

Under the Scope of the Communistic Building Block

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Abstract

Communism was a big part of the Bulgarian history that started after World War 2 and lasted until the last decade of the previous century. This period greatly influenced the current architecture, and mindset and ideas of the people. It is famously known for regarding every individual as equal, which resulted in every person having the same opportunities and resources in their lives. Hence, big building blocks were built to provide housing for the people. These high-density flats were known for their cheap and easy to build construction, later resulting in gray and repetitive building blocks, which in Bulgarian are known as “*Panelki*”. During that period these building blocks provided all the necessary things that their inhabitants needed, such as courtyard open spaces, which were positioned between two or three building blocks, where the children could play freely, while their parents watch over them from their own apartment. It also provided people with a sense of community, as all necessities, such as shops for food or clothes, were positioned “around every corner”. Hence, the small neighborhoods were self-sufficient in a way, which led to the people living in them becoming familiar with each other. Therefore, in this essay the concept of sharing and equality would be investigated as a predominant theme in people’s lives and the architecture that surrounded them, portrayed through the public and private spaces of the typical residential flats “*Panelki*”. The research would include methodological research methods, such as interviews, mental maps, and collection of primary gathered data, in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the proposed topic.

Keywords

Communism / Bulgaria / Architecture / Public and Private Spaces / Flats

Introduction

The time period after the Second World War significantly influenced all the European countries and resulted in changes in government structures in many of them. During these years the Bulgarian country rule was changed into a communistic rule and Bulgaria remained a socialist country for a

major part of the previous century.¹ During the periods of 1950-60s many countries in Europe, under the socialist rule, were facing a housing crisis, due to a sudden urbanization initiated to restore the economy and population in the bigger cities. In Bulgaria the rural population greatly outweighed the urban one, which prevented the country's transition to industrialization.² Hence, through opening new job opportunities in the bigger cities, the population began transitioning from rural to urban, which presented the housing crisis. To combat this lack of housing, the main country's focus was put on the construction of quick and cheap buildings, which was accomplished by using prefabricated concrete façade panels. These high-density residential flats were referred to as "*Panelki*", which is translated to "Panels", describing the simple but yet practical method of construction. These flats embodied the needs of the time while portraying the ideals of the communistic period. The housing was established through state control which aimed at providing housing equally to every resident, while maintaining full control over the housing market and over the population, especially the former higher class. The power and control of the state was further imposed through the clear distinction between the government owned/ public buildings and the private residential buildings. Given the ideals of equality promoted throughout society, the buildings manifested these ideas through their monotone and repetitive character. The government buildings, on the other hand, served as symbols of authority and control, potentially reflecting a propaganda agenda aimed at state control and societal obedience.³ After the collapse of the Communist period the attitude towards the typical socialist flat were completely changed, as the collective ideals and mindset were substituted with the individuals.

The architecture of the Communist period is often analyzed through the monumental structures that erected throughout the country's landscape, symbolizing the political structure of the era. At a closer view of the residential flats, the construction methods are often examined, combined with design structures that are often viewed through a political lens. Hence, this report aims at providing a distinctive perspective into the influence that Communism had on the public and private spaces of residential buildings and how the ideals of sharing and inclusion of collective areas were integrated through the different construction methods. This would be achieved through explorative research, combining number of primary and secondary sources, such as photographs documenting the cityscape, interviews with current or former residents of socialist flats and collection of mental maps.

¹ "Bulgaria - WWII, Axis, Allies | Britannica," accessed March 7, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Postwar-politics-and-government>.

² John Lampe and Mark Mazower, *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe* (Central European University Press, 2004).

³ Dobrinka Parusheva and Iliyana Marcheva, "Housing in Socialist Bulgaria: Appropriating Tradition," *Home Cultures* 7 (July 1, 2010): 197–215, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174210X12663437526214>.

Influence of Communism on Architecture and Housing

Communism greatly affected the architecture in Bulgaria, both in terms of private and public buildings. To begin with, the period focused on the urbanization of the bigger cities, as a way of pushing forward the industrialization period, while presenting the main ideology as equality. Hence, this was translated into the architectural world, where new residential buildings were built to combat the high demand of housing in the bigger cities, where many people moved for job opportunities and the idea of a better life. State control was being implemented in the housing market which aimed at removing private housing, in order to diminish the different social classes, such as the bourgeoisie, and in turn, increase the control over them. Different methods were implemented from the other socialist countries, such as the standardization and prefabrication concepts.⁴ The latter idea became the standard technique for constructing fast and cheap housing. The prefabrication method is illustrated in the images below, where identical prefabricated concrete panels are assembled onto the load-bearing construction.

