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Keep the Lot: Housing Development on the Peripheries of Cities in Poland, Serbia and the United Kingdom.

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The development patterns generated by large landowners and developers are compared to the self-build lot by lot development by individual home builders. Based on their international comparative research on the determining factors of urban morphology, Samuels, Kantarek and Djordjevic, argue for the later type of growth as more democratic, locally appropriate, varied, and individually responsive.

This article discusses some of the recent findings from a collaborative project between Cracow University of Technology, Belgrade University, and the International Seminar on Urban Form (ISUF) that focuses on the transformations in urban form experienced by these two European countries since the significant changes in their political regimes started 30 years ago. As the early years of these transformations have been well documented by Hirt and Stanilov (2009), here we will concentrate on the most recent changes by comparing Cracow and Belgrade with cities in Western Europe in general and in the United Kingdom in particular.

It should be emphasized that before the dramatic regime changes of the 1980s, both Poland and Serbia had well established and respected urban planning traditions. For example, in the 1970s, the Polish system of threshold planning was advocated by the Scottish government, which published a manual on its use for local authorities (Scottish Development Department 1973). In the former Yugoslavia, the planning system was concerned with maximizing economic impacts while maintaining the quality of urban development and allowing public access to the natural environment which was protected against excessive development (Fisher, 1966).

As a basis of this comparison, an urban transect running from city centre to periphery was adopted and revealed that forces of globalization, often financed from overseas, are manifest in the all three cases (UK, Poland, Serbia). The new shopping centres in Belgrade and Krakow are the equals of anything in Western Europe - both in their negative and positive aspects. However, moving along the transect towards the edge of each of these cities, more significant contrasts emerge. The most

significant differences between the two cases and Britain occur in the peripheries (Figure 1).

Lot by lot development and urban sprawl

The difference in the development pattern on the urban peripheries of three locations is illustrated in Figure 2. In Oxford, the compact nature of the edge of city development is in contrast to the dispersed nature of both the Belgrade and Krakow cases.

In the cases of Krakow and Belgrade the development patterns are typical of urban sprawl, the general problems of which were identified in a research review by the European Environment Agency that asserts that "urban sprawl is synonymous with unplanned incremental urban development, characterized by a low-density mix of land uses on the urban fringe" (EEA, 2016, p. 5). While the examples in Figure 2 are by no means the most extreme examples of urban sprawl, Figure 3 shows an extreme example of such development beyond Krakow's periphery.

This pattern of development results in increased energy and land consumption and indicates that the southern, eastern and central parts of Europe, including Poland and Serbia are particularly at risk. It suggests that "...sprawl is the result of little planning control of land subdivision. Development is patchy, scattered and strung out, with a tendency for discontinuity" (EAA, 2016, p. 7).

In Poland, this pattern has been described as lot by lot urbanism; a term formulated to describe the development of Polish cities after 1994 when changes in the national urban law occurred (Kantarek, 2016). The Master Plan as an instrument for development control was replaced by a Study of Conditions,

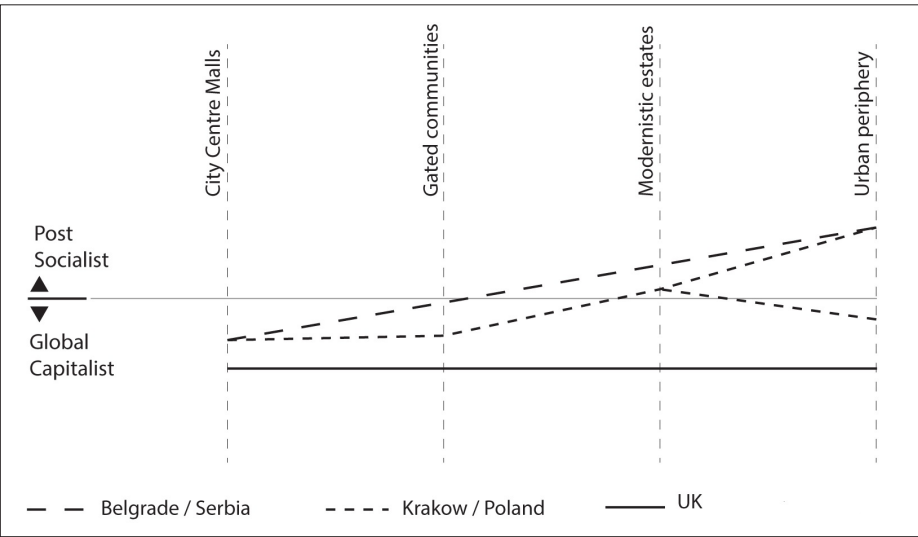


Figure 1: Comparison of new developments in the case studies cities according to the transect of New Urbanism.



