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OUR (POST-)SOCIALIST CITIES:
BETWEEN PROGRESS AND
NOSTALGIA

We usually 'read' cities in terms of their structural development. This approach allows us to link different architectural and urban patterns that interfere with one another in a palimpsest – like the urban organism – into chronological order. Following this logic, clearly circumscribed limitations would be imposed on the socialist city. But do we recognize these demarcation lines in our everyday use of the city? Isn't the socialist way of shaping the environment an integral part of our contemporary urban experience?

A city is socialist in the same way as we talk about other cities being medieval, modern, or industrial: rather than a finite architectural, urban and political movement, it manifests as a still-present set of tendencies. This requires us to use the term in a broader perspective, as a reference to the city's unique experience rather than a finalized stage of its urban development. The recognition mark, then, lies in examining the extent to which the past intervenes in the practice of living in, making use of and thinking about our cities of today.

Besides the appearance of actual architectural and urban forms, the character of any specific historical period may be recognized also by the tactics through which it interacts with the past: how it re-interprets its various signs, how it re-appropriates its physical and cultural legacy, and how it transforms it into new, more suitable forms. The character of each age in the life of a city might be recognized by answering the question of what place the past occupies within its present? How much of the past does the city allow to

penetrate into its present forms? These questions may tell us more if we confront them with our (post-)socialistic urban experience.

If we think about the past, our mental substance is like an imprint of something that is no more. But the reflection of the past in a city is the reflection of something that is still present. Let's take a look around the cities we inhabit: various semblances of different pasts lie on every corner. Because, unlike past events, moods and atmospheres, the past of cities becomes petrified. It is the pure materiality of a city that prevents us from considering the past. Not only do its material witnesses shape our everyday trajectories, they also shape the trajectories of our mind, our consciousness of the city.

We often think cities through their symbols. These remind us of significant events and decision points, their milieux and actors. But what if the status of a dominant symbol through which we think a specific city reaches an object that does not exist any more? Can our consciousness of the city start in a non-articulated space? How powerful is the past that we cannot see? Answering this question may help us to understand the kind of city we live in if we claim to live in a (post-)socialist city.

One place that is representative of the tendencies shaping the image of (post)socialist cities lies in the very central part of present-day Bratislava. But despite its very central location, enclosed by the castle hill to the north, the River Danube to the south and the medieval city to the east, it is very hard to find in most guidebooks. Even panoramic

photographs of the city's skyline try very hard to crowd it out of the image. Once a living organism of streets, squares and passages, it appears to be a non-articulated space resembling a tangle of parking lots and wild vegetation hidden behind dozens of billboards. This, the Podhradie district, is the site of the former Jewish ghetto, located between two distinct complexes of fortifications: that of the municipality and that of the castle. Then, heading westwards, there used to be the Vydrlica and Zuckermantel districts, mostly inhabited by artisans and traders. Though differentiated by different names, together they formed a compact urban fabric. That was before the modernisation of the newborn capital of socialist Slovakia.

The demolition of the Podhradie district, which took place in the 1970s, cannot be taken separately from the construction of a new bridge over the Danube. The public awareness of the necessity to cross the river by a new bridge stumbled on the different visions of where it should be positioned. The winning project (which was later awarded the "structure of the century" prize), required the sanitation of the old urban fabric (by doing this, the medieval situation, when the city and the castle were physically separated, was recalled).

Nowadays, the devastation of Vydrlica, Zuckermantel and the old Jewish district are perceived as a deep trauma caused by the elites of the city's socialist local government. But the need for sanitation of the area because of the new bridge construction was just one aspect of the final decision. There were also circumstances rooted in political

A view of Podhradie district on an old postcard



and ideological visions. In the specific case of the Podhradie district, there were at least three: the concept of Bratislava as a modern, socialist and Slovak city. The modernisation process was about to result in the rebranding of a formerly peripheral town within a monarchy into an exemplary national capital of a socialist country, and the legacy of previous centuries was in the way. Looking at the remnants of what once used to be Bratislava's Podhradie district, we can clearly see the character of the relationship of the socialist elites with the past: heading towards a bright future, there was no place for nostalgia.

