

**Resource Architecture – XXI World Congress of Architecture
22 to 26 July 2002 in Berlin**

Forum 1 Globalisation and Regionalism

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**The need of reassessment of the balance between
local traditions and the trend of globalisation in the
East European countries**

More than a decade the countries in Central and Eastern Europe are going through the enormous difficulties of the political, social, and economic transformations. Every single aspect of life of society has been a subject to these fundamental changes challenging the potential of the nation to deal with the new type of problems faced. One can observe such processes in the areas of architecture and urban development, too.

When discussing the changes in these areas in the East European countries we should stress on two major factors – **firstly, the transformation of centralized economies into free market economies, and, secondly, the opening of social and economic life of these countries to the world, which has much to do with globalisation.**

Architects are trying to keep the changes under control, willing to assess the positive and the negative features of the new development. Many surveys on related topics have been produced and published in the specialized press issues in Bulgaria over the last few years. Evaluating the **changes in architecture** proved to be much easier than the assessment of the new aspects of the **changes in urban development**, which were less obvious, but they turned out to be much more significant. These changes are, no doubt, related to **the new economic mechanisms**, through which the development of urban areas is realized. In the past – in the centralized society, the mechanisms were simple and clear, though this definitely did not mean efficient. The planning process was started and conducted by the state through the municipalities but as a whole the process was based on the potential of the state construction companies. So that was how the vast panel complexes emerged. Yet we should note that planning always requires centralization at some level and the municipal level was, no doubt, the proper one. Eventually, we can now state that what was really negative about the panel complexes was the panel buildings themselves. As for the urban forms and schemes - along with the negative features, they had many positive as well – both typical for modernism and functionalism.

At present, the mechanism of urban development is quite different from the one described above. It actually is typical for a market economy but it also supports the observation that urban market mechanisms may vary substantially from a country to another. A basic feature of urban development in a market society is the fact that it's a result of the interests and activities of numerous market players. An important conclusion is that just like any market process urban development is demand driven.

So there we come to the preferences of the population, which are the main factor, determining market demand. Of course, the preferences of the population are based mainly on traditions.

Such conclusion reveals a less popular aspect of national traditions because usually only the architectural traditions are taken into consideration. A comparison between the urban development in different European countries proves that the preferences of the population towards alternative residential forms have greatest significance for urban processes.

The second major factor determining changes in urban development – **the opening of social and economic life to the world**, which is actually a form of the process called **globalisation**, has, no doubt, a lot to do with traditions. It provides the greatest impact towards new development of traditions **or** weakening their strength.

Globalisation is a controversial process yet most people believe in its advantages. As for Eastern Europe, no one seems to oppose globalisation because integration with the rest of Europe is an important factor for improving the social and economic situation. Still, architects know the significance of local traditions and try to keep them as a valuable legacy of national culture. Nevertheless, we all know that learning from other countries may bring positive developments. In order to make a good use of it, we should reassess the balance between local traditions and globalisation at every new stage of development.

Eventually, let's state it clearly: Planning is the instrument for fine-tuning the balance between local traditions and the trend of globalisation in the area of urban development. This survey is seeking to examine some aspects of the relations between the traditions and the preferences of population on the one hand and on the other – the system of urban planning and the urban market process, to investigate the alternative approaches in Europe and their application in the East European countries. It attempts to assess the process of opening local development to international practice and the challenge of globalisation to local traditions.

Alternative European approaches in urban development and the traditions and current practice in the East European countries

High density or low-density residential forms

Traditions and preferences of the population

When discussing residential density, we should probably start from the old discussion about the advantages and the disadvantages of a single-family house compared to a flat in a multi-family building. Of course, most people prefer a house to a flat, because it provides higher residential standard, individual design, more space in and out of the building, private courtyard, more greenery, etc. This preference is very strong in most of West and North European countries where people value large open spaces and low-density housing despite that it requires more utility and transport infrastructure and connections become longer, which causes extra costs, waste of time, and so on. Unlike that, most citizens in East and South European countries seem to prefer multi-family buildings. In a survey related to the new general plan of Sofia most citizens claim that they prefer single-family houses but the market demand proves that they regard the advantages of the high-density residential forms as a greater value – easy access to social amenities, less time for transportation, less money for infrastructure, etc. That is why people in Eastern Europe like living in the inner city and market research testifies that even the rich prefer to live in the central areas, though in a block of flats. We would hardly make a mistake if we say that the specific development of settlements during the last few decades was one of the major factors for the preferences of the population at present. What was specific about the development in the East European

countries during the first half of the 20th century it was the prevailing poor level of housing. The intensive processes of urbanization and the monopolization of all economic activities by the state in the times of communism resulted in the wide spread of panel complexes. Despite the poor standard of residential buildings in towns, they were equipped with utilities and provided good access to social amenities

