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Dreptul la Oraș

HOUSING, FOR WHOM?

Some of the materials included here, both text and figures, were initially published in the magazine Strada, edited by our group[1].The testimonies were collected during interviews for the magazine or personal discussions with the cited persons. Names are not given as several persons have expressed their desire to not have their identity disclosed.

Timișoara is a city with a thriving economy and its booming property market is one of the most active in the country. There are currently around 200 residential complexes in construction citywide[2]. There is something troubling however, under this facade of prosperity. The cost of a comfortable living in the city is around 400€ per month[3]. Around half of the population in the county earns less than that amount[4]. So it is natural to ask, for whom are all these homes being built?

For the factory worker who does backbreaking work, including on most Saturdays and some Sundays, who earns nowhere near the mean national wage? For the starting high school teacher, who often buys some school props out of her own pocket, and has barely enough money left for subsistence expenditures after paying the rent? Even, for the creative contractual middle-class worker, like some artists and architects, who have good but inconstant incomes?

1 http://dreptullaorastimisoara.com/strada_issue_02.html
2 http://www.tion.ro/aproape-200-de-ansambluri-rezidentiale-sunt-acum-in-lucru-in-timisoara/1979950
3 https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/in/Timisoara
4 http://storage07transcoder.rcs-rds.ro/storage/2018/07/04/934211_934211_1_Studiu-privind-forta-de-munca-2017-principalele-industrii.pdf Table 12, 61-62.

The answer is given more or less subtly by the developers themselves. City of Mara, for example, is marketing itself as the first “city inside a city” in Timișoara[5] – almost literally the definition of a gated community –, obviously speaking to the sensibilities of an *upper middle-class,* that has the means and desire to escape the sight of a decaying urban fabric, of the working poor and especially of the homeless. And ISHO, that, with its offer which includes luxury apartments[6], is promising to attract the type of *capital* for which the built environment (especially in high-value near-central locations) represents merely a safety deposit, without any actual intent for usage. A few years from now we should be keeping an eye on how many of these apartments have their lights on at night, as Sasskia Sassen remarks about the phenomenon plaguing most large cities around the globe[7].

Neoliberalism and the dismantling of the means of social reproduction

It is one of the defining characteristics of neoliberal capitalism, that it undermines and plunders the basic mechanisms that ensure society’s (and thus also the economy’s) continued existence. Social reproduction, as this set of mechanisms is called in Marxist language, includes things formally included in the economy, like the transportation system and after-schools; welfare programs, like child support and the pension system; and a large part of the work (formally un-recognized as such) which goes on in the ‘private sphere’ of the home, like raising children, doing household chores, engaging in recreational activities and nurturing friendships, regularly captured by the terms domestic and care work; all of which are essential for our socio-economic system to go on, from one minute to the other, from one day to the next, and from one decade to the following.

5 http://www.cityofmara.ro/
6 http://www.isho.ro/
7 Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and complexity in the global economy*. London: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Social reproduction includes also ‘social needs’ like “[p]articipation in the higher, even cultural satisfactions, the agitation for [one's] own interests, newspaper subscriptions, attending lectures, educating [one's] children, developing [one's] taste etc.,”[8] but at the most basic level it entails covering the existential needs of humans, like food and shelter. Housing, obviously, has an especially central role in sustaining the daily lives of workers and citizens.

T. Bhattacharya argues that in order to correctly understand the functioning of the economy, we must consider besides the circuit of capital production (money → means of production + labor power → production process → new commodities → surplus money), the circuit of the production and reproduction of the labor force (money → consumer items and services → ‘production process’, i.e. “eating, drinking, procreating” etc. → worker’s renewed labor power → money), as a tangent and interconnected, as opposed to a separate, sphere[9]. Only in doing so, do we correctly appreciate the interconnected web of causality that produces and maintains our capitalist reality. How, for example, the same workers that produce commodities also need to buy them in order to ensure their own survival, and how capital needs workers to be able to buy the commodities, or else they will not be able to rejuvenate their labor power and hence not be able to produce more commodities. Neoliberal capitalism exactly obscures the interrelation between these two spheres. It does this first of all by propagating a discourse according to which ‘the best of all worlds’ is achieved by privatizing and financializing the whole Universe, while persistently rolling back the state, and all of it sprinkled with a superficial narrative of meritocracy. The effect of this discourse is the downplaying of the social importance of jobs like tram drivers, nurses and sanitation workers – which leads to suppression of wages –, and the externalization (as much as possible) of socially reproductive tasks, from the society to individuals and communities (acts like cutting funding for day care programs and reducing the number of public transportation lines).

