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The Historiography and Research on State-Socialist Housing: Prague's *Paneláky*

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Communist-era apartment buildings (*paneláky*) in Prague are home to 40 percent of the city's population. Since the 1990s, following the end of state socialism, they have almost completely fallen into private ownership in the all-encompassing process of post-socialist privatization. They served as a stage and conduit for socio-cultural and economic change and as such, they reflect the transformed and transformative relationship between architecture, capitalism, heritage, and state. By examining the scholarly discourse on state-socialist housing produced since the fall of communism in Europe in 1989 – which has grown steadily in the past decade – this position paper aims to outline the main trends, themes, and gaps in historiography and research into the *paneláky* in Prague and to suggest new avenues for inquiry into the urban and architectural heritage of state-socialist housing estates in the Czech capital.

Keywords: housing estates; *paneláky*; state-socialist heritage; transition; Prague



In Prague, over 40 percent of the population lives in *paneláky*, the concrete-panel behemoths erected in the second half of the twentieth century that are peppered throughout the city and its periphery. During its decades of rule, the Czechoslovak communist party's ability to house the country's growing urban population was a symbol of the ideological triumph of the state and underscored the progress of the centrally planned economy of the Eastern Bloc state. The apartments were constructed in relatively short periods of time, and, regardless of quality or missing amenities in many cases, they illustrated the state's ideological commitment to housing the masses. During the rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ), the construction of *paneláky* embodied the progress of the state's centrally planned economy. While apartments could not be sold at a significant scale and did not serve as financial capital per se, they could be exchanged and so represented cultural and social capital, contributing to the identification of their inhabitants as urban communist citizens. In the 1990s, this narrative was replaced with one that rendered these buildings discursive signifiers of a repressive rule in the debates on the 20th-century state-socialist ideology.

This position paper assesses the scholarship on *paneláky* and aims to ascertain the gaps in research dealing with them and suggest further directions for inquiry. Since 1989, there has been an increase in academic analyses of public housing in state-socialist Czechoslovakia. This research, mainly conducted by local and regional scholars, has largely focused on the planning, construction, and post-socialist transformations of Prague's *paneláky* — with only a few examples dealing with Brno and Ostrava — and on their inextricable links with state-socialist ideology (Figure 1). The scholarly discourse has moreover engaged with the analysis of the post-1989 ideological transition and transformation and explored the place of *paneláky* in socio-political, cultural, and demographic processes that have unfolded since. Notably, while Czech scholars from the humanities and social sciences have written extensively about *paneláky* and housing estates in Prague, architectural and urban historians have seldom addressed the topic, with a few notable exceptions. Sociologists and urban geographers have been the most active in researching Prague's housing estates and *paneláky*, while art historians have predominantly taken the place commonly occupied by architectural scholars in assessments of the built environment in Prague.



Figure 1: Libuš Housing Estate, a typical example of the *paneláky* housing type. Prague, Czech Republic, built in the 1970s and 1980s. Photograph by ŠJů, May 2020. CC-BY-SA-3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S%C3%ADli%C5%A1t%C4%9B_Libu%C5%A1,_panel%C3%A1ky_v_ulic%C3%ADch_Cu%C5%99%C3%ADnova,_Machuldova,_Pavl%C3%ADkova,_od_Zbudovsk%C3%A9.jpg

Writing about *Paneláky* Since 1989

During the 1990s, a senior generation of Czech scholars in the humanities and social sciences, which included sociologist Jiří Musil and geographer Luděk Sýkora, examined the relationship between housing estates in Prague and the socio-political processes that defined the state socialist rule as well as what happened to them in the 1990s during the post-socialist decade of privatization and social and cultural transformation.¹ All facets of private and public space were affected by the shift from a centrally planned economy in a state ruled by a one-party system to a capitalist pluralist democracy. The overall narrative of a ‘return to Europe’ (Musil 2005) pervaded media accounts and indicated the end of an era of oppression and socio-economic and cultural isolation.

