HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE HISTORY OF HOUSING PLANNING IN MODERN SERBIA TO ACHIEVE NEW QUALITY IN HOUSING?

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The topic of (post)socialist housing has been in the spotlight of European science for years. It has usually been examined in relation to specific social and economic aspects, such as tenant rights, social affordability or the issue of rents. Furthermore, it has been interpreted through the lenses of functional and physical aspects, close to urban planning. Nevertheless, scientific research traditionally makes a clear distinction between (post)socialist housing and its "counterpart" in Western Europe, regardless of the aforementioned aspects. However, this "dichotomy" has not been clear-cut in all parts of Europe. The space of former Yugoslavia is a good example of this ascertainment. Centrally positioned, Serbia has had a particularly interesting history of housing planning. Both western/capitalist and eastern/socialist influences have blended in Serbian housing since the beginning of modern age, in early 20th century. The former Oriental matrix of housing has gradually transformed into a specific urban construct through mixed influences. It began with early capitalist progress, which formed both the first modern housing and the informal housing in interwar period. The second period was very interesting because of a unique socialist model in housing with numerous western influences. The last period, i.e. post-socialist transformation, has brought some remnants from the past; visible informality has been developed side by side with new market-oriented housing models, causing observable housing segregation. This situation has created a new distinctiveness of Serbian housing. The purpose of this research is to understand these planning patterns of housing in Serbia, aiming to give recommendations and guidelines for a more resistant and proactive housing planning. This aim will be achieved through the critical presentation of the mentioned three periods. Significant effort will be put into headlining the distinctiveness of the planning of Serbian housing, which can be a crucial element for its qualitative transformation.

Keywords
housing, urban planning, (post)socialism, transition, Serbia

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of (post)socialist housing in Eastern and Central Europe has been in the spotlight of European science for years. Despite the fact that countries in this part of Europe have had distinctly different recent "post-socialist" history, they are regarded and studied as an entity in many cases. This is relevant even in case of major international organizations. It seems that these countries still have common characteristics, such as transitional difficulties in economy or ageing and declining population1, which is the reason they are examined in this manner. Thus, they are usually positioned as a contrast to housing in Western Europe, which has never had "socialist-state" element in its development.

However, the mentioned "dichotomy" has not been very strict in all parts of Europe. Located between the west, the east and the south, Serbia has always had elements of "hybrid" society. This location at the so-called "World crossroads" has brought the mixture of influences from Oriental heritage, socialist movements and constant impulses of Europeanization from the west. Regardless of whether these influences have been perceived as positive or negative, they have consequently formed the unique character of present-day Serbia[2].

This uniqueness has been reflected through all aspects of the society. In this matter, housing in Serbia is not an exception, because "(a) housing unit does not exist in isolation from its physical and social environment"[3]. It also has common characteristics with housing in other countries in South-eastern Europe, which is usually considered as a distinct region in this issue[4]. Nevertheless, some specific features have been recognized in the case of Serbia. These features have clear roots in the complex past of the country and the related process of housing planning during the 20th century. Generally, the history of housing planning in Serbia is divided in three major periods, in accordance to the well-known periods in both European and Serbian national history during the 20th century.

This research strives to clarify these relations between present characteristics of Serbian housing and housing planning during the 20th century. It is organized so as to present the three mentioned historic periods. The essence in presenting every period is to critically explain the main patterns of housing and related planning. It is expected for the study to enable headlining the distinctiveness of the planning of Serbian housing. Consequently, the research will lead to the final stage - giving recommendations and guidelines for a more resistant and proactive housing planning in Serbia.

THE FIRST PERIOD – SERBIA DURING INTERBELLUM

The space of current Serbia was unified for the first time and included in the newly-created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later named *Yugoslavia*, after the First World War, in 1918. It was formed from the former Kingdom of Serbia and the southern parts of the Hapsburg Empire[5].

