

Editors
Cor Wagenaar, Mieke Dings

Picture editor
Jannes Linders

IDEALS IN CONCRETE

Exploring Central and Eastern Europe

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Ode to the European city: the example of Central and Eastern Europe

Cor Wagenaar

'A truly living city is never the mere fossil of an unclarified past but a surging flow, continually abandoning the stony bed of tradition, solidifying and then flowing on, rolling over decades and centuries, from the past into the future, a continuum of hardened thrusts and ceaseless pulses unaware of its ultimate goal, yet it's this irrepressible, insatiable vitality, often wasteful and avaricious, destructive yet creative, that we call, approvingly or disapprovingly, the inner nature or spirituality of a city's existence.'

Péter Nádas, Book of Memories, p. 434

Fifteen years ago the Iron Curtain fell. It happened in some out-of-the-way meadows near the Austro-Hungarian border, not far from Sopron. The barbed wire that had separated East and West for over forty years was ceremonially cut through during a 'pan-European picnic' on 19 August 1989. Intended as no more than a ritual, several dozen East German holiday-makers saw their chance and strolled through the gap into Austria. Three months later the Berlin Wall fell, a dramatic event that has come to symbolize the end of an era. Since that day Eastern Europe is no longer what it was. If one thing characterized the countries 'behind' the Iron Curtain, it was the communist polity imposed from above by the Soviet Union which also called the political, military and economic shots.

With the fall of communism these countries lost everything from which they had derived their identity, voluntarily or under duress, for forty years. Where national traditions were lacking, the events of 1989 seemed to mark the absolute end. This was the case, for example, in the GDR which was only distinguished from the rest of Germany by its communist system of government. Whereas countries like Poland and Hungary cherish their national heritage and do their level best to present themselves as promising EU members, the 'neue Bundesländer' are haemorrhaging people. Nothing seems capable of turning the tide; even megalomaniacal investment in infrastructure and amenities cannot halt the collapse. While city administrators and the business community cling to the mantras of growth and development, others detect new opportunities in the shrinkage, which also appears to be a harbinger of the fate awaiting all European cities in two or three decades' time: in the long term shrinkage would appear to be inevitable everywhere.

For the time being the shrinking cities of the former GDR are an exception. Nowhere else has the parting from communism entailed a parting from the country itself. Elsewhere the triumph of capitalism and democracy is proceeding in a very different manner. Lenin has been usurped by Gucci, Versace, Rolex and the advertising signs of cheap supermarket chains like Tesco. Collective visions of a socialist utopia free from social friction, where an all-encompassing socio-economic planning unerringly provides

for every conceivable need, are forgotten. Only a handful of elderly communist faithful still believe in the old ideals. During the annual May 1st parades an inconspicuous place is reserved for them along the metropolitan boulevards they once filled with big parades and demonstrations. The pursuit of a better future is now a matter for the individual and is primarily focused on rapid material gain designed to make people forget the scarcities of the dead and buried planned economy. The myth of international solidarity, the binding agent of the Warsaw Pact and all its allies, is a thing of the past; with the exception of the former GDR, there is no country in the former East Bloc that is not diligently searching for its national identity.

The revolution that has taken place in the polity, the economy, social relations, politics and mentality has left deep marks on the city. The city is more than a mere reflection of the historical dramas that take place within it. The city is seen as a historical catalyst, urban designers and planners as managers whose task is to help it fulfil its historical role. The city is a personality in its own right, an instrument in the hands of political rulers.

Under communism architecture, urbanism and art were deployed in public space as a way of realizing fragments of the official vision of the future here and now. Changes in the make-up and accommodation of the population were intended to contribute to the emergence of a new society. For the driving force behind the ineluctable historical process – the working classes as represented by the party – special show boulevards, the Magistrales, were built, lined by workers' palaces in socialist-realist style. Not that the image of the future that the city was supposed to bring nearer was entirely unambiguous, however. The most conspicuous volte-face was the introduction of socialist realism and its repudiation less than five years later in the countries incorporated into the Soviet empire after 1945; but there were numerous other, less spectacular but no less drastic changes. What remained unchanged was the firm conviction that the city pointed the way to the future.