Figure 2: Comparison of typical development patterns in the peripheries of the case studies cities. (photos and drawings by the authors)



photo Andrija Vasović



Krakow
Glogera Street

Belgrade
Kaludjerica

Oxford
Barton Park

which does not have the force of law but provides only a general idea of the development that could be implemented in detailed plans: this instrument is not mandatory and can be replaced by administrative decisions which do not take into account spatial and functional factors. Thus, development is based on lot by lot individual investment decisions in a process that generates all the problems associated with urban sprawl and is often described as chaotic by architects and town planners (Djordjevic & Milojevic, 2018; Kantarek, Kwiatkowski & Samuels, 2018).

In Serbia, but not in Poland, these problems are exacerbated by illegal developments with an evolving professional activity for the legalization of illegal buildings. As homes are often built without any input from architects, planners or engineers, one can certainly question the role of these professions. However, there is undoubtedly a role for the design professionals in the more ambitious of these projects as can be seen in the design of dwellings along the Danube riverbank near Belgrade that exhibit an exceptional degree of creativity if not that usually acclaimed by architectural journals (Figure 4).

Despite its problems, the lot by lot process of building housing can be seen as a positive response of individuals to their needs. If the negative aspects of sprawl can be avoided and a balance achieved of bottom-up and top-down decisions then individual investments on a lot of land, provided it is within some minimal regulatory framework, can make a significant contribution to meeting local housing local demands. This is valid for both planned development, where a balance must be achieved



Figure 3: Urban sprawl and lot by lot urbanism in Krakow's periphery. (photo by I. Samuels)

between the different stages of development and infill, and also in organic, unplanned growth (Caniggia & Mafei, 2001).

How not to lose the lot

There are three major factors shaping urban form, and they vary in the three case studies discussed. They are the regulatory system (such as plans and codes), land ownership, and the structure of the development industry. The differences in the

Figure 4: Architectural creativity by individual home builders along the Danube, Belgrade. (photos by the authors)



peripheral developments shown in Figure 1 can be explained by differences in these three factors.

Concerning the urban regulatory system, in Serbia the existing urban regulations are not respected in practice, and a large percentage of development is carried out illegally. In Poland, there are no general rules that deal with spatial matters. In England, despite de-regulation, there exists fundamental political support for urban green belts preventing sprawl, as happens in the case of Oxford (see Figure 1). In Serbia and Poland, land ownership is in the hands of small proprietors with a dispersed division of property which makes comprehensive development difficult if not impossible. In England, on the other hand, land has been in the ownership of a limited number of proprietors since the eighteenth century, a situation that persists today. The building of housing in Britain is dominated by a half dozen of larger companies that operate throughout the country while in both Poland and Serbia it is in the hands of a large number of small local builders.

The imposition of a more rigid system of planning could be seen as an answer to the problems of dispersed development – in fact, a return to the planning systems of thirty years ago. However, in the current political and economic climate of de-regulation, this is unlikely to happen not only in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries but across the whole of Europe.

In the UK, the planning system is now being questioned. For example, a recent study blames the planning system for making inequality worse by increasing the wealth of those who own property in desirable areas against that of homeowners in less economically flourishing parts of the country (Breach, 2019). In the former areas, as the average cost of homes rises, the share of private housing that is owner-occupied is reduced. It is argued that this happens because the planning system does not allow the supply of housing to meet local demand.

A further factor against housing provision is the pattern of land ownership in Britain which has also been recently identified as a major factor in the current British housing crisis (Monbiot, G. et al, 2019). In contrast to Serbia and Poland, where urban peripheral land is owned by many small proprietors, in Britain the big landowners with a near-monopoly control the supply of land, and they will only build homes at the rate at which they can sell them for a profit, no matter what the planning system recommends. They have been accused of “land-banking” as they hold as much land as twice the number of houses they are building. Although the British government has a target of building 300,000 new homes every year, only 192,000 are being built while the large developers hold on to their land for which planning permission has been granted to build potentially 395,000 new homes (Shelter, 2019).