In aforementioned unified Serbia, there coexisted three regional "housing" traditions. In the northern, former Hapsburg part, the housing followed Hungarian/Pannonian type of well-planned and spacious settlements. It was characterised by multi-storey single-family housing units with ground floor retail facilities along block perimeter in compact city centres, as well as detached single-family housing units with rural/agricultural elements in the suburbs[6]. In contrast to this type of housing, which shows clear links between living and economics, the Ottoman type of housing, which existed in the southern Serbian towns, shows a strict functional differentiation. This type of housing was organised in monofunctional, ethnically differentiated and spontaneously developed residential areas with detached houses, known as "mahalas", which encircled the central and very compact part of towns or "čaršija" with strictly non-residential functions (retail, crafts, government, etc.)[7].The third type of housing was "transitive" - it was developed in the central parts of the Principality of Serbia during the 19th century, as a result of the young Serbian elite strive to westernise the former Ottoman urban elements. Hence, this type of housing had elements of both the first and the second types - housing was merged with retail in a very dense and partly spontaneous urban matrix[8].

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FIGURE 1 Old image of Čačak - "Transitive" type of urban fabric and housing

FIGURE 2 Pannonian type of housing with retail in the city centre of Sremska Mitrovica

Despite the identified typology, housing was generally traditional –all the inherited types of housing referred to single-family housing models in underdeveloped urban centres. Therefore, it can be observed as a common characteristic that modern housing patterns with further division and enrichment of housing models were developed in interwar period. This characteristic related to major cities, where the first mass-industrialisation and urbanisation occurred[9]. For instance, although the first examples of social and workers' housing already existed in Belgrade[10] and Subotica[11] (northern Serbia) before the First World War, the interwar period witnessed the intensification of the construction and the appearance of different models of this type of housing[12].

The most intensive development of housing in the interwar period happened in Belgrade. Having become the capital of the newly-formed Yugoslavia, Belgrade transformed significantly in the following 23 years[13]. This was followed with the adoption of the new general urban plan of the city with very progressive albeit unachieved aims in 1924[14].Furthermore, the passing of the new Construction Law in 1931 had a significant impact[15]. As a result, Belgrade became a huge construction-site after it had been seriously destroyed during the war.

This period was marked with the appearance of the first affluent housing areas in Belgrade. Some of them were centrally located. Multi-storey residential buildings with spacious apartments were built there, adding a new urban character to the city. Other locations around the centre were transformed into new residential areas with huge plots and villas. Their development was characterised by the application of the elements of garden-city movement[16].

Nevertheless, vibrant atmosphere in the new capital and other major cities was followed by numerous problems in the housing sector. Newly-emerged demographic boom caused the problem of housing deficiency, which consequently resulted in the rise of illegal housing and informal residential areas. Furthermore, some legal obstacles, such as the ban of cooperative ownership in multi-family residential buildings, prevented the resolution of the problem. Therefore, almost half of the Serbian urban population lived in illegal settlements before the Second World War[17]. These settlements were usually constructed of poor material and without basic amenities and services. Typical example was a transformed and reduced terraced house model with small apartments, known as *Partaja18*. As a result of active illegal construction, professional argumentation about the weaknesses of the general urban plan appeared very soon after its adoption. This proved the obsolescence of the adopted urban plan[19].

Similar, but scaled down, patterns of housing development occurred in Novi Sad and Niš as these cities were the seats of "Serbian" provinces in Yugoslavia. As it was mentioned above, smaller cities and towns in Serbia were mostly in stagnation. Thus, the interwar housing in these cities and towns preserved most of the characteristics of previous epoch(s). Only limited transformations could be observed, which were more exceptions than a rule to the overall housing patterns.

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FIGURE 3 Typical examples of low-income and upscale inter-war housing in central Belgrade, with the problem of poor maintenance in both cases today

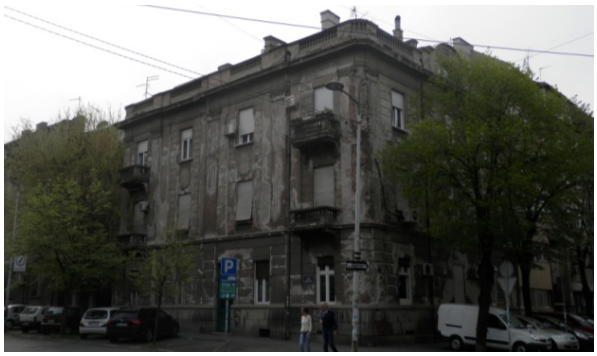

FIGURE 4 Typical examples of low-income and upscale inter-war housing in central Belgrade, with the problem of poor maintenance in both cases today

THE SECOND PERIOD – SOCIALIST SERBIA

Although Yugoslavia became just one in a number of new socialist countries in Eastern and Central Europe after the Second World War, it had a very different history during the following four decades[20]. After the expulsion of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia from the Stalin-controlled Communist Information Bureau in 1948, Yugoslavia took up a unique socialist model[21]. This model was officially inaugurated as a Workers' Self-Government, which enabled decentralisation at all levels. Furthermore, it introduced some elements of market economy and opened the country to the west[22]. This model was in total contrast to the remaining socialist countries, where state socialist elites controlled all aspects of life and strictly promoted planned economy[23].