8 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, quoted in 9.
9 Tithi Bhattacharya, *How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class*, in: Tithi Bhattacharya (Ed.). *Social reproduction theory: Remapping class, recentering oppression*, 2017, 80.

Consider, for example, the lives of two people, A. and C, who live in a small brick shack on the river bank, in a marginal area of the city. One of their sources of income is recycling, refurbishing and selling items that other people have thrown away. A. is regularly employed as a day laborer in construction or in household work like chopping wood. Neighborhood teenagers often mock and disturb them, especially during the night, and people often call the police – who obligingly comply – to try to evict them or give them fines, for no legitimate reason. Even though they work without a contract, and thus do not pay taxes or have any medical or other insurance, their labor contributes as much as any other persons' to erecting buildings and keeping society in motion. In the summer season, for example, A. often gathers worms and insects to sell to fishing store. Even though this might seem work of not tremendous value, for the citizen who after a long day's work wishes to engage in recreational fishing, the availability of buyable fish bait is essential. Despite this fact, the same person might be the one who calls on the police to 'get rid of' A. and C. because they disturb the built and/or natural landscape around his favorite fishing spot.

This obfuscation of the causal link within these continuing cycles of → buying → working → (re)producing → selling → buying →…, is what neoliberalism does so well. This is exactly what permits responsibilities and risks involved in social reproduction to be increasingly privatized, while capital siphons up the liberated values and profits. The fact that the fish bait magically appears in the store, and you can just buy it unconditionally, without consideration for the person whose work is embodied in it, and with whom you co-participate in society, – i.e. the fact that objective social relations between people (in society) appear as subjective material relations between objects (on the market) – is what Marx calls commodity fetishism.

Social Housing and its Discontents

Social Housing Today

Traditionally the way to ensure adequate housing for all throughout much of Europe has been through different types of social housing. Historically social housing became widespread after WWII, as European governments recognised that the only way to avoid the rise of extremist political ideologies (communism, fascism and nazism) was to address the socio-economic disparities that generated the conditions for them to appear (conditions not very unsimilar to what we are experiencing today and which are fueling far-right sentiment around the globe). The right to housing was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a fundamental right[10], the insurance of which is deemed essential for a decent – even a minimal – standard of living.

Housing stopped being viewed through the lens of the 'social question', the shortage of which was understood as a systemic product of free market capitalism, and is now seen instead as an issue of aid for those who are too weak or lazy to cope on their own.

Starting with the 1980s with the spread of the neoliberal ideology (and M.Thatcher's flagship *right to buy* policy) around the world housing became increasingly privatized and financialized. Some countries, like Austria and the Netherlands, still retain considerable amounts of social housing (around 20-30% of the total housing stock[11]) and there is no stigma associated with publicly assisted living. Throughout much of the world, however, social housing has become synonymous with crime and degradation, a place where only the most wretched of the earth live.

10 Art. 25.(1) of the UDHR. http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/
11 http://www.housingeurope.eu/section-14/research?topic=&type=country-profile&order=da

The way the current local administration of Timișoara feels about social housing has been plainly expressed by the mayor. On site, a few years ago, at the opening of a recently acquired social apartment bloc, mayor Robu said: “The issue of social housing has been solved only in a very small measure. But I have said to people now, as I always say this: the problem of housing has to be solved by each himself. We cannot become an assistential city. The city hall does not solve the housing problem for thousands and thousands of citizens. At least in Timișoara there is no such orientation.”[12]

In accord with this discourse, the town hall persistently failed to keep its part of the housing contract (or does so with great delay), i.e. the external maintenance of its social building stock. In a social apartment complex on Polonă street, for example, the walls of some of the homes are crumbling from mold; the pest control process has been several years late now; and the past years’ mega-storm has ripped off parts of the roofs of several buildings, so now it practically pours inside when it rains in the affected apartments.

