

Housing Quality and Lost (Public) Space in Croatia

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1 ABSTRACT

In the post-socialist period and within the current social transition context, urban and rural Croatia has, just like other transition countries, experienced many changes in the social structure and space. One example is the housing quality which is a replica of the situation in the Croatian society and has also undergone some major changes. Socially oriented housing construction co-financed by the state and the cities is in an unfavourable position compared to private housing construction. In the last twenty years the amount of the social housing construction has been only a minor part of the total construction work in the country. For instance, out of nine newly planned residential housing developments in Zagreb, the capital city, only three have been completed and the work on the rest of them has stopped and is unlikely to continue. Private construction work prevails especially on the edge of the city and is characterised by high density housing. This type of housing construction doesn't benefit the majority of citizens in search of accommodation (price per square meter is too high, low-quality building). There is also a big problem of the community facilities (primary and secondary infrastructure, schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, green areas, sidewalks, public transport etc.). The existing globalisation-transition circumstances of the Croatian society corroborate the fact which experts of various profiles often point out: ignoring the process of (urban) planning will irreparably damage the space. The city transformation shows the absence of comprehensive urban planning which results in an ever increasing number of random buildings which do not fit in the surroundings. This leads up to yet another important issue – the shrinking and, in some cases, disappearance of public space which becomes the “lost space“. In recent years there has been a lot of building in the city core and on the edge which does not quite fit in the existing urban structure, image or the skyline of the city. The current situation in the process of planning can be characterized as a conflict and imbalance between the powerful actors (mostly political and economic) and less powerful actors (mostly professional and civil). The actors who have the political power and influence and the ones who possess the capital are forming an “alliance” between two important layers of the social structure. The lack of civil and professional actors, “lost spatial actors”, and therefore of civic aggregation is also present and that is also the cause of public space “disappearance” and undermined process of public participation.

2 INTRODUCTION

Croatia and its space are characterised by the post-socialist context in which new and remarkable social, political and economic changes have occurred since the 1990s. The champions of these changes are new social actors, primarily economic actors (for example, investors) and political actors (for example, town mayors). In the past, in socialism, their influence was not big. The state was the most powerful. “In Croatia the existing social context (transition and post-socialism) makes the social actors increasingly important. New social changes affect the activities and behaviour of new and old actors. Their importance and operations can not be separated from the process of restructuring of modern society today, globalization or transition. Both urban and rural space of Croatia has undergone significant physical transformation in the transition period but even more social changes“(Svirčić Gotovac, 2012:13-14).

These changes are mostly visible in spatial and urban planning. In socialism urban planning was based on well-defined, long-term strategies. Post-socialism is determined by a completely different attitude to space: no strategic, long-term planning, no careful consideration for space development. The consequences are evident. “Socialism is believed to be one of the most constructive periods in the urban development of Zagreb. Not only regarding the quantity of housing development but also its quality and the quality of life of Zagreb's citizens“ (Jukić, Mlinar, Smokvina, 2011). The new capitalist system and its market laws prefer to make a quick profit on investment. So most investment is private and responsible for urban planning. Politicians often side with investors and not with other segments of the society (for example, professional or civil actors).The consequence are numerous thoughtless and inadequate interventions in space, on the periphery and in the centre of towns. This is visible in both residential and commercial construction. “Consequently, land-use planning at the municipal level has been characterized by the prevalence of ad hoc

political decisions and not long-term strategic visions. Also, the development control was weak, and there was a 'laissez-faire' approach to the city development" (Hamilton, Dimitrovska Andrews, Pichler-Milanović, 2005:475).

In the Croatian society today along with the systematic neglect of spatial development there is also insufficient participation of people in public and political life. It is important to point out that people do not take an active part in problems regarding their immediate living environment. "The Law on Spatial Planning and Construction does not precisely define the role of citizens and their participation. The problem is also that the existing regulations are not interpreted to the benefit of citizens and the insistence on their real, transparent participation. They merely satisfy the minimum of legal procedure" (Toš and students, 2012). In Croatia today there is only a public presentation and a public debate which normally last for two weeks after the plans are made. After that, there is no response to the reaction of the public which suggests that people do not have any real influence on the matter. Public debate is not a sufficiently effective method and other steps should precede it, such as information about the stages of the project and some professional opinions about the project (its advantages and drawbacks). For the public this would mean a longer period of involvement leading to more democratic decision-making processes. Greater participation can affect people's living conditions at the local level which correlates with their total quality of living. The quality of living can be measured at different levels, from the quality of immediate neighbourhood to the quality of living in a particular country and they are dependent on each other.

