transferred another 50 percent of Riga's stock into private hands. The privatization of public housing in post-socialist Europe involved the transfer of more than three million homes within the first four years of the transition. This was in effect a huge off-budget subsidy because apartments were transferred to sitting tenants for free, in exchange for vouchers or for symbolic payment (Hegedüs et al. 1996; Struyk 2000). In countries where privatization was delayed (Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Poland), it was completed in the second phase of the transition reforms and/or left to the discretion of municipalities. In fact, in some of the poorest countries, home-ownership exceeds 95 percent.

*Figure 1: Prefabricated and traditional housing in Vilnius.*



Source: Sasha Tsenkova.

Given the nature of the housing stock and its dependence on a collective form of management, in the context of rising utility costs, social differentiation, and poverty, post-socialist cities face a serious challenge to sustain the value of their existing housing assets (see Tsenkova 2009; 2014b). Growing social polarization and the elimination of state-funded housing programs underline the pattern of poverty concentration in run-down inner city neighborhoods as well as in peri-urban areas with illegal settlements. These manifestations of social change, equally dramatic in Budapest, Moscow, Belgrade, Sofia, and Tirana, call for a renewed emphasis on public intervention to reverse the spiral of urban decline.

The affordability of housing remains the fastest-growing and most pervasive housing challenge in the region. Housing costs have increased, with significant implications for access to adequate and affordable housing, particularly for low-income groups. Recent studies indicate growing housing inequalities manifested in large shares of vacant housing (even in urban areas with growth pressures) on the one hand, and significant overcrowding in

housing of lower quality, often in the least attractive housing estates on the other (Krapp et al. 2020). Such inequalities reflect the dual nature of local housing markets in which privileged high-income households retain housing as an asset that appreciates over time while others are forced to share small apartments with extended families and relatives. The commodification of the urban housing shifted the burden of housing costs to the individual consumers, so in many post-socialist countries housing costs in relation to disposable income are comparable and even higher than the EU25 average (Eurostat 2020). For most of these countries, utility and heating expenses account for the bulk of the housing costs, whereas a small portion is expended for rent and mortgage payments. The situation is more problematic for single-person and single-parent households in urban areas, where higher prices for housing and concentration of poverty create cumulative disadvantages (Eurostat 2020).

Privatization alleviated the risk of poverty by providing mortgage-free housing to urban residents. This “shock absorber” had a significant impact on the ability to weather the social and economic hardships of the transition, particularly in highly industrialized and urbanized cities where the loss of jobs in state owned industries triggered massive unemployment. In practice, these cities embraced a top-down housing response to urbanization and industrialization during socialism, resulting in a much higher concentration of housing in high-density estates built with prefabricated methods.

## **The Institutional and Financial Deficit in Housing Management**

In the privatization aftermath, the management and rehabilitation of multifamily housing is potentially one of the largest problems facing post-socialist cities, because failure to improve its quality will result in massive structural problems in more than 40 percent of the urban housing stock. Addressing the problems in privatized multifamily housing is related to two significant challenges: institutional and financial (Tsenkova 2012). This task also illustrates the difficulties in mobilizing owners' support for investing in their own housing assets. Essentially, two alternatives emerge. In countries where the legal framework is more effective and governments leverage private investment through subsidized programs, new institutional entities (homeowners associations) are taking charge and asserting effective control over the management of their collective assets. Progress is difficult and the voices of these

new alliances (owners' associations, industry, banks, and NGOs) have gradually improved the available housing programs and made them more effective (Tsenkova 2014b). These are small gains that certainly depend on the local initiative and the social mix in each homeowners association. In most of the cases, however, owners have taken the "exit" option, either improving their own housing space but opting out of collective action, or passively withdrawing from any engagement due to social stress, poverty, or simple disengagement from any responsibilities.

The legal framework for housing privatization of multifamily housing is also critical in shaping these responses. The forerunners in privatization (Moldova, Lithuania, and Albania) were among the first countries to introduce legislation in 1991, but the legal acts governing the management of common properties were introduced a decade later. In most cases, the legal response was reactive rather than proactive, with the Czech Republic being a notable exception. In this case, the establishment of homeowners associations (condominiums) was a requirement for transferring the building, and individual privatization of apartments was not allowed. In most of the other countries, legislation failed to impose any real obligation to take responsibility for buildings and common areas, and homeowners associations exist in less than 20 percent of the privatized housing (Tsenkova 2012). Furthermore, accelerated privatization often transferred ownership of the apartments while municipalities were left with the ownership of buildings, land, and common areas. Mixed ownership is an issue in countries such as Latvia, Russia, and the Czech Republic, where owners and tenants live in the same building (Gruis et al. 2009).