The effect of traditions on planning practice

Now, the point is that preferences for high-density or low-density urban forms strongly affect the process of urban planning, its principles and the planning regulations and laws. It's not typical for single-family houses to incorporate commercial premises, for instance. So large housing areas require strict land-use zoning and commercial and other non-residential activities are allocated in definite precincts, while multi-family buildings are suitable for mixed uses – residential and commercial, or cultural, or any non-polluting activity. In result, where single-family housing prevails to multi-family forms planning deals mainly with land-uses and less with physical parameters. On the contrary, planning in countries where multi-family residential forms prevail is much more concerned with factors like the ratio of the built up space to the space of the plot, the volume and the height of the buildings, etc. Planning then much easier allows changes in land-use and mix of uses. In Bulgaria, for example, commercial premises in a plot designated for residential use are regarded as quite acceptable and this requires no special permission as far as it complies with sanitary requirements, fire precautions, and building regulations.

Changes of planning practice and the trend of globalisation

The transformation of the centralised economies of Central and Eastern Europe into free market economies is, no doubt, a form of globalisation. The most important feature in this aspect is the rapid growth of the private sector and the expansion of private interests in every area of economy and public life.

Planning practice in the East European countries has changed substantially over the last twelve years. As one could expect, the planning systems were not prepared to work with the private interests and private initiatives. After the decades when private interests were severely disadvantaged, the new authorities and society in general now acted in support of private interests even when this meant neglecting reasonable standards. With regards to new developments, this definitely resulted in rapid increase in intensification of land-use. Building regulations were changed to allow higher density – more storeys and more floor space in every plot. In estimating the proper dwelling density in comparison with the overall density of population in each country we observe that in England the overall density of population (Pd) is about 280 people per square kilometre and the average dwelling density standard (Dd) is 30 dwellings per hectare; in the Netherlands the overall Pd is 400 (highest in Europe), respectively Dd standard for new developments is 100 dwellings per hectare at the maximum; in Hong Kong the overall density of population is about 5170 people per sq. km, and Dd goes up to 400 - 550 dwellings per hectare. In Bulgaria the overall Pd is only 80 people per sq. km, but now Dd reaches 350 dwellings per hectare.

The problem is that the higher density is not respectively maintained with urban factors. A newly issued survey has claimed that the increase in density in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, has resulted in worsening the dwelling standards – the new high density development provides only a sixth of the standards of a development typical for the 70s and 80s for urban elements like open spaces, green spaces, children playgrounds, car-parking places, etc. Apparently, we have replaced the disaster of poor quality panel buildings with the disaster of poor quality environment – insufficient open spaces, insufficient greenery, insufficient car-parking places, etc.

Therefore we may conclude that the process of globalisation of economic life in the East European countries has not been followed by a respective process of proper transformation of the planning system so far.

Large-scale or small-scale developments

Traditions and preferences of the population

Another factor, determining the planning process, is the mechanism of property development. In some countries a new development is often carried out by the landowners and, therefore, this is usually a small-scale development, but in other countries almost all developments are undertaken by big development companies on larger plots of assembled land. This may be regarded as some sort of preferences but it actually has a lot more to do with traditions in planning and in other areas of legislation. In other countries, most of the developments are carried out by larger companies on a large scale. This requires a long and risky process of land-assembly before starting each development.

In the East European countries during the times of communism almost all developments were carried out by the state through the state companies. The process of land-assembly was no problem at all since the state had every legal instrument to expropriate land and this was the only way in which every new development took place.

Changes of planning practice and the trend of globalisation

At the time being, the approach is just the opposite of the approach at the times of communism. The small properties are preserved and they are developed without being assembled. As far as planning is concerned, this scheme is not efficient. On the one hand, it could be assessed as efficient in regard of the fact that small properties are easier to develop as they are owned by a small number of owners – usually 2, 3, or 4, which makes it easy for them to agree about a deal, to sign a contract and to sell the plot or to consign it to a company to develop the property. It would be extremely difficult if the land should be assembled for the construction to take place. But on the other hand, planning is definitely hampered in such areas and the urban structures realized through such a scheme could not be assessed as successful. It is very difficult (if possible at all) to stick to certain planning objectives – since planners and designers have to satisfy the needs of landowners and developers for floor spaces in these small plots, spaces are hardly left for greenery and playgrounds, nor for car-parking.

Flexible or rigid planning system

Local traditions and the form of planning

This issue is closely related to the issue of the scale of development. Respectively in the case of the small scale development planning should fix the volume (the floor space and the height) of the buildings in all small plots in advance – and then planning is “rigid”, because it should set compulsory limits – maximal parameters (ceilings) as well as minimal. This has to be done in order to harmonise the interests of all owners and the interests of the community, as well.