In the existing globalization and transitional circumstances, spatial transformations are happening in Croatia with almost no participation of its inhabitants and citizens. Public interest is often neglected and private interest is promoted (investors' and partial interests). Such relations between different social actors in the process of spatial planning can be characterised as the conflict and imbalance between the powerful (usually political and economic) actors and the less powerful (mostly professional and civil) actors. "Urban phenomenon comprises a complex set of actors and each type of society and each type of urban society means a power hierarchy of actors. A different power structure for a different system" (Bassand, 2001). It is precisely the power of a specific actor which defines how much difference their activities will eventually make to space. In many post-socialist countries the neo-liberal thinking is characterized by a low political priority given by central governments to physical planning, regional development and housing policy. There is an absence of comprehensive national spatial development strategy and coherent regional policies, together with local and regional government reforms and disputes regarding the basis of new planning legislation (Sykora, 1994; Dimitrovska Andrews and Ploštajner, 2000; Pichler-Milanović, 2001).

3 TRANSFORMATION OF URBAN SPACE IN ZAGREB

Zagreb region, the capital city, the largest (macroregional) center and its county has only a little more than one million inhabitants (1,107,623) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), and is, according to the world urban population statistics, a relatively small metropolitan area. In comparison with other Croatian towns, however, it is the biggest centre and with its metropolitan area the only one with over a million inhabitants. If compared with big European towns, for example with "ten towns similar in size and the number of people (such as Amsterdam, Athens and Stockholm, smaller than Zagreb, such as Zurich and Dublin or bigger than Zagreb, such as Barcelona, Vienna, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw), Zagreb has the biggest average number of people per household (2.8) and Amsterdam the smallest (1.8)" (ZagrebPlan, 2013:129).

The second-largest Croatian town Split and its county have less than half a million inhabitants (454,798) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). These data show that most problems of urbanization, high density housing or moving to towns are connected with Zagreb. With its modernization and transformation characteristics Zagreb greatly differs from the rest of the country. Also various research indicators of the quality of life and especially the quality of housing in Zagreb considerably differ from the rest of the country.¹

¹ The quality of life in the majority of settlements in the Croatian settlements network is defined by the quality of their equipment (infrastructure and institutions), as shown in the 2004 research. It is difficult to compare the biggest towns, such as Zagreb and Split, especially with numerous rural settlements where the quality of life is often reduced to basic existence, whereas higher levels are hard to attain for most people. Urban agglomerations, that is, macroregional centers in Croatia are well ahead of most urban or rural settlements regarding life quality although they also have a lot of

In most countries of the world since the 1990s the role of private investors has become increasingly important and they have made some big financial investments. It also means they have made some major decisions about what cities will look like in the future. Processes related to the construction work in city centres, such as urban renewal and gentrification, have also grown stronger in Zagreb since the 1990s. “Earlier the process of gentrification was generally associated with the real estate market of developed countries and their leading cities (the so-called command-center cities). Today, however, it is becoming a global process and an urban strategy going beyond liberal urban policy or sporadic and local occurrence” (Smith, 2002:427). Attractive real estate in the very city center has made gentrification possible and revived construction work there, with uneven involvement of spatial actors, especially experts and politicians. A large number of shopping centres and underground garages has been built near the centre. By letting the traffic in the city centre rather than reducing the number of cars, Zagreb is not following trends in developed European cities. Experts and residents take part in these city changes only marginally while some actors, namely investors, make a maximum profit. In the process of urban renewal the role of the state has weakened and individuals or private actors play a prominent role. Because of inadequate involvement of the state and city authorities in the process of renewal and revitalization of the city centre, these new actors have become extremely powerful in urban space and responsible for its future look without having sufficient respect for the historical and urban identity of the city. Even some protected parts of the old city core have been radically altered and expanded, the changes usually accompanied by discordant opinions of experts and politicians.² Still, the most remarkable transformations of urban space have happened on the edge of the city because of numerous open possibilities there.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

The paper gives an overview of long-time research carried out by the sociology of space group at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb³ regarding the quality of life of residents of Zagreb and the relations among the social actors (economic, political, professional and civil actors). Mixed-type methodology has been used, qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (surveys). In order to get an insight into the changes of the last two decades (the transition period) brought about by the new social system and new rules among the actors, the most interesting research results obtained from 2004 to 2009 are presented. The results of the 2004 survey representative sample contribute to the criticism of living conditions in new housing estates and high density housing areas in Zagreb. They show that their level of equipment (infrastructure and facilities) is rather unsatisfactory especially on the edge of the city. Interviews conducted in 2007, 2008 and 2009 with target actors and their representatives point to obvious inequality among actors in the City of Zagreb and the rest of Croatia. This problem becomes bigger when power is frequently abused for selfish interests which is often the case with political and economic actors.

