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## REFLECTION

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Crossdomain studio "City of the Future"

### Looking into the "City of the Future"

*The relationship between the graduation topic, the studio topic, the master track, and the master programme*

By offering freedom to determine the graduation topic, the crossdomain studio "City of the Future" encouraged the students to explore the various aspects of what a city of the future is. The format of the graduation studio allowed me to tackle a subject, which I have been concerned with for quite some time - the revitalization of Soviet mass housing (Panelka). The direction I took when defining the City of the future was connected to unravelling the potential of the existing urban fabric. Additionally the organised masterclasses gave an insight on how the city functions as a system of systems and what their roles are in its development. This studio approach was helpful as it challenged my knowledge of the urban complexity and forced me to look beyond the scope of architecture. As I already had entered the course with a theme of interest, I attended the masterclasses with the idea to understand how the discussed topics might relate to the Panelka.

### Working as a studio

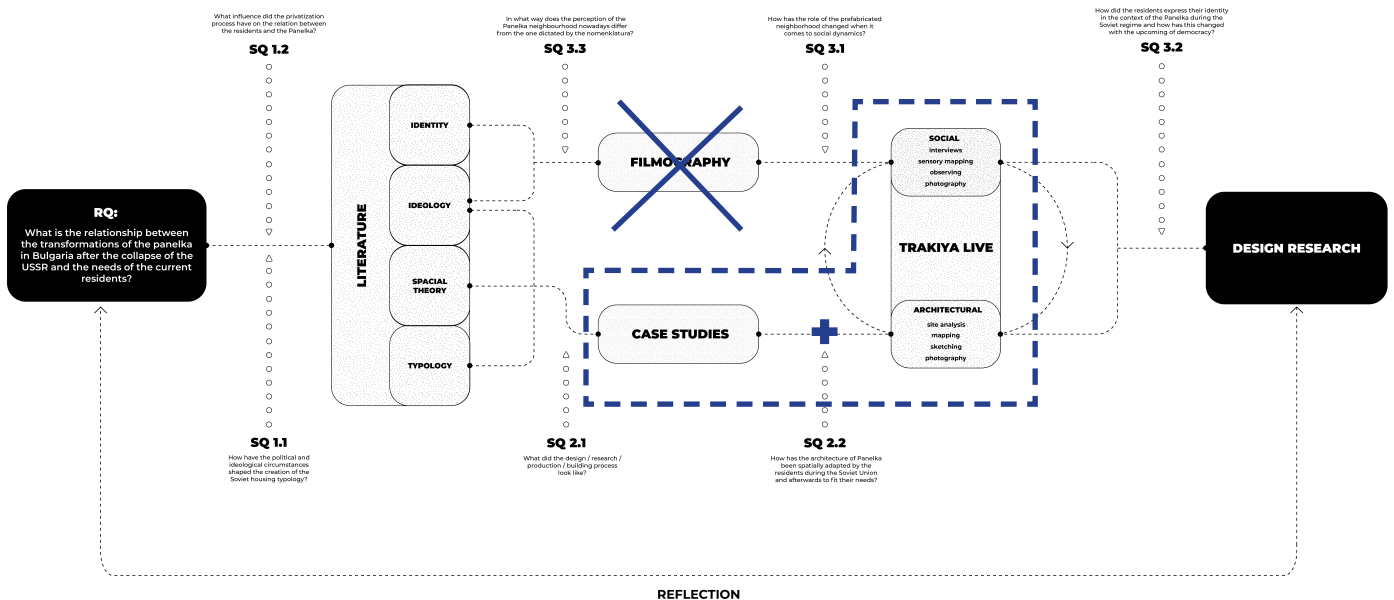
*Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry*

Next to the given topic freedom, the heterogeneous character of the studio had its challenges. The studio didn't have a predefined methodological line of inquiry, as every student had their own theme. This enabled students to work autonomously and define their focus and methodological approach. On one hand, this allowed me to dive into the specifics of my graduation through the methods I found suitable. On the other hand, the knowledge exchange within the studio was difficult due to the independent approach of every student. As all students were developing their projects according to their own structure, a comparison of how one was developing according to others was difficult. The scheduled presentations (P1, P2, P3), as well as the intermediate ones (P1.5, P2.5, P3.5) were very helpful as points to reflect on the completeness of my research and design process. Additionally, they provided an insight into how my colleagues were approaching their own projects.

### Getting started

*the research phase*

Having a topic already at the start of graduation, allowed me to get the most of the first months in the Msc3. While this period was dedicated to students exploring different interests for their graduation, I could already start investigating the different aspects of my topic. The exploration period was valuable as I understood the complexity of Panelka's development and its close relation to history, socio-culture and politics. On one hand, this dive into multiple aspects was fruitful to inform the main graduation focus. On the other hand, this process broadened my scope of research and made it difficult to formulate a clear research question. The seminar on creating the research plan was rightly scheduled as it helped me determine my research focus. Later on, it became clear to me that even the narrowed scope was too broad for the given time frame as I couldn't incorporate the planned filmography research. Thinking about that period of the graduation studio, I appreciate the dive into the different aspects of my topic. However I think narrowing down earlier would have had a positive impact, as I would have been able to go more in-depth in the chosen aspects, or started earlier with the design process.