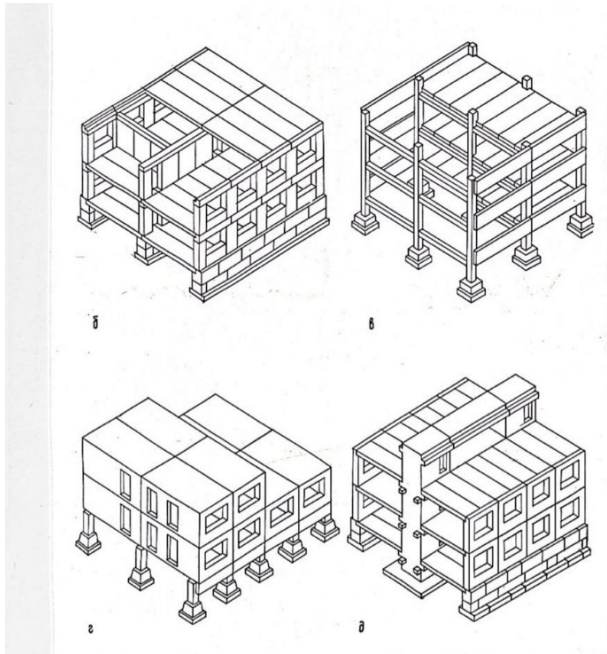


Figure 1: Prefabrication method illustrated in an architectural textbook from 1987⁵



Figure 2: Photograph by Panayot Burnev taken in 1975 of a construction site⁶

The photograph, Figure 2, is of a building's construction site, where the façade of the building appears to be constructed of identical prefabricated panels, which is deduced from the clear separation

⁴ Dobrinka Parusheva and Iliyana Marcheva, "Housing in Socialist Bulgaria: Appropriating Tradition," *Home Cultures* 7 (July 1, 2010): 197–215, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174210X12663437526214>.

⁵ С. Б. Дехтяр et al., *Архитектурные Конструкции. Гражданских Зданий* (Будивельник, 1987).

⁶ Panayot Burnev, "Bulgarian Visual Archive: Panayot Burnev" (visualarchive.bg, 2019), <https://visualarchive.bg/en>.

between the borders of each panel. The prefabricated structure is assumed to be concrete, which can be based on exterior knowledge and based on the concrete machine that is lifted by the crane. Hence, this construction method presented identical apartment types, as the prefabricated panels did not allow for much freedom in the organization of the spaces in the apartments. Through the similar building methods of all the newly built residential flats, similarities in the apartment layouts could be found in all the flats. This is investigated further in the report through the use of mental maps of residents who lived or are currently living in socialist flats.

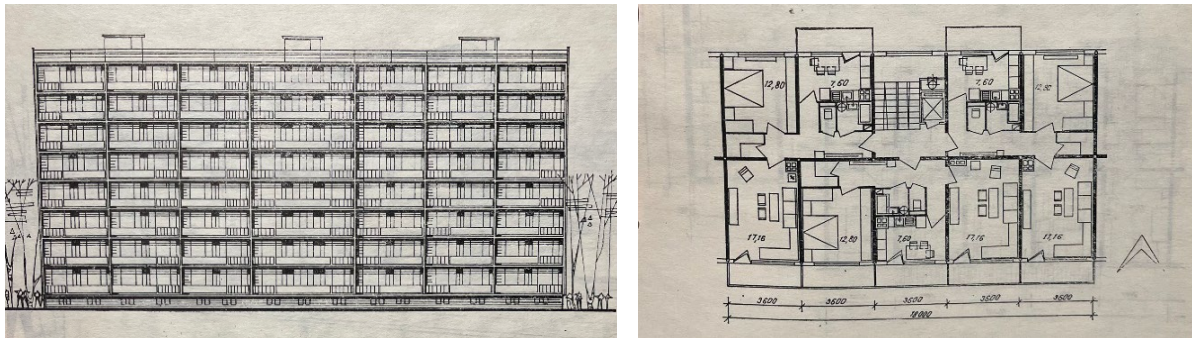


Figure 3: Floorplan and Elevation taken from an architectural textbook published in 1978 ⁷

The figure depicts the characteristic repetitive façade layout of the socialist building flats during the Communist period. It is often distinguished by the allocation of balconies along two sides of the structure, facilitating connection to the public space and ensuring relative outdoor access to all apartments. Given the typical structure of these blocks with multiple entrances and subsequently with multiple circulation cores, it is typical that three apartments are accommodated around each of these central points. As seen in Figure 3 only two of these apartments feature a two-sided outdoor connection, leaving the third apartment with relation to only one side of the building block. Hence, certain inequalities might arise, however, the apartments contain identical spaces and functions, all connected through an internal hall, and a compromise can be deduced based on the slight difference in the number of balconies present in the two different types of apartments.