Public space with its facilities is available to everyone and is managed by the city for the benefit of its citizens (Low, 1992). One of the main characteristics of public space is that various organized and spontaneous activities take place there. Also public space is multidimensional: social, cultural, political and economic. Increasing privatization of public space leads to its discrimination and loss.

All attributes of public space which are not connected with the market and economy disappear. Permanent accessibility, openness, safety, constant liveliness – everything is seriously disrupted.

All research done by the above mentioned group aims to contribute to the protection of space, especially public space (squares, streets, parks, playgrounds, all facilities useful in everyday life), in the city centre as well as in various housing estates. Public space is evidently threatened and becoming scarce. It is deliberately eliminated from the planning process as such and converted into private or semi-public space (for example, a new shopping mall, residential or office building). Thus it is becoming lost space.

downsides due to their size. Generally speaking, towns still achieve better results. This is why towns permanently attract and receive new residents, especially the City of Zagreb, the biggest urban centre.

² Flower Square is a Lower Town protected architectural unity in the heart of the city where a modern shopping centre and an underground garage have been built in spite of strong protests coming from experts and citizens.

³ The sociology of space group at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb has been researching urban and rural issues (including the quality of life in urban and rural areas of Croatia) for almost 50 years. The authors of this paper are part of the group.

In the sequence of this paper the mentioned results will be shortly introduced on the examples of spatial transformations in Zagreb, primarily transformations of residential and business construction.

4.1 Residential construction

High density housing in residential areas has paradoxically led to a reduced quality of life in broader city areas. The reason is that the housing construction has not always been matched by the housing quality. The life quality of residents in some new housing estates in Zagreb has therefore fallen (Pictures 1 and 2). Private investment has taken little care of either technical or social (institutional) infrastructure of the new settlements. The city authorities, on the other hand, have not demanded the investors' help with the infrastructure necessary for everyday life of citizens when giving them municipal land plots (schools, kinder gartens, shops, health and culture centres, playgrounds, parks, green areas). And the city itself often lacks finance for the complete infrastructure so the present one does not meet the citizens' real needs and requirements.



Picture 1 New housing construction and high density housing in Zagreb



Picture 2 High density housing in a new estate in Zagreb

The housing quality has undergone a lot of both positive and negative changes in the period of transition. The most obvious change is a large number of new flats and housing estates initiated by private investors,

much less by the state (city). Socially oriented housing construction subsidized by the state (city) is currently stagnating although in the last few years new projects have been considered offering flats to citizens at a favourable price (new housing estates). Fewer than planned have been built and then the construction has stopped. And so it has remained in the shadow of the private sector.

The quality of living in such housing estates is often low and the private-public partnership model⁴ is a complete failure. The city authorities frequently refer to this particular model, well recognized and successful in Europe. It is used for various projects where investors make a profit but also offer useful services and additional attractions to citizens. In Croatia, because of the crisis in the town planning process, investors are given locations which are not necessarily economically advantageous to the city and the whole profit fills their pockets making them the sole beneficiaries of the partnership. The city authorities fail to realize that the model has been unsuccessfully applied. Building flats for citizens has not benefited them, the citizens of Zagreb, only specific individuals, the so-called new actors (investors, developers etc.).



Picture 3 High density housing in a business district



Picture 4 Business tower near the centre of the city

The above mentioned is supported by the fact that “40,000 new flats were built in Zagreb from 2001 to 2008. There are about 20,000 unsold new flats on the real estate market now, plus some old flats on sale. A lot of people live in parts of the town with no essential services, no local employment, low-quality public spaces, no green areas, sport and recreation facilities“ (ZagrebPlan, 2013:127). At the same time, paradoxically, the

⁴ The term refers to the cooperation between big private investors (often corporations) and the local authorities. The partnership has become quite common recently (Carmon, 1999).

new flats are unaffordable to most citizens because of their exorbitant prices per square meter. It is therefore clear that the principal goal is not being achieved: citizens are not provided with the satisfactory housing quality. European Charter on Housing states that “controlling the expansion of suburban and urban zones should become an important goal for the Community if sustainable development is to be maintained (Article 5, Section 2, European Housing Charter). Suburban zones of Zagreb are hardly good examples of sustainable development.