The specificity of self-government model reflected strongly on the housing in Yugoslavia, because housing was one of the main problems for the new socialist government. The reasons were obvious: the cities were severely damaged during the war; more than 75% of Yugoslavian population lived in overpopulated albeit underdeveloped rural areas[24]; the state promoted the equalization of the proletariat and the urban residents in accordance with the socialist ideology of mass-industrialisation[25, 26]. As a result, state-assisted fast urbanisation happened in the decades to follow. K. Petovar even named it the "urbocentric policy"[27]. The main consequence of this rapid urbanisation was a huge pressure on housing in urban areas and major cities in particular.

As a result of the self-government model, the housing policy was decentralised in the 1960s, giving more independence to republic and local governments, which consequently "had power to turn down national prescriptions"[28]. For example, both of the mentioned government levels could enact their own norms and standards in housing construction[29]. Nevertheless, housing as well as other spheres of life in the socialist Yugoslavia were generally based on the socialist model comprising the so called apartments with tenant rights[30]. This model prevented complete decentralisation and allowed "covert" state control in housing[31].

Furthermore, this model enabled the introduction of some elements of market economy in the housing sector. This was especially noticeable in the construction of multi-family housing units, where a quasi-market system was organised. In these cases the state-owned companies had to invest at least 4% of their net product to buy new apartments from state-owned construction companies[32]. Moreover, the banking system of former Yugoslavia firmly supported all kinds of housing construction by offering very affordable loans. In the last decades of socialist Yugoslavia, this "approach" was transformed into a powerful model of locally-based Housing Construction Solidarity Funds which played a role of well-established cooperatives in housing construction.

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FIGURE 5 An example of more humane socialist multi-family housing estates in New Belgrade

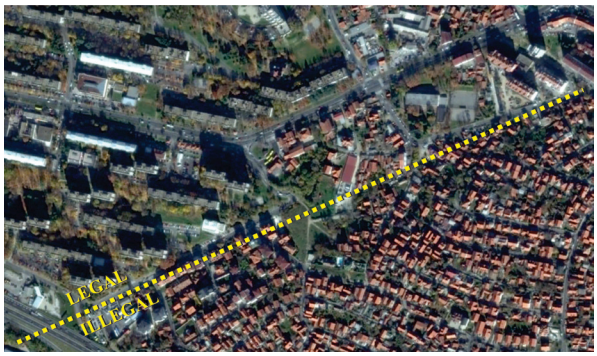

FIGURE 6 Sharp division between "legal" and "illegal" neighbourhoods in eastern Belgrade

These funds were particularly significant in the socialist republic of Serbia[33]. In contrast, the entire system of housing provision and construction was much simpler in the other socialist countries, where strictly vertical state-provided housing was dominant.

Another case which witnessed the difference between Yugoslavia and other socialist countries was the case of planning and designing process of mass-housing estates. Multi-family housing was planned and developed under western influence. This meant the introduction of new paradigms in the 1970s and the 1980s, such as housing programming[34] and participatory planning in housing. Panel blocks, well-known in many socialist cities, were relatively rare in the case of Yugoslavian cities. Additionally, the design of such blocks was usually well-organised and unique for every block or several blocks. The example of New Belgrade as a major "urban" representative of socialist Yugoslavia was illustrative – many blocks were formed according to the plans and projects with unique designs[35].

However, multi-family housing in mass-housing estates was not a prevalent model of housing in majority of the Yugoslavian cities and towns[36]. Single-family housing in the form of detached houses was dominant in most of the small and middle-size urban settlements. Some other residential forms, such as terraced houses, were very infrequent and linked with more developed regions (Slovenia, Vojvodina)[37]. Single-family housing was also supported by the state, through the system of aforementioned loans.