The process of privatization characterized the early post-communist years and thus became a focal point in scholarship on housing estates and on *paneláky*. The social scientist Michael Harloe argued in 1996 that cities could be seen as ‘stocks of physical assets whose privatisation forms a large part of the capital involved in new class formation’ (1996: 9). According to Harloe, the process of privatization was not straightforward, and it ultimately proved to be path dependent and shaped ‘cross-nationally (and sub-nationally)’ by ‘variant historical legacies and current conjunctures’ (10). Writing in 1998, the Czech economist Lubomír Mlčoch characterized the 1990s as a decade of ‘radical’ and ‘misunderstood’ liberalism; some of Mlčoch’s contemporaries referred to 1990s liberalism as ‘naïve’, ‘primitive’, and ‘vulgar’, with the philosopher, politician, and former dissident Jan Sokol describing it as “‘gangster’s liberalism’” (1998: 951). According to Mlčoch, the transformation was ultimately superficial: ‘the disfunctions of the former regime have been reproduced, based on the principle of “path-dependency”’ (953).

Over the past decade, a new trend in scholarship on *paneláky* has emerged. A younger generation of sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, and architectural and urban historians have studied the buildings in Prague and throughout the former Czechoslovakia through the lens of heritage and preservation, design, demographics, and memory. Their scholarship straddles the two periods, state socialist and post-socialist, and they seek to link the 20th-century architecture and urban planning of the estates with their post-1989 transformations.

Social and urban geographers Petra Špačková, Lucie Pospíšilová, and Martin Ouředníček (2012; 2016) document the demographic changes in the *paneláky*, while geographers Slavomíra Ferenčuhová (2016) and Martin Ouředníček (2016) theorize post-socialist cities and apply Western urban concepts to them in the process of developing a theory of post-socialist cities. Sociologists Martin Lux and Petr Sunega (2010; 2012; 2017) examine the future of ‘housing systems’ and social housing in the aftermath of the transition; geographer Jana Temelová (2017) considers the links among marginalized social groups in post-socialist societies; anthropologist Michal Lehečka (2019) explores the notion of ownership in Czech housing estates; and political scientist Lucie Cviklová elaborates on Natasha Pichler-Milanovich’s 2001 inquiry into path dependency, arguing that privatization in the Czech Republic created an ‘institutional vacuum’ that resulted in the survival of informal socialist constraints and policies and a subsequent attempt to reinstate the ‘pre-socialist institutional framework’ that idealized the ‘institution of private property’ (2015: 75).

While this literature overview is by no means exhaustive, a significant and noticeable trend has emerged: generally speaking, only local scholars have researched

the *paneláky* in Prague, and those in architectural and urban studies rarely take up the subject. However, there are exceptions. In 2017, cultural theorist Lucie Skřivánková spearheaded *The Paneláks: Twenty-Five Housing Estates in the Czech Republic*, a project whose goal is to facilitate a better understanding of *paneláky* in Czech media accounts. In addition, Eva Špačková (2014) has documented the revitalization of panel housing in the Czech Republic, and architectural theorist Michaela Janečková (2017) has explored the design nuances of the estates and their architects, while urbanist and historian Maroš Krivý (2015) has examined socialist urbanism and links between design and power.

The Paneláky

Media accounts on the architecture of *paneláky* almost exclusively link their creation with state-socialist Czechoslovakia and, significantly, with the Soviet-influenced design and communist-era construction of the Czechoslovak built environment. However, the architectural and technological basis for the construction of *paneláky* is more local than such accounts posit. In her seminal work in the field of architecture and urban studies of 2011, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960*, American architectural historian Kimberly Elman Zarecor argues that significant technological progress during the First Republic in the interwar years laid the foundations for the later construction of *paneláky* in state-socialist Czechoslovak cities, rejecting the idea that the Soviets introduced prefabricated housing systems to the country: this ‘received history’ of a Soviet-imposed system of the building, she notes, ‘has been especially alluring’ given that ‘modern interwar architecture is held in such high regard’ (2). Cold War émigré scholars and authors in the early 1990s emphasized the otherness of prefabricated housing in the country as a particularly potent anti-communist statement.