Residential Alienation

Moving beyond the poor conditions of the physical spaces and materials, D. Madden and P. Marcuse argue that “[i]f we truly want to understand the consequences of the hyper-commodification of housing, we need to understand the alienated psychosocial experience – the fear, stress, anxiety, and disempowerment – that the current housing system produces”[13], a state which the authors call ‘residential alienation’. In modern understanding, alienation means not only “powerlessness and lack of freedom but also [...] a characteristic impoverishment of the relation to self and the world.”[14]

12 http://www.tion.ro/primaria-timisoara-a-impartit-inca-100-de-locuinte-sociale-in-zona-polona/1443569
13 Peter Marcuse and David Madden, *In defense of housing: The politics of crisis*. London: Verso Books, 2016, 56.
14 Ibid 58.

Furthermore, in social housing in particular, the “feeling of alienation is intensified by the social stigma that outside observers apply to housing that differs from the imagined middle-class suburban ideal. “[T]he disgrace that comes from living in stigmatized locations and housing types is a form of symbolic class violence, adding a layer of socially generated shame to living conditions that may already be precarious.”[15]

Mr. Ș lives with his wife and five children in a small one-room social apartment on Polonă street. He works in sanitation and talks with pride about his job – “without us the city would come to a halt” –, but also with an undercurrent of induced shame – “they tell us that we are digging in trash cans, but if we wouldn’t work they would be neck deep in garbage in two days”. Both he and his wife are visibly affected by the fact that after decades of work at a job that they feel has great social importance, they had to wait 15 years to be granted a social home, and even that, as they found out, was extremely small, damaged and, on top of all, located on the ‘periphery of the periphery’ of the city, as another resident remarks.

Spatial injustice

As E. Soja comments, we must be “insistently aware how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics of ideology.”[16]

15 Ibid 73.
16 Edward W Soja, *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. London: Verso Books, 1989, 6.

The ‘periphery of the periphery’ is a syntagm that captures truly well the spatial position of the social apartment complex on Polonă street – almost a ‘ghetto’ we might say – (barely) within the city. This spatiality is not a product of accident, but rather of deliberate political decisions. Hidden behind the superficially objective process of the assessment of an application for a social home, there are subjective judgments being made about the importance and deservedness of people to be placed in this or that house. “There are other social houses in Timișoara, closer to the city center”, as another resident observes, “but those ones are only for teachers and other more important people.” Even within the complex on Polonă itself, there are larger and smaller apartments, and there is a social stratification which is being induced by subjective appraisals (beyond the ‘objective’ criteria) of people’s worth or merit.

The spatial distribution of goods and services is also heavily marked by ideology and judgments of importance. M., another resident, who has a daughter who is confined to a wheelchair, complains that there are no amenities for disabled persons at all in the area. “It is very hard for me to move around with my girl because of the state of the pavement, which is cracked and broken everywhere, and there are lots of stairs without ramps. We were the other day on a brief visit at relatives in Italy, and she was so happy that she did not want to come home, because it was so easy to move around there.” V., who has six children, several with different types and degrees of disabilities, says that there is no stop light at the street crossing, even though it is a heavily circulated road and the number of children in the area outweighs that of the adults. There is no stop light even at the school where her kids go, which is two bus stops away, in a neighborhood in the city. There is also currently no pharmacy in the area. When they have an emergency, they either have to take the car (if they have one) or wait for half an hour after the bus. N. says that she has to wake up at 6AM each morning in order to get prepared for school and catch the only appropriate bus for her. If she misses it, she has to wait another half an hour for the next one and be late for class.

The effect of these unjust spatial configurations is to create new forms of marginalization and alienation, and deepen existing inequalities.[17]

17 Edward W Soja, *Seeking spatial justice*. Minneapolis: Univeristy of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Proximity does not a community create

We need also to move beyond a narrow understanding of the right to housing as the right to a physical space – a place with four walls and a roof –, towards what would more accurately be called the right to a home and a right to a community. More explicitly this entails ensuring an adequate background and social infrastructure such that relationships and solidarity networks between neighbors can form. Just putting people in proximity to each other does not guarantee in any way the possibility of forming meaningful relationships. Cramming as many people into a small a space as possible, also obviously does not help. Another important issue is related to the varying needs, wants and desires (NWD) of tenants. While diversity is obviously desirable in a community, and some level of conflict is unavoidable – if not even desirable – putting together people with differing unfulfilled or unfulfillable NWDs can also be a source of problems.