Although all the state levels in the socialist Yugoslavia paid much attention to the housing sector, housing construction in many towns and cities was not sufficient to satisfy the demographic needs. This was mostly noticeable in under-developed republics where fast urbanisation occurred (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia). Hence, the illegal sector of housing construction flourished there[38]. Illegal residential settlements were usually built in the outer belts around the main cities[39], disabling the formation of the well-planned and affluent suburbia, typical for the capitalist west. These settlements were characterised by a conflict between architectural and urban dimensions: despite the fact that the houses in illegal settlements were often very spacious and decently built, they were located on the land planned for other purposes and thereby excluded from the basic communal amenities and public services in spontaneously-developed and fuzzy urban fabric.

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THE THIRD PERIOD – POST-SOCIALIST SERBIA

Despite the fact that post-socialist transition is generalised by definition as a political and economic transformation of former socialist societies in Central and Eastern Europe[40], overall progress in this transformation has varied among countries. Post-socialist transition has been slower in the sub-region of the Balkans or South Eastern Europe, due to political turmoil in the 1990s. Due to the Yugoslavian crisis, the transition in the countries of former Yugoslavia has been a particularly painful experience. It has posed specific challenges to urban planning and housing, such as the destruction of the built environment, post-war reconstruction, refugees, the changes of national borders, etc. Therefore, most of the newly-formed countries are marked as "long-term excluded" territories in the EU integration[41]. This isolation is still evident.

In the case of Serbia, this isolation has often been named a "blocked" transformation in the 1990s[42]. Taking the housing sector in account, it refers to the state of coexistence of the elements of both old and new systems, where the role of the state was largely marginalised[43]. Serbian legal system of housing in the 1990s was a good example of such a situation – it was very problematic and obsolete by many criteria. For example, the main Law on housing, enacted in 1992, enabled a quick mass-privatisation of state-owned apartments, but prevented restitution process at the same time[44].Furthermore, it has not developed any mechanism which would substitute for the loss of former public housing. Finally, the implementation of the legal acts was very poor, which opened the doors to illegal practice in housing. Nevertheless, it has prevented some negative consequences of post-socialist transformation of residential areas, such as ghettoisation and urban fragmentation of housing[45].

The practice of illegal housing in Serbian cities was very widespread during the 1990s. For example, illegal construction occupied almost 50% of the housing sector in Belgrade in the late 1990s[46]. It was especially accelerated by the influx of the refugee population, who represented more than 7% of the total population in Serbia during this time. Furthermore, some patterns of illegal housing changed during the 1990s. For the first time it appeared in the inner parts of urban areas and in the form of multi-story collective buildings for the market. The problem with illegal housing practice was particularly noticeable in Belgrade. As a result, 44% of residential areas in the urban area of Belgrade were labelled illegal by the new general urban plan in 2002[47]. Such a high percentage proved this issue to be a "result" of unofficial "housing policy" in harsh times with the consequences that cannot be ignored in any future housing policy or strategy[48].

Although illegal housing has not been stopped after the political and economic opening of Serbia in 2000, it has decreased in numbers. The involvement of UN Habitat in Serbia has had an especially positive influence to the housing regulation, since housing component has been recognized by the entire urban development[49]. In this situation, most of the efforts have been made to recover the vulnerable cases such as Roma slums in Serbia, which are known as socially excluded urban spaces with a high level of informality[50]. Nevertheless, the regulation of this element in housing is still an inevitable task for Serbian experts and authorities – three legalisation acts passed in the last 15 years have not had major success.

The problem of illegal housing in the last two decades has certainly been connected to the evident shortage of public or social housing. Nowadays, more than 98% of housing units in Serbia are in private ownership, which is higher than in most other post-socialist countries[51]. Mass-privatisation of old housing facilities has not been followed by a measure to replace them with new forms of social/affordable housing. Even though qualitative new legislation on social housing was enacted several years ago, the concrete provision of new social/affordable housing has not been successful due to both financial and administrative problems[52]. For example, new social-housing buildings are still very rare in Serbian cities. Accordingly, inefficient state policy in housing has caused a huge gap between the need and the solutions in socially supporting housing measures.

