

'Socialist and Post-socialist Urbanizations: Architecture, Land and Property Rights': A Conference Held on 8–11 May 2014 in Tallinn, Estonia

'Socialist and Post-socialist Urbanizations: Architecture, Land and Property Rights'¹ is the name of conference that was organised by the Faculty of Architecture of the Estonian Academy of Arts as part of the 11th Urban and Landscape Days, a regular interdisciplinary meeting of urban scholars in Tallinn. This year, the event, which in the past has been held as a workshop, took the form of an international conference. It brought together researchers from around the world (although a larger proportion of European institutions were represented) and various disciplines including architecture and planning, history, philosophy, sociology, political science, and, of course, urban studies. The conference's organisers called for presentations focused on socialist and post-socialist cities and reached some scholars studying a variety of issues and topics in the context of former socialist countries and their settlements, many of whom hold different views on what the adjectives 'socialist' and 'post-socialist' actually mean or refer to. With slight simplification, the contributions—presentations and posters—can be said to have addressed four main themes, which crystallised over the course of the talks. At the same time, most presenters touched upon more than one of the four themes and to strictly class the talks into distinct thematic groups would therefore be constrictive. The event then concluded with a debate on the challenging question—how to draw more general conclusions from the variety of empirical cases presented during the days of the conference?

Many presentations focused on changing property relations or shifts in housing/land ownership under and since the collapse of state-socialism; this was the first of the key themes of the conference. Talk-

ing about post-socialist China, Chaitawat Boonjubun ('Factors Contributing to "Naked Marriage" and Women's Home Ownership in China's Post-socialist Cities') highlighted the connections between the rising prices of housing on one hand and changes in the cultural meaning of marriage in China's big cities on the other; he specifically described the changing attitude of young women towards 'naked marriage'—a situation in which the young couple's original families cannot provide house/land for them. Other presenters analysed the processes and effects of privatisation and the commodification of land, public space, and housing in the post-socialist period (e.g. Nabil Menhem and Elena Batunova's paper 'Land Property from State Control to Full Privatization, Where to Draw the Line?', or Irina Paraschivoiu's talk 'From Public to Private. The Case of Bucharest's Inner City Development'). Joanna Kusiak focused on the complicated processes of restitution in central Warsaw, a city built almost anew after the destruction that occurred during the Second World War, and on how Warsaw today is affected by this history and the economic and political changes in the city since 1989. Many of the contributions were critical of the shrinking of public or collectively used spaces in post-socialist cities. Some presenters analysed the effects of changing property rights and the marketisation of services in the cities on inhabitants' lives and on neighbourhood relations (e.g. Dorina Pojani's talk 'From Camaraderie to Detachment'), others observed the weakening role of the public domain in decisions on future land use (Marija Cvetinovic and Visnja Sretovic's paper 'Unfolding Urban Planning Model for Top-Down Management of Urban Conflicts in a Post-socialist City. Case Study of Savamala Neighbourhood in Belgrade'). Two of the keynote lectures provided further background for such analysis and explained the more general framework of critical urban studies while refer-

ring to examples from post-socialist Europe or China. Stefan Rettich from the School of Architecture in Bremen talked about the dominance of market logic in defining cities and other settlements and about the easily forgotten social responsibility of architectural practice, and he called for a rethinking of the possibilities of more collective uses of infrastructure at the level of cities or regions. In her lecture entitled 'The Value of Land as a Fiction', Anne Haila, a professor of urban studies at the University of Helsinki, used the example of Chinese cities since the 1980s to discuss how urban space is treated as and transformed into a 'financial asset' and the effects this has had on cities and their development, land use, property rights, and politics.

The second of the four dominant themes of the conference appeared in many contributions describing and analysing the changing institutional and legal framework in which urban development has occurred in the post-socialist context. Presenters also explained who the actors were in urban governance and urban development, described the changing role of the state and the shifts in urban planning and policies, both under state socialism and after its fall. Mirjam Büdenbender ('Subsuming Post-socialism. The "Real Estate/Financial Complex" in Moscow City') talked about the 'hybridity' typical of the 'real estate/financial' practices in contemporary Moscow, where the strong state influences the position of the city in the global economy. Ting Chen ("State" beyond the "State") analysed the continuing dominance of state-owned enterprises in defining urbanisation in China after post-Mao reform, as these enterprises remain the main actor behind decisions about urban development in the country. Cvetinovic and Sretovic analysed the processes of decision-making in the case of the neighbourhood of Savamala in Belgrade and proposed a rethinking of the possibilities of innovations and change in

urban planning. Leonora Grcheva ('Urban Planning and Ideology') analysed three big plans for Skopje, Macedonia, from different periods, and linked her explanation for the changes of plans to an understanding of the changing historical situation.