I. is a person living in the social apartment block on Polonă street. He has a quite a serious visual impairment and also a mild intellectual disability. For this, the state offers him a sum of money, from which he must both survive and pay an attendant. He says that due to his poor vision, he has trouble keeping his apartment in order and even mundane activities can be problematic. “[I]’ve cried in my house because sometimes I’m afraid to even light the stove, I’m afraid to do anything”, I. says. His neighbors are very unhappy with this situation, because it generates conditions for bed bugs, for example, they say, with which they are having difficulty dealing. On the other hand, whenever he calls for an attendant to help him, he is reported for bringing foreign people into the block (even when it is his sister). This creates a catch-22 situation in which he is constantly at odds with his close neighbours.

On the other hand, A. and C., have an excellent relation with their close neighbors, offering mutual aid to each other in times of need. Also, their dwelling, although barely a house, is truly a home. They have constantly improved it through the many years they have lived there, from once a ruin it is now a livable shack and they feel that it is their own. They say they would not exchange it for any other dwelling which does not offer significantly better conditions.

Thus, we see that the problem of whether a house forms the basis for a home or for the formation of a community, is conditioned, but not determined, by the actual physical conditions of the dwelling or the proximity to other residents.

Other political shenanigans

One last thing worth noteing, is that the scarcity of social housing makes it a good political bargaining chip and also a tool for disciplining and silencing residents. Around election period the most urgent – and mediatizable – cases suddenly receive social homes, ensuring votes on one side and raising hopes on the other. Away from politically volatile periods however, people are told to shut up and accept their conditions because there are no other houses to give. When I. asked to be relocated due to his constant conflicts with his neighbours, he was told “we gave you [a place] here, you will stay here, for if not, you will not get any other home.”

Social Housing and its Discontents

There are three goals that we wished to pursue through this short essay.

The first is to argue – hopefully convincingly – that housing, in all its aspects, is a political issue. Even when it seems that the discourse is neutral and objective, there are always – explicit or implicit – judgments that are being made about whose rights matter, who represents a worthy citizen and who is recognized as a legitimate subject of need.

The second is to show that if you live in social housing in Timișoara, you are basically voiceless and invisible.

And the third is to touch on the role of the architect 'in all this madness'[18]. In the book *Spaces of Hope,* David Harvey says about the figure of the architect that she

> "has a certain centrality and positionality in all discussions of the processes of constructing and organizing spaces. The architect has been most deeply enmeshed throughout history in the production and pursuit of utopian ideals (particularly though not solely those of spatial form). The architect shapes spaces so as to give them social utility as well as human and aesthetic/symbolic meanings. The architect shapes and preserves longterm social memories and strives to give material form to the longings and desires of individuals and collectivities. The architect struggles to open spaces for new possibilities, for future forms of social life. For all of those reasons […] the 'will to architecture' understood as 'the will to create' is the 'foundation of Western thought'."[19]

Furthermore, what distinguishes architects from other builders from the animal kingdom is that:

> "A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst of architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects in reality. At the end of the labor process we get a result that existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement. He not only affects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose…"[20]

D. Harvey calls on all of us to "adopt the figure of the architect as a metaphor for our own agency as we go about our daily practices and through them effectively preserve, construct, and re-construct our life-world." Through this short intervention we would also like to call on (professional) architects, who are in an especially good position to assume the figure of the architect – in the sense described by Harvey –, to choose that purpose and apply that will to where it is most needed. That is, to use their privileged social position to shine a light on the wants, needs and desires of the invisible and to create platforms for empowering the voiceless.

18 https://youtu.be/mKl5_OxKBn8?t=105
19 David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, 200.
20 Karl Marx, *Capital volume 1*, quoted in [19].