In the history of urban design and architecture there are probably few places and moments in which political, economic and social ideals were so directly cast in concrete as in the cities of Central and Eastern Europe in the four decades after 1945. This book explores these ideals, their origins, the widely employed urban design interventions they inspired, the consequences of the system change around 1990 and the replacement of old by new ideals and icons. It also considers how the experience gained in Central and Eastern Europe might contribute to the solution of fundamental problems in the post-war districts of Western Europe.

What ideals did the 'socialist city' embody? Apart from the brief socialist-realist intermezzo, the post-war 'socialist' city appears to be the most eloquent expression of the principles formulated around 1930 by the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM). That raises questions. Is there really a direct relation between post-war city planning in Central and Eastern Europe and the ideals of Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, the Bauhaus and Constructivism? Are the architectural-urbanist ideals of the pre-war pioneers conceivable without their more or less pronounced political ideals? Could the ideal of the 'socialist' city ever have been so convincingly brought into the limelight without the bewitching modernist future visions that architects and urban designers not only set down in propagandist perspectives but which they also built in many different places? Didn't the designers of the new housing estates run the risk

of having their ideals corrupted by politicians? What does a comparison between the post-war districts in the Netherlands and those in Central and Eastern Europe yield?

It is fascinating to see just how much quality there is in the new housing estates that were built en masse in Central and Eastern Europe. Erected using industrialized construction systems and known in Western Europe by their East German name, 'Plattenbau' (slab block), these vast residential areas are unequivocal reminders of the socialist past. Notwithstanding the dictatorship of the concrete panels, the housing factory and the building crane, they reveal a considerable degree of variation and it appears that they can be transformed without the need for large-scale demolition. It is above all the qualities inherent in the original design that make these once denigrated districts so interesting. The apartment buildings were not always brilliantly executed but the design, which featured many lifts and stairs, was relatively luxurious. For all its disadvantages, the 'denationalization' that followed the system change had one big advantage in that it allowed residents to fill the lacunae in post-socialist society and to take possession of the physical lacunae that are present in abundance in the housing estates of the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

It is these suburbs in particular that demonstrate that the city is capable of withstanding the most fundamental historical changes. In so doing they reveal a quality that is usually only attributed to old inner cities. Nonetheless, the consequences of the fall of communism are as far-reaching in the suburbs as in the old city cores and the way they are assimilating the social revolution that overtook them practically overnight raises questions about contemporaneous renovation projects in the post-war housing estates of the Netherlands. Central and Eastern Europe is experiencing an extreme form of same phenomenon whereby collective arrangements guaranteed by the government are being swept aside. Planning, the instrument by which these arrangements were realized, has fallen into disrepute. Central and Eastern Europe is witnessing the blossoming of 'informal planning', a euphemism for the total absence of planning. It contributes to the picture of the 'wild East' whose unbridled capitalism is reminiscent of the original, nineteenth-century capitalism. A huge amount of energy is being released and both city and countryside are changing at a speed that Western Europe hasn't witnessed for decades. For every architect in Kiev today there are two jobs; the boom town is exploding. Architects enter into coalitions with banks, developers and the owners of not yet 'denationalized' housing complexes, seize their chance and turn developer themselves.

Criticism of 'informal' planning initially fell on deaf ears because it sounded too much like a plea for a return to the central planning so typical of communism. Seldom can a change of political system have left a deeper mark on the city than the recent victory of capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe. Yet the socialist city has not been replaced by a capitalist one: the capitalist nestles in the socialist city which is still everywhere in evidence and nowhere more clearly than in the post-war districts. It conjures up a picture of a contest between new and old icons, symbols of old and new ideals that are antithetical and yet merge with one another in the city.

Nothing is simpler than to dismiss the socialist heritage and the changes effected by informal planning as the inevitable consequences of a system that lost the competition with a superior capitalism, and to portray the most socialistic ensembles (the Magistrales, the huge Plattenbau districts) as

both symbols and causes of the great failure. But what justification is there for this? The essays in this book dispose of these clichéd representations once and for all. What is happening in Central and Eastern Europe is in scale, consistency and effect, and also in the unbridled energy with which the massive reconstruction is being tackled, an example of how we might engage with the city. The city gives shape to history, but at the same time resists it. No artwork reflects reality as candidly as the city, and at this moment there are few cities that display more vitality and spirituality than the cities of Central and Eastern Europe.