The influence of communism on architecture can also be depicted in the significant difference between public/ government buildings and social/ residential ones in their architectural design and expression. Given the concept of equality during this period, certain exceptions could be seen in the upper classes, especially government officials. However, an interesting comparison can be made between the socialist housing blocks and public/ government buildings.

⁷ Ангел Дамянов, *Жилищни Сгради. Първа Част*. (Държавно Издателство, 1978).



Figure 4: *Government Buildings in Sofia built in the 1950s*
(Photograph: taken by Kathmandu & Beyond) ⁸

The photograph highlights the contrast between the construction methods and design between buildings constructed for different functions. The government building in Figure 4, can be distinguished by complex design of the façade constructed with expensive stone materials, compared to the repetitive and simple construction of the prefabricated concrete residential flats. The scale and expression of the government building symbolize the power of the Communist rule of that period.⁹ Thus, it can be inferred that the focal theme and concept of public residential buildings predominantly lied on the portrayal of equality and repetition, while the private government ones represent the opposite – standing out as expensive and grandiose, thus further proving the power of the Communist party not only to the nation, but to other socialistic countries.

Transition Period of the Urbanization

As the urbanization of the bigger cities was pushed by the socialist parties to improve the economy of the bigger cities, the landscape of the country started to change drastically. The country's rural population, that was living in small houses in the villages was presented with a new reality of the bigger cities with tall multi-family buildings. The change presented many challenges, as the Bulgarian population was characterized with a 'small holder' mentality, as people had a clear preference of

⁸ Mark, "Communist-Era Architecture in Sofia, Bulgaria | Guide to Sofia Architecture," Kathmandu & Beyond, December 2, 2016, <https://www.kathmanduandbeyond.com/communist-era-architecture-sofia-bulgaria/>.

⁹ Svetlin Kiradzhiev, *Sofia. 125 Years a Capital. 1879–2004*. (Guttenberg, 2006).

owning their own private property, which they defined as a home.¹⁰ Furthermore, with statistics showing that the rural population of the country before the war was around 80%, the urbanization was presented with distinct challenges of providing a functional practice that would facilitate the change.¹¹



Figure 5: *Changing landscape of Sofia.*
(Photographs: taken by Panayot Burnev)¹²



Figure 6: *A typical socialist flat.*

The two images, captured by the photographer Panayot Burnev in 1981, portray the change in the landscape of the big cities, as tall flat buildings emerge in the city's landscape. The buildings shown in image 5 vary greatly which alludes to the development that is occurring within the city.

In an interview with Petia Ilieva, who experienced this changing landscape first handedly, a different perspective is understood. In her words, “the change was not that drastic”. She lived in a small town in Bulgaria and moved to Sofia for pursuing higher education, during which she lived in a communistic flat near the center of Sofia. She explains that this change was not a big deal, as a lot of people used to do that. When presented with the question of whether she found it difficult to live in a small apartment in a big building block with many other residents, while being used to living in smaller dwellings/ houses, her response was: “It was considered normal, people lived in small apartments in the bigger cities for better job opportunities, but everyone still had their villas in the villages, where the older generations lived, so every weekend you go and visit them.”. She further added: “People didn't question why during that period; it was normal that things are implemented and then you just follow them.”. The interview concluded with a personal view of how she perceived that change, to which the reaction was: “The biggest change for me was that the buildings we used to live

¹⁰ Dobrinka Parusheva and Iliyana Marcheva, “Housing in Socialist Bulgaria: Appropriating Tradition,” *Home Cultures* 7 (July 1, 2010): 197–215, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174210X12663437526214>.

¹¹ “ERSF-02-10-1969_The_Agricultural_Economy_and_Trade_of_Bulgaria.Pdf,” accessed April 9, 2024, https://downloads.usda.library.cornell.edu/usda-esmis/files/jq085j963/cj82kb67z/cv43p116g/ERSF-02-10-1969_The_Agricultural_Economy_and_Trade_of_Bulgaria.pdf.

¹² Burnev, “Bulgarian Visual Archive: Panayot Burnev.”

in were small one- or two-family dwellings, which were usually built by our families. I remember when I was younger and we moved, it was the elders in the family that were laying the bricks, and that was normal, but of course it took a very long time.”¹³

Hence, the interview provided another perspective into urbanization that presents a rather natural transition, which provided people with more job opportunities. Based on the interview it can be deduced that the functional practice that was positively received by the people was the duality of housing that people had. The fast-changing landscape of the bigger cities did not present a difficult transition in society, as people kept their “small-holder’s” mentality by keeping their rural villas, where they could always seclude to. This mindset is still present in today’s society in Bulgaria, as it has become a normal practice for the older generations/ ‘grandparents’ to live in small houses in the villages and smaller towns, while the younger generation to live in the bigger more developed and thus more densely populated cities, but still visit their relatives in the outskirts during the weekends.

