Review

The Colourfulness of Prefab Grey

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“The value of housing estates and panel buildings lies in their truthfulness, in the genuineness with which they reflect, in a manner we have not yet put up with, their time,” was what architect Ladislav Lábus wrote in 1997, comparing panel buildings with their “absence of pretence of expression” to folk and industrial architecture,
“the architecture without architects.” As excellently illustrated by the books Paneláci 1 and Paneláci 2, the “truthfulness” of panel buildings has become a part of the mainstream of research into the history of architecture and urban planning in the Czech Lands 20 years later.

Both books represent the outcome of unprecedented academic, pedagogic, and managerial efforts which combined historians of architecture and arts with a number of other specialists in areas such as sociology, anthropology or heritage conservation in a long-term research project and extensive popularization and curatorship activities. The scope of the project is also reflected in a rather complicated structure of the two books. The book Paneláci 1 is, after a fashion, an extensive large-format critical catalogue of almost 500 pages for the exhibition “Residence – housing estate: Plans, realization, housing 1945–1989,” which took place in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague from January to July 2018, but also for the “Story of a panelák” exterior exhibitions, which took place one after another in all regional capitals. The book is the first ever systematic attempt to periodize panel construction in Czechoslovakia (or, more accurately, in its Czech part), as formulated by Martina Koukalová on the basis of the team members’ discussions. The different phases of the period in question – the archaic phase (Two-Year Plan housing estates, 1946–1947), the socialist realism phase (from 1948 till the mid-1950s), the pioneering phase (the second half of the 1950s), the beautiful phase (the 1960s), the technocratic phase (the “normalization” period, roughly till the mid-1980s), and finally the phase of late beautiful and post-modernist housing estates (roughly the perestroika period) – are illustrated in the text by examples of housing estates from 50 different areas of Bohemia and Moravia. Each of them has been subjected to a thorough art-historical analysis which outlines the development of the concept of the housing estate, provides brief information about its authors and describes the urban planning concept of the housing estate, and the panel technology and decoration used.

Each periodization block of the book Paneláci 1 is concluded by an extensive socio-demographic study of selected housing estates by Lucie Pospíšilová and Petra Špačková. Although other texts of the authoresses have made an essential contribution to urban geography and sociology, these studies are the only weaker point of the book. For each housing estate (selected for its art-historical characteristics, not for socio-demographic properties), there is a census-based package of socio-demographic data on the development and number of its inhabitants, and their educational, professional and family status structure. Apart from the fact that the data itself is sometimes questionable (for example, the postwar two-year plan housing estates are accompanied by data from 1970), these studies do not make any significant contribution to understanding social dynamism of the housing estates. Instead, they bring, on more than 60 pages, an array of sociological data which is

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difficult to interpret and not very significant. For example, it is not quite clear why a reader needs to know how the share of inhabitants of Prague’s Solidarita housing estate employed in the primary sector (i.e. agriculture, forestry and fisheries) changed between 1970 and 2011 (it dropped from 0.77 to 0.25 percent).

The follow-on book, *Paneláci 2*, with an ambitious, but fitting subtitle *The history of housing estates in the Czech Lands 1945-1989*, brings a more systematic insight into the comprehensive history of panel housing estates. Although the publication is a collective and interdisciplinary work, the lion’s share of architecture historian Rostislav Švácha is obvious not only from the fact that he wrote a half of its contents, but also from its overall concept. Švácha thus tops off his long-term efforts to re-evaluate the opinion of and attitude to panel buildings, which he started as early as at the end of the 1990s, when his series of articles pointed out the importance of housing estates for both architectural theory and practice, stating that their sweeping condemnations were “out of place and in fact irresponsible.”

The book *Paneláci 2* is thus basically comprehensive materialization of a simple, but essential proposition which Švácha was advocating as early as 20 years ago, namely that housing estates are not all alike. To distinguish their qualities, Švácha and his team use the chronological segmentation outlined above, which is his basic methodological tool. Theoretically, the strictly chronological criterion is based on the principle of seriality formulated by George Kubler, which is relevant for studies of panel buildings due to its concept of the history of things as a series of problem-solving actions. Although its details and concept can (and undoubtedly will) be discussed at length, the periodization is a very efficient tool that helps convey the fundamental message of both books; to show housing estates, no matter how similar they may seem, as a diverse and dynamically developing object of interest. This effect of both books is further emphasized by excellent use of archival photographs and generally great graphic design of the publications.

Although Švácha’s contribution is extraordinary, it is equally impressive how he and Lucie Skřivánková, née Zadražilová (she is the authoress of several fundamental publications on the history of panel construction and the head of the NAKI project which the books emerged from), managed to create a compact team of researchers. A particularly valuable part of *Paneláci 2* is the contribution of Jana Zajoncová on the criticism of housing estates in the 1960s and efforts to humanize them; the same applies to the follow-on text by Michaela Janečková on post-modern tendencies in the construction of late socialism housing estates. The discussion about panel construction is also dramatically enhanced by Martina Koukalová’s contribution on rebuilding and redevelopment of older built-up areas, which demonstrates dramatic consequences of this building technology for the urban planning of a socialist city in general.