The anti-Soviet character of this rhetoric, paired with the argument that the post-war planning and construction created a chasm with the progressive interwar modernism, stood at the forefront of the 1990s anti-communist urban discourse. During the state-socialist decades in Czechoslovakia, grey prefabricated structures peppered the outskirts of the cities, although the state did sporadically invest in innovative housing design and construction. Krivý argues that not only were the buildings criticized for their poor quality but the ‘tropes of greyness’ became a predominant narrative that ‘permeated architectural culture of the period’ and implied ‘criticism of aesthetic, moral, psychological, and environmental shortcomings of panelaks’ (2015: 766).

In the wake of the end of state socialism in former Czechoslovakia, politicians, journalists, and the public debated the future of *paneláky*: calls for them to be razed

were loud, and many, including architects, ‘dreamed of large-scale demolition of panel blocks for a considerable length of time’ (Skřivánková 2017: 9). By the late 1990s, however, architectural historian Rostislav Švácha and architects Ladislav Lábus and Josef Pleskot were arguing for the necessity of eschewing the oversimplification of the discourse on *paneláky* (Skřivánková 2017: 9–10). Švácha, for example, maintained that an adequate assessment of prefabricated housing in the Czech Republic required that the buildings be historicized and differentiated. The public’s negative view of *paneláky* has been slowly evaporating ever since. As evidenced by cultural events organized in the city and media reports, the change has been most evident since the 2008 economic crash and the housing crisis of the past decade and particularly amongst the younger population seeking to purchase apartments. In this context, *paneláky* are seen as valuable real estate, and their architectural problematic associated with the previous ideological era is not as much of a concern.

Conclusion: Future Research Directions

During the state-socialist era, architecture and urban planning were critical tools of the state’s ideology, while during the post-socialist transformation in the 1990s, the urban realm served as a background and an agent in ideological and urban transition. Housing estates and *paneláky* proved vital in this multifaceted process. As a large percentage of Prague’s population lives in state-socialist-era *paneláky*, it can be argued that their contemporary urban identities are constructed through a negotiation of the architectural and ideological space of the buildings as juxtaposed with the discourse on the heritage of the state-socialist era that produced it. Their complex relationship with the users of this dissonant heritage of the totalitarian era — who essentially do not recognize it as such — is defined and articulated through the socio-political and cultural processes of different post-socialist periods, and so that relationship has changed from the early 1990s to today.

Prague’s *paneláky* can also serve as another element in the analysis of the idiosyncrasies of post-socialist space: while research on the former Eastern Bloc states’ socialist housing dwells on segregation, poverty, and ghettoization, the reality is different. The location, size, quality of amenities and materials used in construction, and the extent of maintenance of state-socialist *paneláky* varies, as does their place in the socio-economic constellation of the city. Most of the units in the Ďáblice and Invalidovna estates, for example, are privately owned, while the state owns a significant number of units in the Černý estate, populated by Roma and immigrant tenants (Lehečka 2019: 8).

Paneláky in the contemporary period bear the marks of decades of changes and urban alterations. Czech architect Ladislav Lábus has argued that even if citizens in post-socialist countries had no experience with *paneláky*, ‘their idea would enchant us again, even though I hope in a humbler form today’ (Holeček 2018).² Nevertheless, the idiosyncratic architectural elements of *paneláky* are not as well researched as their other elements. Why are *paneláky* studied mainly outside of the field of architecture? Why are their architectural values considered secondary to their ideological implications? Moreover, how do we link the two in a meaningful manner? Prague’s state-socialist *paneláky* should not be treated merely as an element of the heritage of a totalitarian regime. The study of their idiosyncratic architectural aspects ought to be incorporated into the global discourse of architectural and urban history of the 20th century.

Notes

¹ The list of authors outlined in the text is by no means exhaustive, but it is indicative of the prevalent scholarship trends since the 1990s.

² Translation by the author.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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