The Urban Landscape of the Socialist Movement

The landscape of the socialist cities, such as the capital Sofia, had a different functional structure of the urban planning compared to the Western countries of that period. The organization of the city centers is distinguished through the concentration of residential structures instead of commercial activities. The focal point of the city center was predominantly focused on government buildings and housing. However, the core of the cities was considered exclusive for the higher classes and government officials, as the architecture of that region was characterized as historical, way more distinctive and highly perceived. Hence, the socialist housing project was predominantly focusing on the outskirts, the more distant from the center neighborhoods of the bigger cities.

The housing planning on the city’s outskirts consisted of an abundance of socialist flats closely built to one another shaping these newly constructed neighborhoods. An example of this initiative is a residential complex called ‘Tolstoy’ which was distinguished through the utilization of prefabricated panels.¹⁴ The region and subsequently similar areas were later developed with similar housing projects with a focus on locations in close proximity to industrial areas to accommodate housing for the workers. To this day, the most notable region of the socialist housing movement remains the neighborhood of Mladost, epitomizing the ideas of this initiative. These newly designed neighborhoods were characterized through their repetitive building blocks, but also with their public

¹³ Petia Ilieva, *Living in a Communistic Flat*, 2024.

¹⁴ Kiril Stanilov, *The Post-Socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2007).

and green areas positioned throughout the building blocks, giving access points of each flat to a park area, as illustrated in the image below.



*Figure 7: Housing Conglomerate in Mladost built during the Communism
(Photograph: Newspaper “Trud”)¹⁵*

The socialist housing initiative varied across the different urban scales, as the central regions of the city, considered as historical neighborhoods with abundance of single-family houses including private gardens, were differently adapted compared to the outskirts regions. In the central regions the housing projects of numerous building blocks, that were planned completed on the outskirts of the city, could not be executed as the already existing buildings were perceived as historical and could not be demolished. Hence, a different approach was taken that densified the central neighborhoods, while maintaining the historical landscape of the existing architecture. This resulted in reduction of the public and green areas, as well as private gardens of the existing properties, and introduction of a mixed building typology.

¹⁵ Наталия Малчева, “Тревоги около панелните блокове - Труд,” April 18, 2024, <https://trud.bg/тревоги-около-панелните-блокове/>.



Figure 8: Images showing socialist flats emerging among smaller houses in the city center of Sofia (Photographs: taken by author)

The images above are taken nowadays, but still represent the significant effect that Communism and the numerous socialist flat buildings that emerged in not only the outskirts but also the city center had on the city's landscape. Due to the limited unoccupied space in the center of the city, these flats are scarcely positioned around and stand out among the smaller single-family houses. This presents a distinctive landscape over the central parts of the city, through the combination of high-rise with low-rise, as well as a mixture of different architectural expressions. Even nowadays with the emergence of high-rise culture, significantly altering the landscape of the city, the socialist blocks remain a distinctive feature in the cityscape.

Building Block Scale – The Collective Green Areas

The residential complexes built on the outskirts of the cities during the period of communism portray a unique structure combining the private, public, and collective spaces in an intricate way. The areas are characterized by the abundance of building blocks erected in close proximity to one another, presenting a simple and repetitive landscape. However, the neighborhoods can be distinguished through the elaborate integration of these structures with the outdoor green areas distributed between them, which can be seen on Figure 7 and 9.



Figure 9: Image of a Residential Flat with a Park next to it
(Photograph: taken by author)

The green areas surrounding those blocks represented a new type of urban planning approach implemented within the emerging building typologies. These outdoor spaces served as focal points, providing a collective area for the different residents of the various blocks to come together in a shared environment. This was an essential concept during the communist period, as not only it enhanced social interactions, but fostered a stronger sense of community among the inhabitants of the different blocks. Given the early stages of development of the high-rise living environment, residents were confronted with an unfamiliar reality of cohabiting with numerous other families, presenting possible challenges within the social dynamics and living practices. Hence, a significant importance relies on this outdoor collective point where the different families would meet and socialize, while their children are playing in the playgrounds.¹⁶

The importance of these intermediary spaces between building blocks is further presented in a movie made during the communist period. The film highlights the profound connection that the residents of the flats shared with the collective green areas adjacent to their home. Further depicting the integral role these spaces have in shaping the social fabric of these residential structures. The movie called ‘The Hedgehogs’ War’, which was later adapted into a children’s book, portrays a glimpse into the