4.2 Commercial construction

Beside residential construction in broader city areas, urban transformations are visible in other types of construction: shopping centers, new business zones and high-rise office blocks. In the twenty years of transition we have witnessed in both residential and commercial construction (Pictures 3 and 4). In socialism business high towers grew on vacant land areas expanding horizontally. Today they are placed in already occupied zones. This results in the shrinking of public space and the infrastructure of the chosen locations is insufficient for new high-rises. They are yet another example of urban transformations dictated by private investment.

Zagreb has become crowded with shopping centers, in the city center and on the periphery, as well as with underground parking garages, mostly in the centre. Shopping centres usually buy cheap land and the infrastructure is already there. After some time they close down (there are too many) and become brownfields available for re-use. Underground garages are seemingly solutions for the traffic but are in actual fact just additional profit for investors.

These examples in Zagreb (high rises, shopping centers and underground parking garages) do not stand for urban renewal but random, incomplete and chaotic urban transformations. And so does residential housing construction. “In town planning for many years now there has been a string of illogical decisions. They have allocated the best municipal land to shopping centers and businesses and moved residential projects to less convenient locations“ (Jukić; Mlinar; Smokvina, 2011:43).

5 DISCUSSION

Looking at high density housing in Zagreb, another aspect of the problem that comes to mind is used and irretrievably lost space, especially public space. When public spaces are generally shrinking and being destroyed, this building surplus is a paradox (lost space). It is not useful for the public. What is useful (schools, kinder gartens, sport centers, parks) is not being built and the old, existing institutions are put under additional pressure. Such inadequate use of space speaks at the same time of unnecessarily wasted space and the absence of strategies and policies for managing the city better, both its residential and business needs.

It is apparent that there is a serious imbalance between social actors in Croatia. The imbalance is visible between very powerful (economic and political) actors and less powerful (civil and professional) actors who are even completely powerless in some circumstances (lost spatial actors). A situation like this is not problematic as such because it is a normal part of social reality; when, however, it puts public interest and public space in danger, everything changes. Participation of the public in spatial planning and decision-making processes regarding their immediate environment has not been satisfactory for a while now. Non-government organizations (NGOs), a new type of actors, have come in conflict with economic actors. They are critical of the present situation and try to introduce some changes in the decision-making and increase participation of the public. They are therefore “regulators“ of democracy. Zagreb's authorities manage the town development weakly and non-transparently favouring private investors. Some professional actors also side with investors forgetting the rules of their profession and contributing to “dotted“, random housing construction. Decision-making procedures are non-transparent and frequent alterations of the Master Plan are noticeable, too. This should not be the case because of the Plan's importance for the city urban planning.

Bearing in mind everything mentioned so far, it is essential to correct the mistakes of the transition period and give a more prominent role in the management of town affairs to professional and civil actors. Today's random and chaotic construction at locations lacking the necessary facilities, will not help. Interdisciplinary urban planning does not exist either, one can talk about the so-called “death of urbanism“ in the transition period. Spatial planning should be given greater care and appreciation than has been the case in these last years. This comprises transparent participation of the public (experts and civil actors) in practical and legal matters.

Today when the concept of sustainable development has been globally accepted and the majority of countries are planning their spatial development accordingly, it is impossible to behave otherwise. Everybody's commitment should be to preserve our space for the future and yet its irrevocable waste or neglect contradict the concept. The 2009 strategy for sustainable development⁵ “brings together various development policies trying to find suitable solutions for all three sustainable development components: economic, social and environmental... and will be guided by the following general principles...”; here we wish to stress “the creation of an open and democratic society and the participation of citizens“(Narodne novine, the Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia, 2009:2-3). Since strategically important documents exist, they are to be applied which has not always been the case so far. It is vital to raise the awareness that space is an important resource for the future development. Only then can space be saved and its loss minimized.

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⁵ Croatia accepted this strategy in 2009 as the Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Republic of Croatia in the Croatian Parliament.