In addition to institutional and legal constraints, the collective form of privatized housing from the past has a critical effect on housing management and quality. Every observer in the region concludes that the deterioration process in parts of the urban stock has reached a critical stage. Panel technologies, which featured prominently in Russia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Romania, resulted in large-scale developments with demanding requirements for their housing management. Although most urban multi-apartment housing is less than forty years old, its initial quality was not very high. Subsequently, inadequate investment in maintenance along with deferred capital repairs aggravated technical problems with leaking roofs, obsolete installations, faulty elevators, and poor wall insulation (Gruis et al. 2010; Tsenkova 2009). The energy efficiency of the stock is very low and, with the deregulation of energy costs and the elimination of subsidies, households have been faced with disproport-

tionately high costs for heating, crowding out the ability to invest in housing improvements.

Lack of adequate financing is considered a major constraint. Many owners tend to be asset rich but income poor, and are thus unable to cover the costs of major repairs (Tsenkova 2006). In most cases, multi-apartment buildings have reached this critical stage in the life cycle assessment where a major infusion of capital is needed to bring them back to standards. The buildings have poor quality and the current stream of revenues does not ensure sufficient funds for renovation and improvement of the building envelope or for energy efficiency retrofits. In addition to the institutional challenges to mobilizing collective action, it is difficult to borrow funds for major improvements, particularly for prefabricated housing (see fig. 2). Banks often request that individual owners sign a mortgage or a loan contract, making the process extremely cumbersome and costly (Tsenkova 2009). Very few countries have launched experimental programs to assist in this process (e.g., Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia).

*Figures 2.1 + 2.2: Renovation of prefabricated housing in Czech Republic and Hungary.*



Source: Sasha Tsenkova, 2013.

In Hungary, the Széchenyi Plan of 2001 aimed to mobilize the nation's resources to improve the energy efficiency of housing estates built of pre-fabricated elements as well as owner-occupied single-family housing. Two programs with a total budget of €55 million provided a 30 percent subsidy towards the cost of energy efficiency retrofits and quality improvements. The subsidy

leveraged substantial private investment and targeted the improvement of energy efficiency parameters of the buildings.

The Czech Republic offers another positive example, despite the small outreach of its panel renovation programs. The government launched two programs aiming at the rehabilitation of panel housing estates since 2001. Low-cost credits and subsidies fund up to 70 percent of the costs, while homeowners, cooperatives, and municipalities provide matching funds. Most of the borrowers (85%–90%) are housing cooperatives and homeowners associations.

## **Towards Solutions: The Planning and Housing Nexus**

The hallmark of the transition was the move to democracy and market economy, signaling major transformations in their economies and urban structure. Within cities, some of the most visible manifestations of the transition made urban politics less predictable, and also socially and economically more conservative compared to during socialist times. Local governments have an important role in shaping investment in urban infrastructure and leveraging private sector involvement through strategic planning, land use planning, and city marketing (Adair et al. 1999; Stanilov 2007). In addition, local governments retained statutory responsibility for providing and maintaining technical infrastructure and urban social services. In most cases, municipalities acquired ownership of the fixed assets of water and sewerage companies, district central heating systems, and public housing (Tosic 2005). At the same time, inflation, subsidy restructuring, and budget cuts raised the cost of urban services dramatically, leading to a growing number of unfunded mandates, particularly in the realm of social responsibilities—with long-term implications for urban residents.

Cash-constrained local governments often resorted to privatizing land, buildings, housing, and other municipal assets. Studies have found that new, market-oriented regimes adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to planning, resulting in uneven urban development (Tsenkova 2006). The new institutional actors often confront old planning rules, legislation, and policies, but the powerful socialist legacy in land use planning remained embedded in planning legislation and planning practice (Bertaud and Renaud 1997). The institutional transformation is path-dependent and does influence the success and speed of transition. Within the new realities, urban planning was transformed into

a democratic participatory process and the legacy of the socialist top-down approach was dismantled.

The ideological shifts also affected housing reforms. Across post-socialist countries, these housing reforms are far from uniform. They proceeded through “trial and error,” focusing on addressing housing market problems rather than strategic intervention (Tsenkova & French 2012). There have been limited attempts to launch more strategic interventions. All countries have housing action plans, strategies, and a myriad of “stop-and-go” housing programs, but implementation is limited and the commitment is inadequate (World Bank 2005).