¹⁶ Pavlína Kolcunová, Ivan Siláči, and Ľubica Vitková, “Public Space and Its Role to Transforming the Community,” *Procedia Engineering*, World Multidisciplinary Civil Engineering-Architecture-Urban Planning Symposium 2016, WMCAUS 2016, 161 (January 1, 2016): 1944–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proeng.2016.08.784>.

lives of a group of children living in neighboring residential flats. The narrative follows the children getting together in their free time to play outside in this in-between playground area. The film provides a unique inside perspective into the daily lives of the people residing in those neighborhoods through the lens of these young protagonists, captivating the intricate connection intertwining the private lives of the individual residents with the communal setting. Through the movie the essence of these residential complexes is captured, portraying the relations formed among the residents. The story is predominantly unfolded through the innocence of the children's perspective, whose focus relies on getting together and playing with their friends, however the storyline reflects on the lives of everyone residing in those buildings. In the movie it can be seen how the children are presented in a safe environment, where they can carelessly play, while being supervised by their parents from their own homes. Given the building blocks orientation towards the middle playground, there is constant surveillance onto the playground or in other words 'eyes on the backyard', ensuring safety and security. The familiarity of the residents is further illustrated, as each family collectively takes care of and looks after all the children. A touching scene in the movie depicts even further this sense of connection and trust among the residents, when one family extends an invitation to some of the other children to join them for dinner at their house, thus, highlighting the significance of communal bond and the positive supportive environment characterized in those building complexes during that period. Furthermore, the movie also emphasizes the seamless integration of interior and exterior spaces through a comedic scene, where different mothers call out their children to return home for dinner, their voices intermixing and echoing within the in-between block area. This moment portrays the effortless connection of the individual private residences with the outdoor playground areas. Thus, the movie 'The Hedgehogs' War' provides a unique glimpse of the lives of the people inhabiting the socialist flats, while reflecting on the vital concepts of unity and cohesion among the community.¹⁷

Building Block Scale – The Private Interior Space

On a smaller scale, the residential buildings of the communistic period serve as a reflection of the ideals of the time. The repetitive nature of the flats, characterized by their monotone façade elements, presents the collective mindset and focal point of the socialist regime. By prioritizing uniformity, these buildings symbolize the detachment of individuality in the pursuit and the interest of cohesion and collectiveness.

The building blocks, as previously mentioned, harmoniously blend the ideals of unity and equality across various scales of their structure. The embodiment of these principles is evident in the similar formation and execution of these blocks through the Socialist countries. The construction of the

¹⁷ *The Hedgehogs' War* (1979) | MUBI, accessed April 19, 2024, <https://mubi.com/en/nl/films/the-hedgehogs-war>.

typical socialist housing building adhered to a specific standardized layout, which ensured suitable and optimal organization, and cohesion within each structure. Given the widespread adoption of this standardized socialist model, the communist landscape was presented with the emergence of similar or even identical structures. Hence, the majority of the newly built buildings during this period resemble one another both in their external appearance, but also in their internal layout. The internal organization of the buildings adhered to a standardized principle, which led to the formation of a middle circulation core with apartments positioned around it. Likewise, the apartments surrounding the circulation were designed following a certain spatial organization fostering societal cohesion and equality.¹⁸

To investigate the internal cohesion among different socialist buildings, an analysis is conducted to examine the spatial organization and functional layout of apartments across various buildings from the communist period. This is achieved through interviewing people currently living in socialist flats or who have previously resided in such. Each of these people is asked to make a mental map of how they remember their apartment by drawing a quick sketch of the spaces. Mental maps provide a unique insight into people's perspective and spatial cognition of their memories and perception. They can be used to map out similarities and differences among different cognitive maps due to peoples' subjective idea and remembrance of a space.¹⁹