In CEE countries, where it has been possible for developers to acquire large land holdings, there is a tendency to build gated communities, such as on the edge of Krakow. Therefore, one key to maintaining the democratic and social advantages of lot by lot development is the retention of a pattern of small ownerships and the adoption of some means of restricting the acquisition of land by large developers. This does not mean that the pattern of landholdings cannot be altered to produce more rational development from the point of view of service provision, but it should compensate small landowners by allocating to them buildable lots in a reorganized block urban pattern.

Another problem resulting from the dominance of large builders, as identified by a recent government report for Britain’s Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, is “the homogeneity of the types and tenures of the homes on offer is a problem on large sites in areas of high housing demand” (Letwin, 2018, p. 5). This report recommends rules requiring developments to provide a diversity of both types and tenures, a problem that does not exist in lot by lot development where, in fact, the resulting variety has often been described as chaotic when it imposes on the quality of life of neighbouring families.

It should be noted that in Britain plot by plot urbanism is now being promoted as an avant-garde solution to housing. In the rapidly growing town of Bicester for example, a large area has been allocated for self-build (Graven Hill, 2019). Graven Hill is the UK’s largest self-build community. In this case, would-be house builders are given “passports” indicating the minimum requirements they must follow when building their own house (Figure 5). The big difference from the Polish and Serbian cases is that in Britain the land is owned by the local authority what enables this process to be implemented, in contrast to areas where the large landowners prevail. Ownership of land has allowed Cherwell District Council, the planning authority for Bicester, to enforce a design code with varying restrictions on individual dwelling designs according to their location such as Village Centre, Community Streets, Urban Lanes, etc. In doing so, the council established a system of character areas that is in accordance with the practice of design coding in England. The only difference is that in some locations it does not insist on an imposed local character and offers freedom for self-builders to choose their own construction materials with no restrictions.

This project is unusual if not unique in Britain where local authorities do not possess the means to buy land and are obliged to dispose of land that they may own because of the severe fiscal constraints of the last decade. Lot by lot development in Britain must, therefore, remain a marginal solution to the current shortage of affordable housing.



Figure 5: Graven Hill, Britain's largest self-build planned development. (photo: n.a.; source: www.gravenhill)

Conclusions

From the examples of peripheral housing development in Belgrade, Krakow, Oxford, and Bicester it is evident that the different structures of the development industry, of land ownership and of planning systems produce different patterns of urban form. Historically, the relatively stable UK political system as well as its urban laws, show an ordered development of urban fringes, while Krakow and Belgrade both have ineffective suburban strategies even though they result from different systems both in planning regulations and in the everyday practice of its execution. These differences can be summarized in the contrasting cases as a big plot of land with planned infrastructure provision versus the aggregation of individual lots with minimum design and uncoordinated infrastructure provision.

The expression "lot by lot development" can be used in two different situations. First, it can be used as a fundamental tool in both planned or organic development replacing the hierarchical systems of plans and urban rules. Secondly, in the absence of formulated plans, we call it "lot by lot urbanism" where individual ownership does not follow general rules but only expresses its own needs without respecting any neighbourhood or contextual rationale. However, the positive aspects of lot by lot development by individual self-builders must be acknowledged. It allows families and individuals of modest means to build their own homes and, in many cases, fulfil their dreams of living in a house with a garden – not unlike the dreams of many families in Britain.

Therefore, any reform of current systems in CEE countries needs to retain the democratic nature of lot by lot urbanism while

avoiding its negative consequences and main disadvantages, such as the higher cost of infrastructure provision and of energy consumption. Simple rules should also be included, such as requiring individual builders to maintain the character of an area and to protect neighbourhood amenities, such as preventing buildings much higher than the existing context. These rules do not need to be too concerned with the appearance of individual dwellings, providing opportunities for personalization and variety in the townscape (Figure 4). This would run contrary to the practice in many iconic housing developments such as the Crown Estate at Poundbury. Promoted by the Prince of Wales, this project is much admired as a model for housing developments in Britain which are concerned with the retention of local character. In this transatlantic transplant of New Urbanism, house owners need "the consent of his Royal Highness to paint or decorate the exterior of the property otherwise than in the same colour or colours as the Property here previously painted" (Poundbury Manco, 1). To retain the advantages of lot by lot urbanism, future codes should be less obsessed with detail and more concerned with larger strategic issues, such as increasing small scale development opportunities and democratizing architectural production.

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