In the other case, the parameters of a large-scale development could be negotiated between the development company and the planning authorities just before the construction – “ad hoc” - so this is what is called “flexible planning”.

All these considerations could explain why in the East European countries the form of planning is rigid and not flexible. Firstly, during the first half of the 20th century the prevailing form of property was small-scale private. This established certain traditions for rigid planning systems, which were not overthrown during the second half of the century because

of the inclination of the centralized society towards rigid planning in any aspect, so planning system remained rigid too.

The effect of traditions on the planning practice

In both systems – in rigid as well as in flexible – the master plan or the general plan could be identified as an instrument of greatest importance for the entire process. In fact, the general plan is the major tool for elaboration and implementation of the planning policy. The point is that this is the level to observe the urban features and factors, to analyse the indexes, to identify urban problems and to formulate planning objectives and policies.

In considering the rest levels of planning, we have to emphasise the fact that within the rigid system the urban design plans are compulsory. Unfortunately this might be misleading because then the stress is often shifted from the strategy to the details – from the policy making to urban design and implementation that is not in support of the proper urban strategy

We should also mention that flexible planning provides for faster changes in the development of private properties (though through waste of extra efforts and expertise) while a rigid system requires more time for changes in what is present in the adopted plan.

Changes of planning practice and the trend of globalisation

There are two controversial tendencies, which are supposed to provide controversial impacts on the planning systems and practices in Eastern Europe. The first tendency comes from the preservation and restoration of private properties – a process causing an increase in the number of small landowners and therefore requiring rigid planning. The second tendency is for faster changes in plans where acceptable, because of the investors' interests, and this requires application of flexible approaches.

As implied already at several points throughout the statement one, of the strongest incentives for the changes of current practice and relevant legislation in the East European countries is the will to serve the strengthening private interests and initiatives.

A good example is the newly introduced option in Bulgarian law on spatial planning called "complex project for investment initiative". It definitely could be regarded as a substantial element of flexible approach within the rigid Bulgarian system. This option allows landowners, developers, and investors to apply for a development that they are interested to undertake if different from the approved plan or if there has not been planned so far. In general "the complex project for investment initiative" is an efficient planning tool and though it was introduced only about a year ago it is already being applied quite often. Yet we should note that if used improperly it could also serve as a basis for unacceptable changes in the plan particularly when applied for smaller developments, because proper planning requires the large territory to be always kept in view.

Superiority of private or superiority of public interests

Traditions and the disposition of society

As it was mentioned above, since the changes at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s the authorities in the East European countries and society in general have been very much concerned about the support of private interests.

Changes of the planning practice and the trend of globalisation

After the decades of communist social and economic development when private interests were fully neglected, during the last 10 - 12 years and at present they are well defended, often better than the public interests are. Unfortunately, from the one extreme we have moved into the other. Probably the greatest lesson to be learnt by East European architects and planners from the practice in the highly developed Western countries is - urban planning in a market society does not necessarily mean serving private interests – it rather

means serving all interests, public in the first place, by using the private initiative of all market players. This is a well-known principle in the Western countries, but it's misunderstood by most professionals and especially by the planning authorities in the former "socialist" countries. Another widely spread self-deception is that municipality officers believe that they properly serve, help and facilitate private initiatives. The history of urban planning in the developed countries gives many examples of how misleading a wrong "help" could be. Instead of studying that experience, local planning authorities in East European countries have already spoiled many good development opportunities through allowing unacceptable mix of land uses, or unacceptable density, etc. It has all been done under the pressure of private landowners and /or private developers, but soon the market situation turned around and the prices of land dropped down. Therefore, this was a great loss for the private landowners, for the developers as well, because prices of buildings dropped down too, designers and construction workers lost their jobs, and, worst of all, the built environment was damaged for decades. At present, prices of properties in Eastern Europe are the lowest in the continent and this is just a reflection of the described development.

Finally we may conclude that globalisation of all aspects of social life seems to be inevitable, no matter whether we like that or not. Of course, this may bring in both – positive and negative changes. Loss of traditions is most often negative, but the promotion of new and better approaches, practices, experience is definitely positive.

This survey has revealed a major problem with the changes in the planning systems of the East European countries – the fact that these changes have lagged behind the transformations in the rest aspects of social and economic life.

Unfortunately many architects and planners in East European countries are not well aware of this, nor are acquainted with the traditions and the practice in other countries. The European planning systems yet are not taught at the universities, the sources are insufficient and such knowledge is not widely spread.

Being well acquainted with different dwelling traditions is essential for offering a good choice of alternative urban forms.