While privatization of housing was popular in the first wave of the transition, subsequent phases focused on development of an adequate institutional and financial framework and new subsidy programs to make housing more affordable. Most countries rolled out mortgage subsidies to support access to homeownership, while retrofits of multifamily housing was not inevitably a priority. Because the development of housing institutions is path-dependent, it is not surprising that institutional change is inherently slow and an imbalance has arisen between creating markets and establishing appropriate supporting institutions. In the case of housing management, the institutional vacuum was significant—with detrimental consequences for the transformation of housing estates into fully functioning, privately owned entities. Gradually redefining the state and municipal role in housing requires more than their withdrawal from direct housing production, housing management, and finance. The asset transfer proved more complicated due to the collective nature of urban living in the estates, the need for support to homeowners and market agents through a transparent and effective legal system, and sound definition of rules and responsibilities. Due to the special nature of housing, it was also important to facilitate a socially efficient management system, enhancing housing quality, energy efficiency, and affordability to alleviate the social costs of the housing transition.

## **Revitalizing Housing Estates through Action Planning**

In the privatization aftermath, the transformation of housing in the post-socialist housing estates is a complex urban challenge that reflects social, economic, and institutional drivers of change in these societies. The overall transformation of housing estates is far from uniform, but reflects location, market

potential, and people's choices. Typically, estates closer to the inner city, despite being older, are more desirable locations that command higher prices, reflecting consumer choices and opportunities for access to jobs, urban services, and better quality of life. In some cases, proximity to new housing that gentrifies inner-city neighborhoods simply improves the image of the area and has a positive spillover effect. In many post-socialist cities, new housing construction has added subsequent rings to the existing compact urban structure of high-density peripheral estates. A number of studies document a pattern of extensive growth and even urban sprawl driven by higher mobility of urban residents and preferences for single-family living. However, these trends have been more moderate due to limited mortgage lending and the fragmented nature of the housebuilding industry. So far, post-socialist cities do not have a pattern of abandonment affecting housing estates. They retain a social mix attributed to the socialist system of housing allocation but demonstrate the typical filtering process in local housing markets, in which social status becomes more explicitly aligned with housing status (see Tsenkova 2009 for a review of the literature). Thirty years after the start of the transition, many of the owners are not able to sustain the value of their asset due to social constraints such as retirement, lack of employment, or poverty.

In spatial terms, the transition to democratic, market-based governance in housing has facilitated two distinct patterns of spatial restructuring in the housing estates—*ad hoc projects and revitalization*. A considerable growth in the construction of low-rise housing provided by decentralized suppliers, often in attractive locations, has created a new residential landscape. Notwithstanding suburbanization pressures, such developments have started a quiet process of intensification in some of the older housing estates built in the 1960s closer to the inner city, converting underutilized public land into residential uses. This post-socialist restructuring of urban spaces is often associated with private-sector development for more affluent consumers. Urban governments have become more innovative in their efforts to mobilize investment and make some of these areas more attractive, as this creates a social mix. While this is more the exception rather than the rule, post-socialist cities have many good examples of revitalization affecting housing estates, as the example in Figure 3 illustrates. This is one of the many estates in Riga where the municipality has used an area-based approach to provide synergies of different programs. At the small scale, some urban furniture provides much-needed places for community interaction, and urban graffiti by a local artist brakes the anonymity of buildings and is used as a wayfinding design. Housing retrofit programs with various subsi-

dies are used to reverse the spiral of neglect and physical deterioration while improving thermal comfort and eliminating energy poverty. Finally, a redesignation of land use to accommodate new residents in a more ground-oriented housing typology provides population diversity in the estate.

*Figures 3.1–3.3: Area-based revitalization of a housing estate in Riga.*



Source: Sasha Tsenkova.

The project-based retrofits have gained ground. These are financially supported by various energy efficiency programs, often funded by the European Union or other financial institutions, at times in partnership with local municipalities. Many multifamily buildings have received a major facelift and in some cases additional residential units (see fig. 4).

*Figure 4: Retrofit of multifamily housing in the housing estates of Burgas.*



Source: Municipality of Burgas.