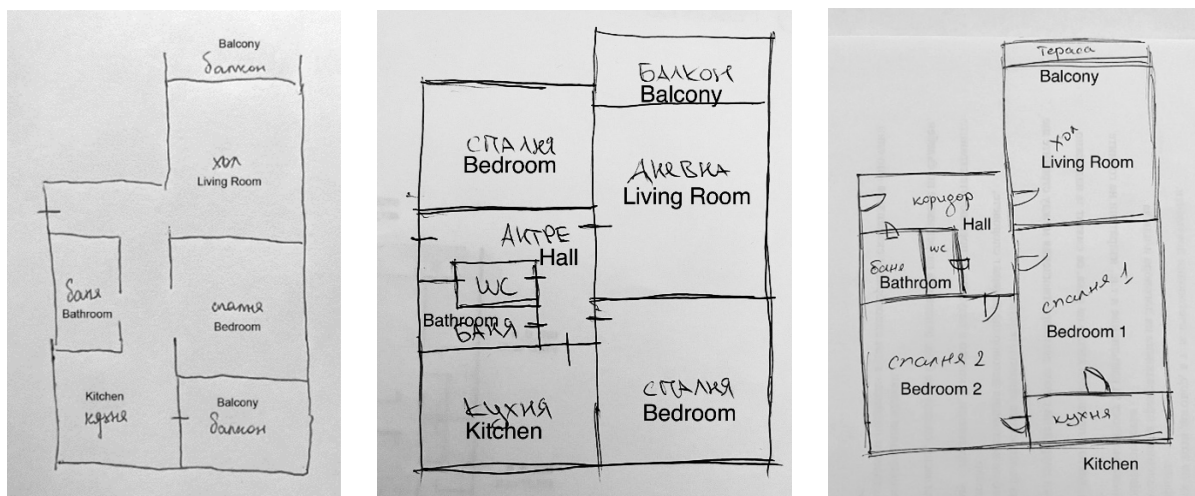


Figure 10: *Mental Maps of Different Apartments in Different Socialist Buildings*
(Images Drawn: Petia Ilieva, Ioana Petkanova, Dimitar Doychev - respectively)

Figure 10 presents three different mental maps drawn by three separate people that have previously lived in a socialist flat. The maps are hand-drawn including written text and translation of each of the

¹⁸ Дамянов, *Жилищни Сгради. Първа Част*.

¹⁹ Lisa Weston and Susan Handy, "Mental Maps," in *Handbook of Transport Geography and Spatial Systems*, ed. David A. Hensher et al., vol. 5 (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2004), 533–45, <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781615832538-030>.

spaces, later added by the author. Similarities between the three sketched apartments can directly be noticed, such as the overall positioning of the various functions and their connection to each other. The most prominent similarity is the hallway that is the focal point of all three apartments, as it is located in the middle of the apartment, providing accessibility points to each of the different spaces. An allusion can be drawn connecting those private apartments with the overall organization of the building itself, as clear similarities can be noted of the organizational layout, as both follow a sequencing order of an inner circulation space that connects each of the individual apartments or rooms. Given the three apartments typology, shown in Figure 3, it can be deduced that the apartments in Figure 10 can be considered corner ones, due to the positioning of the entrances, as well as the balconies, accounting for the apparent similarity of these housings.

The mental map, drawn by Dimitar, however, presents some variations in the spatial layout compared to the other two maps. When questioned about this alteration, it was understood that this is the image of the apartment he remembers, however, the apartment has undergone several developments since it was first purchased. Hence, the spaces have been adapted from their initial functions, such as the kitchen, which was initially a balcony and the second bedroom, originally used for the kitchen.²⁰

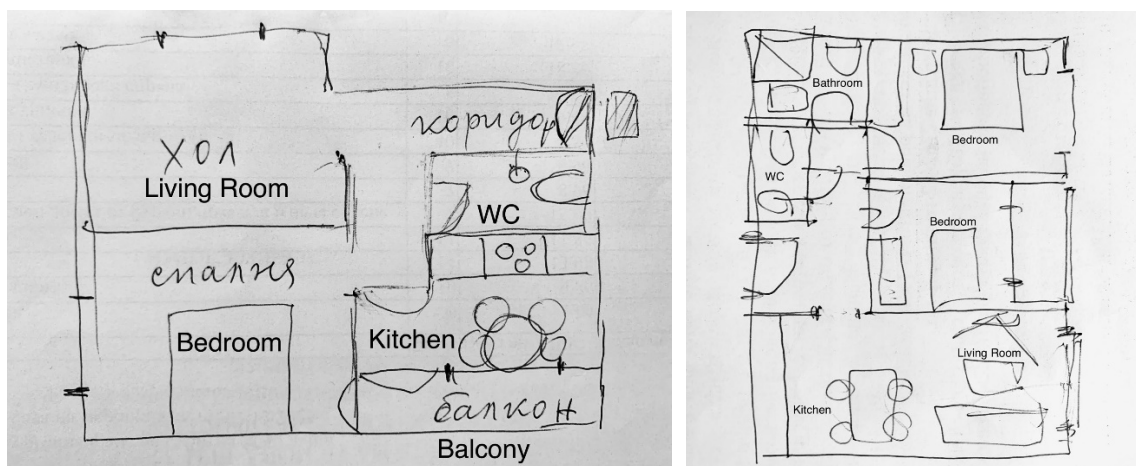


Figure 11: *Mental Maps of Different Apartments in Different Socialist Buildings*
(Images Drawn: Elena Boyadzhieva, Ilian Iliev - respectively)