## The on-site experience

*the research phase*

A key aspect of the research was the one-month visit to the neighbourhood Trakiya (Plovdiv, Bulgaria). As the stay was after the first months of exploration, it allowed me to observe the site through the lens of my gained knowledge. I think the timeframe of the on-site experience was fruitful as the foundations of my research were already laid. Although I used the time period beforehand to investigate the socio-cultural background of Panelka, I think an additional spatial analysis in advance would have provided me with even more valuable insights.

While being in Trakiya, I organised a few interviews with current residents in order to understand the perception of Trakiya. Their responses were very helpful as it intertwined the theory with the practical development of the typology. However, due to the Christmas vacation period, reaching out to professionals to share thoughts on the position of Panelka in today's context was impossible. An aspect, which I would have done differently, would have been to organise the interviews beforehand, as then I could have included professionals and more residents into this process. However, the snowball sampling was successful as it determined the more personal dynamics of the interviews.

Overall, the stay in Trakiya was quite successful, as I was able to visit archives, collect literature, do photographic studies, and observe the dynamics of the neighbourhood. As a former resident, I had already experienced life in Panelka. Nevertheless, doing the academic research altered my view of Panelka as I became more aware of why the typology had evolved in the particular direction.

## The turning point

*the relationship between research and design*

My focus up until P2 was to establish a relation between the gathered insights from the on-site research and the academic knowledge. As the design was based on the research, the structure of the design proposal was highly influenced by the structure of the research: I was concentrating on a different scale of independent interventions, which together created an overall strategy. The P2 feedback required a shift in my approach of 'independent interventions' towards a more integrated proposal. The change of mindset was challenging as the research and design were closely related. However, this led to the embedding of the architectural proposal into the urban design. Looking back, starting sooner with the design process would have had a positive impact on the depth of the design proposal. Simultaneously, I don't regret investing time in the research as it provided me with stable foundations for the design decision making.

## **The conundrum of Panelka**

*the ethical issues and dilemmas*

The Panelka's specific character is dictated by multiple contradictions on social, historical and architectural level. While the conundrum of Panelka was a key point in the research, it posed dilemmas in the design process. A few of the ethical issues, which I faced were:

- The goal of the design proposal is to ensure an environment adaptable to the needs of the residents, while at the same time tackling the historical baggage of the Panelka. This objective led to the dilemma concerning the design language: by tackling the negative connotations connected to the appearance of the buildings, the heritage of Panelka is being erased. What I learned from this process is to assess carefully the aspects of the Panelka and create different strategies as a general solution is not applicable.

- A further ethical issue was connected to the proposed extension and interior rearrangement. The objective of the project is to empower the residents to redefine their living space according to their needs. However for the creation of this framework, a partial demolition of Panelka is needed. Although the design strategy is based on the methods of the residents' interventions, those same interventions need to be demolished for the establishment of the new framework.

- The positions of the professional and the user in the design and the building process are redefined in the vision for the new Panelka. The current state of the Panelka is a result of the division of those two spheres. During the design process I embraced the concept of giving the user full responsibility over their living environment - designing and building the interior, as well as the facade of their apartment. This created the dilemma of "the personal vs the common", where the personal decisions have a great impact on the coherency of the urban fabric. This dilemma resulted in defining different zones of "participatory" and "assistive" design.

## **The projects' impact**

*the relationship between the project and the social, professional and scientific framework*

At the start of the graduation project I was aware of the urgency to address the issues of Soviet mass housing internationally. Regardless of the location of the typology, I thought a general strategy could prevent the pending demolition. While conducting the research, I started acknowledging the importance of local culture for Panelka's current development. As a result my perspective for a general solution underwent a major shift, as I started recognising the prefabricated Soviet mass-housing both as an expression of the global Soviet movement, as well as one of the local Post-Soviet culture. Throughout the graduation process, I learned of the crucial impact research work could have on the renovation practice, when it is closely connected to the social aspect. The research design studio allowed me for the first time in my study experience to explore the close correlation between architectural practice and academic work. As a result, the project piqued a strong interest in me to explore more in depth how the Soviet typology has developed differently across countries' borders according to the distinct local culture.

## **Looking ahead**

The final part of the graduation period will be used to:

- assemble the photography study, as well as create an illustrated booklet of the interviews
- further develop the set of variations in the public facilities, as well as the variations in the framework of the facade options
- demonstrate the proposed strategy through modelmaking
- create visual impressions of the strategy on a building and apartment level
- adapt the proposed strategy to the rest of the Panelka types