Progress is a direction towards an ideal state not yet achieved. On the other hand, nostalgia is a longing for an ideal already lost. It seems that we are always trying to achieve something that is not present. If we stood before the task of conceptualizing this twofold tendency, we could hardly find a better place than Bratislava's Podhradie district. Nowadays an abandoned place, it stands between progress (represented by the New Bridge) and nostalgia (symbolized by the few solitary historical buildings on its western edge). But the emptiness of the place doesn't serve as a mere metaphor. The imaginary emptiness works

as a source of tendencies that shape present discussions about the city.

It is the image of the city that many try to reclaim but only few remember that draws the main contour lines of current discussions. An initiative launched early in the 1990s (and which is still shaping the debate to a certain degree) claimed the intent to restore the whole district to its original appearance. Let us just make the brief comment that this case was not the same as, say, the post-war reconstruction of Warsaw, where the innermost historical core, the heart of the nation's pride, had been demolished by an enemy. Podhradie was the home of lower-class merchants and craftsmen, who inhabited the area outside the city walls. A poor, peripheral neighbourhood, lacking both social standards and significant monuments. Even the conservationists, who represented the main opposition to the new bridge project, did not justify their opinion as a struggle to protect architectural heritage in its proper sense (as reasons for not demolishing the area, the old urban fabric and the city's skyline were cited). Why then, does the city live in the permanent conviction that there is something important missing? Looking at the cores of our cities, we may claim that it is because this is in the very nature of our (post-) socialist condition.

It seems that an era of progress was superseded by an era with an opposite vector. Decades spent in an atmosphere of constant progress resulted in an longing for the lost past. And the decline of the idea of progress comes hand in hand with the emergence of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as longing for a home that no longer exists, or never existed.

The newest project regarding Bratislava's Podhradie district claims this close relationship in its very name: The Lost City. Its main idea rests on the concept of a "Tram of historical memory", tracking some of the most significant events of the 19th and 20th centuries. The tram should follow an ordinary route encompassing the historical part of Bratislava. But instead of the transparent windows of an ordinary tram, the "tram of historical memory" will have large LCD panels showing passengers events from and the historical appearance of the places that they are passing.

The second part of the Lost City project has as its ambition to restore one of the most well-known symbols of the demolished district: the Neolog synagogue, on what was once Rybné námestie. Standing next to the city's main cathedral, on a market square, where all strata of society once mingled, it symbolizes the idealized image of a tolerant, multilingual and multinational Prešorok (Slovakized variant of the city's German name, Pressburg, and the Hungarian Poszony) of the pre-war period. Except for this cherished image, almost nothing is left: the Jews were annihilated during the Holocaust, the Germans and Hungarians were displaced during the Slovakization, and the intelligentsia during the proletarianization of the city. Even the square itself fell prey to the modernizing zeal, and after the new bridge sliced the square in two, the synagogue had to be demolished too. This symbolic building is to be restored as a temporary replica, two-thirds of its original size. For the limited period of its existence, it will act as an educational and cultural centre, providing information about the history of the "lost city".

Above: a building of demolished neologic synagogue at Rybné námestie

To the right: a contemporary form of commemorating the site in which the synagogue used to be

Couliresses with no core and trams with no windows. What does this say about our relationship with the past? What does it say about the present condition of our (post-)socialist cities? In 2009, a young female artist, Magdaléna Kuchtová, made an artistic intervention in this "no-man's land". She placed 19 letters on the back of the billboards separating the road from the former Podhradie area, making the sentence "Looking downward, you see nothing." How should we read this message, placed in a spot visible only from the passage-way to the castle? Perhaps that our inability to see things through the wall of billboards is no different to the impossibility of seeing through the decorative walls of couliresses and LCD panels. That perhaps it is just another way of not-seeing the present. Because perhaps it is our sense of time, and not the city, that is lost.