The mental maps in Figure 11 illustrate different types of socialist apartments. The image, sketched by Ilian, can be deduced to be a middle apartment, following the three-apartment layout scheme, evident from the positioning of the balcony across the main entrance, hence, allowing direct sunlight from only one side of the apartment. Having one-sided window placement poses constraints in the varieties of the apartment spaces, highlighting the differences between the given apartment and the previous ones. Additionally, the cognitive map by Elena portrays a distinct apartment, which is likely situated

²⁰ Dimitar Doychev, *Mental Map of an Apartment in a Socialist Building*, 2024.

at either end of a building block due to the inclusion of two adjacent window areas, while the rest of the spatial organization can be assimilated to the apartments in Figure 10.

Thus, the mental maps can offer an exploratory analysis of spatial arrangements within different research areas. They present an intricate scope into the spatial setting of apartments located in communist buildings, as they provide an additional personal subjective layer of memories and experiences of the individuals that resided in those spaces. Through incorporating personal interpretations, these drawings can document changes and developments made to the apartments by the residents over time.

Additionally, the analysis of these maps provides an insight into the similarities throughout the various apartments in the different communist buildings, which further portrays the standardized organizational scheme these socialist flats were following. Thus, it can be further alluded to the concept of equality during that period, as everyone was given similar or even identical housing options, which fostered a shared equivalence among the society and even on a smaller scale among your own building blocks neighbors. This notion played a significant role in cultivating a communal and cohesive environment among the people, regardless of their working title and origin.

Traces of the Communist Buildings Nowadays

Following the collapse of Communism, drastic densification occurred in the big cities in Bulgaria. This resulted in the expansion of the urban areas, encompassing the previously considered outskirts zones with the discussed Panel buildings into the central city area. Hence, the abundance of socialist residential building complexes became integral features of the post-socialist reality of the urban landscape. Since the fall of the Socialist period, the attitude towards these flats changed completely, as the construction methods once employed during Communism were abandoned and replaced with new approaches. The buildings started being considered of low quality, unpleasant and with many different issues, nevertheless too uniform to express any uniqueness and personality, key features in modern society. Thus, these buildings are considered to be lacking in quality, aesthetically unpleasing and afflicted with numerous issues. The prefabricated façade panels are criticized to be of poor quality, due to the fast construction methods required during that period, resulting in bad insulation and window quality. As a result, the areas of the city with predominant construction of socialist flats began to be perceived as unsafe and undesirable. This shift reflects the post-socialist ideals, where personal preferences and aspirations become of a much greater consideration and focus, alongside an increased appreciation for value and quality.²¹

²¹ Stanilov, *The Post-Socialist City*.

The decline in value of socialist flats could also be attributed to the political climate, as the Communism reflects the ideas and presents affiliations to Russia. Hence, in the post-socialist era negative connotations are connected to these flat buildings, as they have become a symbol of the past. The shift in attitude towards these buildings is evident in the emergence of defacement and graffiti on the blocks, reflecting the public dissatisfaction with their historical and political connotations.



Figure 12: *Graffiti on Old Communist Buildings*
(Photograph: taken by author)

The image above portrays a socialist building block in the center of Sofia which has been defaced multiple times. The municipality has undertaken multiple cleaning initiatives to remove the graffiti, however they were deemed unsuccessful, as the buildings would be vandalized anew. Hence, most of the buildings around the country, predominantly the socialist blocks, have been defaced with graffiti illustrating the society rejecting the previous ideals of the Communist time.

Change in the landscape of these type of building blocks can be seen through the rise and focus on the individual preferences and affinity of the society replacing the former collective ideals. This shift in the people's mindset can be seen in the separate improvements and changes to the individual apartments in the flats. Given the poor building quality of these buildings, renovations were needed to provide a better living environment and to cater to the more modern preferences and needs. The most common improvement people implemented was the addition of insulation, which included the placement of extra material to the exterior face of the façade. Given the lack of government support and initiative to improve the flats and present better living conditions, the residents were compelled to organize and take control of making the additions themselves.²² However, in the post-socialist reality the equality ideal began to fade and the residents in the buildings were now faced with different financial opportunities. In many cases, entire building blocks were renovated together by all the residents, resulting in a cohesive façade appearance. On the other hand, the majority of the socialist

²² Stanilov.

flats were faced with a contrasting reality, resulting in partial improvements and unpleasant overall exterior appearance.