My critical comments on the *Paneláci 2* are based on two interconnected areas of topics. First, the publication fairly understandably prefers architecture to urbanism,
yet it does not reflect this emphasis sufficiently enough. A good example of this is
the periodization, which sensitively reflects changes in the architecture of housing
estates and places four of the six “phases” of their development in the first two
decades of the state socialism period. However, the periodization does not capture
important changes in the perception of socialist urban planning in the late 1960s and
particularly throughout the 1970s, nor does it clarify their significance adequately
(except maybe for Martina Koukalová’s text on redevelopments). The authors’ col-
lective encountered the discrepancy between the architectural and the urbanistic
views when analyzing housing estates dating back to the period of socialist realism
which are, in their opinion, characterized by good urban planning and poor archi-
tecture. However, the exact opposite could be said about some “beautiful” housing
estates, highly appreciated in the book, which even the criticism of that time con-
sidered poorly-planned. The book does not capture adequately enough the radical
change in the perception of socialist housing estates during the “normalization,”
when they became the target of increasingly intensive criticism of experts and were
also problematized by popular culture (the term krátkářka [rabbit hutch] was not
coined by Václav Havel after November 1989; it can be already heard, for example,
First and foremost, however, housing estates start disappearing from urban plans
of large cities in the 1980s. What remains is the panel technology deprived of the
housing estate concept and finding its way into inner cities as redevelopment pro-
jects under slogans such as a “city for people” and “human scale”.

The second comment concerns the perception of “normalization” housing estates,
which the book terms “technocratic.” In the context of the book, this term has a pe-
jorative connotation. Again, this opinion is understandable from the viewpoint of
the history of architecture, but, as a matter of fact, “normalization” housing estates
fulfill the ideal which their founding fathers – the “PASists” – were promoting: to
provide, as fast as possible and at the lowest possible costs, hygienic housing for
broad masses of people using new technological and scientific methods without the
interference of market and artistic inspiration. In their view, housing estates were
to be “technocratic” rather than “beautiful.” According to their original concept,
prefabricated panel buildings did not have to display aesthetic curves or stand on
feet, but fulfil a clearly defined role in the overall social planning of the society.
The “normalization” housing estates were much closer to this ambition than the
“beautiful” ones, which were too expensive to be built on a scale demanded by the
housing crisis. The perception of the “normalization” in the book generally lags
behind the current state of research and often remains at the level of a static and
superficial cliché about the “timelessness” borrowed from the Václav Havel’s essays.

However, the problematic perception of the “normalization” housing estates has
little effect on the fact that both books represent, and for a long time will repre-

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3 The Working Group of Architects (in Czech acronymized as PAS) consisted mainly of Karel
Janů, Jiří Voženílek and Jiří Štursa and was strongly influenced by Karel Teige. It promoted
a programme of building industrialization and scientification of architecture.
sent, a fundamental interdisciplinary framework for any future research of prefab housing estates which are still inhabited by about one third of the Czech Republic’s population. The prestigious Magnesia Litera award granted to Paneláci in the non-fiction category in 2018 only underlines their value and contribution.

The Czech version of this review, entitled Pestrost panelové šedi, was originally published in Soudobé dějiny, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2019), pp. 594–597.

Translated by Jiří Mareš

Abstract
Both collective publications (Prefab houses 1: Fifty prefab housing schemes in the Czech Lands. A critical catalogue of the “Prefab house story” series of exhibitions and Prefab houses 2: History of housing schemes in the Czech Lands 1945–1989. A critical catalogue of the “Residence – prefab housing scheme: Planning, realization, housing 1945–1989” exhibition) are products of a broadly conceived interdisciplinary research project the deliverables of which included, inter alia, exhibitions in Prague and all regional capitals of the Czech Republic and which were awarded the prestigious Magnesia Litera prize in 2018 as an extraordinary feat in the field of professional and educational literature. In the reviewer’s opinion, they bring the first-ever systematic attempt to periodize the prefab-based building projects in the Czech part of the former Czechoslovakia between the mid-1940s and the end of the 1980s, at the same time providing a multifaceted characterization based on a representative sample of fifty prefab housing schemes in Bohemia and Moravia. Each of them was subjected to a thorough artistic-historical analysis outlining the development of the housing scheme’s concept, providing brief information about its authors, describes its urbanistic concept, prefab technology used, and artefacts and decorations. Added to the above is a set of interdepartmental studies analyzing different aspects of the historical development of prefab housing schemes. The compact collective of authoresses and authors has succeeded in presenting the prefab housing schemes, no matter how similar they may seem, as a varied and dynamically developing phenomenon, which fact is underlined by excellent work with archival photographs and the generally outstanding graphic layout of the publications. The only critical comment the reviewer has is that the authors were so absorbed by the architectural aspect of the matter that they tended to overlook substantial changes of the socialist urbanism in Czechoslovakia.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia; prefab houses; prefab housing schemes; architecture; housing; Communist regime