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Postfabrications

„A peculiar field of East European urbanity“ – this is how the latest exhibition of Trafó Gallery, central location of contemporary art in Budapest, defines the housing estates.¹ The exhibited works are based on personal memories, political desires or sociological research, applying highly diverse artistic methods. Their only common point is that they deal with housing estates which have become, as the exhibition's introduction states, not only a subject of dilemma, but also a matter of inspiration.

This exhibition is not an isolated phenomena in its attempt to help the prefabricated architecture and the housing estate enter the public discourse. On the contrary, it is part of the overall fascination and interest witnessed by a recent vague of cultural productions, from architecture conferences to the feature films, from photography to television series. But this interest and its role in shaping the future of the housing estates are, to put it mildly, ambiguous.

If one looks at the debates surrounding the recently started re-run of the most popular Hungarian television series ever, *Szomszédok* (Neighbors), 20 years after its original production, it becomes clear that there are not only different conceptions about a seemingly depoliticised not-too-distant past, but especially about the way it should be remembered. *Szomszédok* is a series launched in the late 1980s whose all 331 episodes were set in a Budapest housing estate, and whose key concept is rooted in this very location, as the excessive physical proximity turns into social solidarity and communal atmosphere where strangers become neighbors. The re-run was initially narrated by computer text inserts, to comment the everyday culture of the late socialist era from a present perspective. The idea met a huge criticism both from the side of the original creators and from the audience, for it not only hurted the original concept and the entirety of the production but also touched questions of social memory and identity.

The everyday life of the socialist era, and especially its object culture and architecture is increasingly seen from a very particular angle that is often called ‚ostalgia‘. The word comes from the fusion of the German words ‚Ost‘ (east) and ‚Nostalgia‘, and which refers to the the enthusiasm towards certain ingredients of the pre-1989 socialist Europe fed by exoticism as well as irony. In the practice of ostalgia objects gain a specific status and new meanings through the process of this cultural transposal: from simple objects or scenes they become symbols, or even cult objects. This is also how the prefabricated building becomes a cultural object underplaying its relevance as a socio-economic framework.

The social reality is not independent from the cultural imagery. On the contrary, they interfere one with another. Many, like the participants of the 2006 Annual Meeting of Architects suggest that the key solution to regenerate housing estates is to enhance

¹ ‚The Other City‘ <http://www.trafo.hu/programok.phtml?id=870>

their image, to make them attractive for higher-status habitants. This would mean that focusing on the positive aspects of the prefab-living, a successful campaign would be able to redynamise the housing estates' real estate market performance, thus renovating the housing stock and forming self-confident communities out of their habitants. This scenario follows the great European urban regeneration schemes but does not count with some of the specific limitations that occur in the case of prefabricated architecture and the housing estates they are situated within.

Changing the image of the prefabricated estates is not simply a matter of a campaign, though. „If we advertise something, we must be able to harmonise it with our resources and plans“, says László Csider, from the Ministry of Municipality and Regional Development, when I ask him about the communication of the supporting programmes run by the ministry. „We cannot promise anything before we are able to guarantee changes, to create a basis for these promises.“

The renovation of the buildings is inevitable for many reasons. Already when the prefabricated buildings were built, from the 1960s on, it was clear that these edifices are limited in time. Besides the aging of the construction materials the engineering units have arrived to the end of their lifespan, just as their energy system has proved to be completely inefficient and unsustainable. A detailed subsidy structure came into effect in 2001, focusing on three directions for the renovation: the external isolation, the replacement of windows and the renovation of the elements of the engineering system. These priorities were supplemented in 2005 by a focus on the public spaces situated between the buildings: parks, playgrounds, pavements. This subsidy structure is based on the cooperation of three actors: the owner of the flat, the municipality and the state. In case the (often hundreds of) habitants of a building agree on their renovation strategy and manage to raise a fund, they have to apply for the municipality's subsidy that is supplemented by the state's part, if the application is successful. In this case all three actors give 1/3 of the whole necessary budget for the renovation.

But the 2/3 provided by the authorities is often not enough. Many habitants of the country's half million panel flats (of the total housing stock of 4 million) are struggling with their altered living conditions, and are not even able to pay their bills, not to mention the renovation costs. Some of the housing estates, the lowest-status ones, function as social traps, attracting and accumulating a segment of the population with very limited means, and with a growing constraint to stay.

The prefabricated flats that used to be allocated to a privileged group of people in the 1970s and 1980s, have gradually become the cheapest component of the Hungarian housing market, did not turn out to be good investments when the privatisation of the housing stock took place. On the contrary, the increasing energy prices and the incompetent floor-plans made them less attractive for newcomers and less affordable for already habitants. The lack of demand and the physical decay specified the habitants of these areas to certain groups: those who could not afford to buy or rent property elsewhere. This is why in certain housing estates one can find a big proportion of students, only spending a period of their lives there and not investing anything in the flats, and in others, divorced women who arrived after the division of the common family property.

The less favorable social conditions are also reflected in the state of public spaces in housing estates. These are victims of a crucial failure of the socialist urban planning, enforcing industrial production and neglecting residential and communal infrastructures. The spaces in-between, the common property became noone's property, disintegrated and partly illegally appropriated, before a wave of renovation recently started to turn this trend backwards. Community premises also failed to work, rapidly becoming storage spaces or privately rented commerces.

Prefabricated buildings standing in housing estates have a lot of advantages though. They are generally situated in green areas, have cleaner air, more sunshine, better view over the city, and clear engineering structures. And they are not very badly located. Their architectural features are also not infinitely restricting, there is a variety of possible ways to intervene in a flat in order to turn it more appropriate. Already in some mid-1980 competition showed that prefabricated flats can be joined vertically as well as horizontally, floor-plans can be altered, facades can be dressed up, private or semi-communal gardens can be attached to the buildings, so repetitiveness can be clothed with individuality and the rigid plan can be softened according to the personal needs. But these possibilities are overshadowed by one-sidedly technology- and energy-oriented policies.

No new prefabricated housing estates were built since the regime change in Hungary. Nevertheless, the concept of the housing estates has survived the weakening of the state and its social policies. The new phenomenon, the residential park resembles to the socialist housing estates, if not in its financing and property structure, then in its appearance and quality, but carefully keeps its distance from its architectural predecessor. As the architecture historian András Ferkai remarks: „The rejection of the earlier name is tantamount to the traditions represented by the housing estate of socialism.”² But it does not prevent residential parks from repeating the failures of the housing estates or replacing them with new ones, thus contributing to a further disintegration of the cities.

² András Ferkai: Housing Estates. Budapest, 2005.