Figure 13: *Partial Insulation Improvements in a Communist Flat*
(Photograph: taken by author)

Lastly, the construction methods of these flats left a misconstrued understanding and impression over the pre-fabrication techniques because of their poor quality, execution and materials that were used in the Socialist era. Nowadays despite the country's lack of sustainable materials and construction methods, a reintroduction of prefabricated building materials is negatively understood and rejected by the post-socialist society. In an interview with architect Ilian Iliev, who has been actively working in the architecture field since before the fall of Communism, the topic of sustainability and the most prominent shifts in the evolving architectural landscape were further discussed. In his opinion, a noticeable hesitance has emerged among the Bulgarian society towards embracing new and sustainable construction methods such as the pre-fabrication techniques, due to a negative connotation associated with the building methods applied in socialist flats. Given the current climate change and ecological crisis, the need for durable and sustainable practices is more than essential. However, influenced significantly by the historical building techniques, Bulgaria's development towards sustainable methods appears to be rather behind compared to the rest of Europe.

In Ilian's words, "there are many things slowing this progress down and one aspect, in my opinion, is the rejection of certain methods, due to previous undesirable examples", referring to the prefabrication method used during Socialism. As mentioned above, the technique was adapted to provide expedited housing options for the people, however with low quality. Despite significant developments and advances in the method in the last years, there still retains a reluctance to reintroduce the pre-fabrication techniques in Bulgaria.

Nowadays, there is a reemergence of this method, as it promotes more sustainable building practices, providing repurposing of materials, which is noted by Ilian. However, despite the improvements, the technique remains not embraced and accepted in Bulgaria. Ilian explained in further detail that “people think the resulting building appearance would be like a Socialist flat”, completely lacking individuality, uniqueness, and most of all that it would not be of sufficient quality. Ilian’s insights provided a different perspective and insight on the interplay between historical legacies and evolving architectural practices in Bulgaria.²³

Analyzing in depth the modern building understandings and people’s perceptions, it can be noted that traces of the Communist period in Bulgaria are still present to this day, not only as personal memories and political preferences, but also negative connotations towards the time period. As people’s mindset towards symbols of the Communism in the Bulgaria have been drastically changed, the further research and development of more environmentally positive building techniques and methods have been significantly slowed down and even rejected by the society due it’s biased association with former socialist construction methods.

Conclusion

The Communism introduced a new architectural and urban reality within the cityscape of Bulgaria. Residential building blocks emerged portraying the new ideals and necessities of the time through their quick construction methods and repetitive design. These design choices reflect the urgent necessity for housing during urbanization, while also portraying the ideal of equality, both significant factors during the Socialism in Bulgaria.

The newly built residential complexes combined the private, public, and collective spaces in an intricate way, allowing the new residents of the big cities to experience the period changes and opportunities, whilst not losing the sense of community that they were used to - living in smaller towns and villages.

Given that the focal point of the period was the concept of sharing and equality, the collective areas became an integral part of the urban and architectural development. The in-between block areas were utilized as green parks, promoting social gathering, community belonging and providing safe playing areas for the children.

On a building scale, the structural practices of the period further signified the ideals of Communism. The blocks followed a three apartment per floor organizational layout, positioned around a circulation core. The private space of the apartments was defined by a similar system, as the hall became the

²³ Ilian Iliev, The Post-Socialist Impression Over Prefabricated Building Techniques, n.d.

focal point of each flat providing a connection to each of the rooms. An analysis through the inclusion of mental maps highlights similarities found in different apartments in various building blocks around the country. Thus, further alluding to the concept of equality during that period through presenting society with equal living conditions despite the working title and origin of its inhabitants.

The mental maps offer an additional insight and personal perspective into the spaces, as they incorporate changes and development made to the apartments throughout the years. Hence, alluding to the necessary improvements that need to be made to these Socialist flats due to their poor quality. In many blocks nowadays, such renovations are completed, while in others only partial are done, due to shift in the preferences of the individual, as well as the opportunities they had.

Traces of the Communist period are also seen in society's view on these building blocks due to the negative connotations associated with the building techniques used. The pre-fabrication method is a vital construction technique, used nowadays as a sustainable building approach. However, due to the poor former practices, the Bulgarian society remains skeptical of its reintroduction, thus, slowing down sustainable development methods of construction.

Therefore, it can be argued that even though the typical Communistic building blocks "*Panelki*" represented all the new opportunities of the urbanizing socialist society and highlighted the importance of equality and community, the poor execution of the building block constructions overpowered all the positive concepts and left a mark on the architectural development in Bulgaria.

Further research points could include a deeper understanding of the key factors in the behavioral profile of the average person of that period, their day-to-day life, and the connection with their architectural environment. Moreover, the urban planning during the Communist period could be further analyzed in regards to the functionality and idea of the Socialist building block and its connection to the cityscape and surroundings.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Professor John Hanna for the advice and encouragement throughout this project, as well as the people that participated in my research process and contributed mental maps.

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