Bulgaria's National Program for Energy Efficiency in Residential Buildings addresses the problems of owner-occupied housing, targeting energy efficiency retrofits and overall quality improvements. Since 2007, the government has implemented several energy efficiency programs, having started with EU-funding with a 50 percent cofinancing element for eligible energy efficiency improvements. The subsidy was increased to 100 percent to attract homeowners, together with some soft loans for in-house renovations and a requirement to establish a homeowner association. In one of the largest cities in Bulgaria, this has resulted in the improvement of over 250 multifamily buildings.

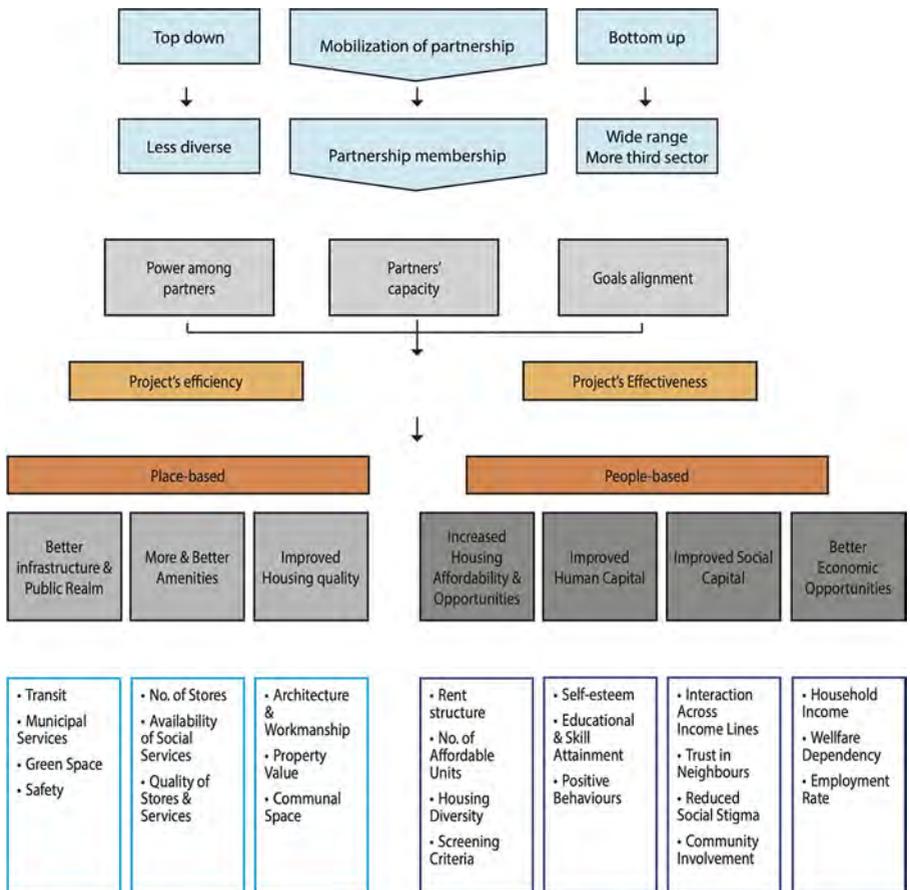
However, private development, exclusively profit motivated, often leads to conflicts or a simple takeover of public urban land and its illegal use for retail business purposes. While urban planning during socialism has been subject to a devastating critique on the basis that comprehensive plans were neither practically feasible under market conditions nor politically viable, post-socialist cities need to develop a new generation of plans for the housing estates that are action based and capitalize on the synergies of planning and housing intervention. This is a very different type of planning widely implemented in many European cities under estate action and urban regeneration programs. Such plans focus on the area and maximize the opportunity for intensification, conversion of underutilized spaces into other uses, provision of community spaces and services, et cetera. The action plans target existing housing programs such as energy efficiency retrofits, new social housing development, and neighborhood social initiatives into the same estate to achieve greater social and economic impact. While long-term goals and objectives are defined in a participatory manner, the strategy for implementation is more flexible and opportunistic. It can start as small-scale tactical urbanism, with residents and local organizations improving a pocket park, planting trees, redesigning a parking lot, or creating a mural. It can then move into demonstration projects that capitalize on existing housing and urban programs to build confidence in the estate and mobilize homeowners, local businesses, and residents for action and private investment. The implementation is not necessarily easy and can become ridden with conflicts, particularly in areas with competing development needs.