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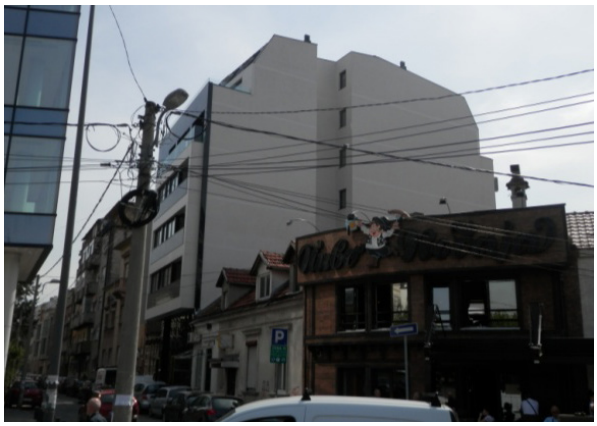

FIGURE 7 Evident problem with the maximization of the capacities of built plot in central Belgrade

FIGURE 8 One of the rare examples of new social housing in Serbia, in Sremska Mitrovica

The aforementioned mass-privatisation has also caused some other obstacles in housing development. Many new flat owners have been too poor to maintain the newly-acquired private property, which has consequently led to visible problems of maintenance and management of the existing housing facilities[53]. Many multi-family housing buildings are currently in bad shape.

In contrast, this issue has caused the occurrence of one quite conflicting and unique phenomenon. Since living costs in non-maintained multi-family buildings are more affordable to a typical Serbian urban household, the price of this type of housing is significantly higher than the price of single-family detached houses with similar surface area. This has even been evident in small cities and towns in Serbia since 2000, where general urban patterns enable smaller densities. Market has reacted to this opportunity before the adequate controlling system has been established. Consequently, new multi-storey housing facilities are usually constructed on overbuilt plots with maximum utilization of the capacities, which altogether generates inhumane living conditions regarding natural lightening or ventilation.

The solution for the refurbishment of such existing multi-family buildings in Serbian cities is also unique. It refers to the addition of extra floor(s) above the top of existing buildings as a compensation for the refurbishment. But, weak legal and administrative systems in Serbia have influenced these extensions to be of ill-favoured design and on prominent positions in the urban space[54].

Conclusion — Recommendations and Guidelines for Future Development Considering the elaboration of modern housing history of Serbia, it is easy to make a between some long-lasting patterns and new tendencies in this sector. This distinction can be a good starting point for the formulation of different approaches to the tasks of housing planning in Serbia:

First, the problem of illegal practice in Serbian housing has been obvious during the entire period. Even more, the illegal residential construction has boomed in the last period of post-socialist transformation, bringing into question the total urban development. Thus, coping with illegal housing is certainly the major task in spatial and urban planning. However, planning needs to overcome the old “conservative” approach and try to cleverly deal will it instead of disclaiming it. The worst option is to turn a blind eye to this widespread and persistent problem.

A similar long-lasting problem can be noticed in housing regulation. It seems that legal and planning acts in housing have been strict in relation to ownership and land utilization, but without adequate outcomes in reality. New market economy in Serbia is certainly a challenge, but examples of good practice in other post-socialist countries clarify that these acts can be flexible enough to enable a balance between regulations and profitability.

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Other problems are related to the more recent history of Serbian housing. For example, the maximum utilization of all capacities in the construction of new housing facilities is not just a problem for legislation and formal planning but is also linked with individual preferences and knowledge. Therefore, the education of prospective owners of new housing facilities could be very useful. The popularisation of guidance books and best-practice brochures could accompany this practice.

The management and the maintenance of old housing facilities have also been a relevant factor in the recent history. Here, the task is to transform the current system into a new one which would produce self-regulation of the existing housing. For such an accomplishment the combined efforts of public and private sectors are inevitable. Planning should promote sustainable patterns and modes. One of the possible solutions is a shift of a part of these facilities from residential to other central functions, which are more market-orientated and hence more able to invest in maintenance. This can be a win-win combination since it will consequentially support new housing construction and vitality of the housing market.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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Image Sources

Figure 01: Photo-Archive of National museum of Čačak
Figure 02 to 05: Branislav Antonić
Figure 06: Google Earth (accessed April 6, 2016)
Figure 07 to 08: Branislav Antonić

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