Another group of papers raised questions about how architecture and design (both material objects and the practices of producing architecture) from the period of state-socialism influence current performance and preferences in this field. Łukasz Stanek ('Postmodernism Is Almost All Right. From Poland to the Middle East, and Back') talked about the work that Polish architects performed in the Middle East during the 1970s and asked how this experience later influenced postmodern architecture in Poland. Urszula Kozminska ('Materials' Reuse. Aesthetic Choices and Patterns of Usage Determined by Socialism and Their Influence on Architecture in Post-socialist Poland') described how approaches to architecture and preferences in materials that developed partly under socialism and partly in the post-socialist period, when the socialist legacy was openly rejected and exchanged for 'foreign' models, complicate attempts to develop sustainable architecture in Poland today. The process of dealing with the past that is expressed in material form in cities were also analysed in the paper given by Leonora Grcheva and Francisco Martínez. Martínez ('On the Urban Entropy of Tallinn, Estonia') focused on the elements in the urban landscape and urban life that persist, despite the important social changes that have been taking place in Estonia, and define the current situation of the city of Tallinn. In the poster section of the conference, Maria A. Ustinova opened up the question of how 'educational infrastructure' from Soviet times in Russia (kindergartens as former 'aesthetic and spatial environments') may or may not be adapted to the new values and ideas that education is trying to pursue at present.

The important role of symbolic meanings that refer to the past or represent events or identities and that are inscribed into the urban landscape appeared in other presentations as well. These talks thus brought up the fourth main theme of the conference. Panu Lehtovuori presented a collective work (with Andreas Kurg, Siri Ermert, and Martina Schwab) on conflicts over symbols located on Freedom square in Tallinn. He narrated and analysed the story of the changing symbolic value of a bronze statue of a soldier located on the square, the conflicts that arose over attempts to remove or symbolically redefine this monument after 1991, and finally over the new design of the square. In this last thematic line of the conference, the authors suggested thinking about the post-socialist period as a historical moment, when re-interpreting the past—both recent and more remote—was of great importance. Péter Bagoly-Simó compared the way in which post-socialist countries and their histories are represented in geography textbooks published in post-socialist Europe, in other European countries, and outside Europe ('Teaching the Red and Bad. Representations of Post-socialist Urbanizations in School Geography Textbooks of International Selection'), and thus shed light on the specific features of how the socialist past is remembered in these different contexts. Slavomíra Ferenčuhová ('Continuities in Urban Planning after 1989. Radical Changes Reconsidered') also drew attention to the tendency of urban planning in the Czech Republic to deal in specific ways with the unwanted past, both before and after 1989. Nerma Prnjavorac Cridge ('Post-socialist City. Remembered Anew') reflected on the 'failure to accept the socialist legacy' in post-socialist cities and the related

process of what she observed as a loss of distinction between cities.

The variety of issues that were discussed—from property rights, to architectural and planning practices, the analysis of symbolic values, and conflicts over interpretations of the past—proves how wide-ranging the understanding of the expression '(post)socialist urbanisations' can be within urban studies. Also, the ways in which researchers use key concepts and the meaning they ascribe to the words 'socialist' and 'post-socialist' are manifold. Moreover, many of the presentations used detailed case studies from very different places—either from a country or a particular city—as the basis for more general observations. The resulting mosaic of topics, cases, examples, and arguments was debated in the concluding panel discussion. In this sense, the organisers did a great job in leading the scholars and facilitating the exchange of ideas—there were no parallel sessions at the conference. As they were aware of the variety of approaches and issues and the risk of the splintering of ideas that such variety brings, they tried to advance an understanding of the conference as a call for a more general debate, founded on individual researchers' work. Moreover, two members of the organising team guest-edited a special issue of the *Estonian Urbanists' Review U*, which was dedicated to the themes of the conference and printed articles by some of the conference participants. This, together with the chosen format of the meeting, ultimately gave the conference a very compact and focused character.

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Notes:

- ¹ For more on the conference, see: <http://www.artun.ee/x/uld/>.