## Conclusion: Implementing Planning-Policy Partnership Nexus

An important strategy for change that might be helpful in the revitalization of post-socialist housing estates builds on the planning-policy partnership nexus (Legacy, Davison, and Liu 2016). Nexus thinking transcends traditional policy- and decision-making silos and develops approaches that build synergies across these sectors. Partnerships for affordable housing in cities and neighborhood revitalization are indeed very diverse multisectoral collaborations that leverage real-estate market pressures to promote affordability goals and social mix. Cities often take the lead in managing the planning–design policy nexus as neighborhood rebuilding takes decades and shifting the responsibility to private developers might not work, particularly in the context of gentrification and displacement of lower-income residents. Partnerships need robust and sustained financial support, alignment of planning policies, and institutional commitment to increase the supply of affordable rental housing. Such complexity by design makes statements on “what works” and “what does not” challenging and illustrate the interdependent nature of resilience at the nexus, raising the fundamental questions of how policy might enable systemic resilience. Each city will need to develop its own successful model, based on the resilience of the planning–design policy nexus for affordable housing to respond to growing affordability pressures while emphasizing diversity and social mix (see Tsenkova 2021 for further detail).

The framework for design and implementation of such revitalization strategies is presented in Figure 5. It draws on research carried out in Canada using the experience of major Canadian cities in the context of urban regeneration. The framework can incorporate the existing experience of project-based intervention in post-socialist housing estates as well more strategic area-based action planning to generate a wider range of positive outcomes associated with such projects. Many scholars have opted to organize these outcomes into two broad categories: place-based outcomes and people-based outcomes (Fraser and Kick 2007; Smith 2013). Adopting Chaskin and Brown's (1996) theory for neighborhood change, such place-based and people-based outcomes could be further divided into seven dimensions: physical infrastructure, amenities, housing quality, affordability, human capital, social capital, and economic opportunities.

Figure 5: Framework for design and implementation of revitalization strategies.



Source: Sasha Tsenkova.

Place-based outcomes are improvements to the physical and built environment and can be measured through indicators such as the amount of investment to improve infrastructure, an increase in the number of retail services, and the quality of the public realm. The physical dimension may include affordable housing stock, appreciation in housing prices, provision of high-quality affordable housing units, and improvement in transport infrastructure. Recently, place-based strategies often rely on quality affordable housing as the agent of change in addition to mixed-income, mixed tenure housing

developments aiming to improve the physical conditions and commercial viability of neighborhoods. Place-based campaigns anchored around affordable housing are led by cross-sectoral partnerships to bring public and private capital into underinvested neighborhoods, turning them into neighborhoods of choice (Joseph and Khare 2020).

People-based outcomes as defined by Katz (2004) are opportunity strategies that focus on expanding the opportunities of low-income households to access quality jobs and school. When organized under Chaskin and Brown's model, people-based outcomes contain the following aspects: affordable housing, human and social capital, and economic opportunities. These outcomes take a lot longer to materialize but are important for community capacity and political strength of area-based intervention. "Human capital" outcomes may include advancement of individual capital such as education, training, and self-confidence. Outcomes that improve low-income individuals' "social capital" include increased level of trust and expansion of their social network. Mixed-income affordable housing generally has greater potential to foster desirable people-based outcomes.

Incidentally, the ability to deliver place-based and people-based outcomes is a function of the stakeholders' overall capacity and their goals alignment. Both place- and people-based outcomes are highly probable if partnerships are made up of capable partners who share the same goals. Fraser and Kick (2007) established that when it comes to generating place-based outcomes, the public and private sector's capacities and goals alignment are more critical than those of the nonprofits and residents, while all stakeholders' capacities and goals alignment are needed to implement people-based outcomes. Ultimately, the efficiency and effectiveness of any project in the area is enhanced, as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Current affordable housing partnership models in Canadian cities combine both place- and people-based strategies. These policies emphasize altering the socioeconomic mix of poor neighborhoods and transforming them into communities that are economically integrated and appealing to a wide range of households. Mixed-income affordable housing projects offer affordable housing options to low- and mid-income households with the idea that, as their income improves due to better housing and increased access to jobs, opportunities, and services, they can move up the housing ladder into other housing choices within the same development in a neighborhood that has quality amenities and infrastructure (see Tsenkova 2020).

Recognizing that different points of departure have a considerable impact on choices and revitalization strategies in the housing estates of post-socialist cities, this framework offers a blueprint for diverse implementation through action planning and an opportunity to transition from ad hoc project-based intervention to a more strategic management of revitalization programs and plans in a participatory way.

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