

KIMBERLY ELMAN ZARECOR, *MANUFACTURING A SOCIALIST MODERNITY: HOUSING IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1945–1960*<sup>1</sup>,

PHILIPP MEUSER, *DIE ÄSTHETIK DER PLATTE. WOHNUNGSBAU IN DER SOWJETUNION ZWISCHEN STALIN UND GLASNOST*<sup>2</sup>

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Housing has always been one of the major topics in the study of socialist architecture. Improving the living conditions of citizens and ensuring the right distribution of population were among the key political promises made by new post-war governments of the Eastern Bloc. Eradicating (or at least marginalising) private construction businesses and extending state supervision over the housing industry were typically practiced by Communist authorities. The process had strong ideological motivation and was accompanied by forceful propaganda. The broad array of issues connected with socialist housing has long been the subject of much academic interest across many fields of study, particularly those regarding social matters and the history of daily life.<sup>3</sup>

The book by Kimberly Elman Zarecor is exceptional in that the author adopts in it a different research perspective. Analysing the housing industry of the first fifteen years of socialist Czechoslovakia, Zarecor directs her attention to the evolution of preferred architectural and structural solutions, and the changed organisation of architectural work. These elements are at the core of *socialist modernity*. One of the book's central objectives is assuming a broader perspective in dealing with the subject than simply putting it down to the ideological priorities of the Communist government.

Discussing the search for a new housing model that preoccupied Czechoslovakia in the years 1945–1948, Zarecor reflects on the prominent role played in the process by the left-wing architects of

the interwar avant-garde, who devised an organisational framework for their professional activity immediately after the liberation – May 1945 saw the formation of the Union of Socialist Architects, which, a month later, initiated the establishment of a larger organisation, the Block of Progressive Architectural Associations (BAPS). The group emphasised the importance of collective effort and considered the role of the architect to be strictly technical, and one of its main objectives to develop “the industrial foundation” for architecture. At the same time, attempts were made at developing a new housing model. These efforts bore fruit in the form of the collective house in Litvínov, which, however, remained an isolated case. Architects from BAPS also participated in a project which had more bearing on the future of Czechoslovakian housing – the 1947 model housing development programme, launched by the government with the objective of building pilot housing developments in Ostrava, Most and Kladno. For financial reasons, the programme failed, but the idea of grouping a number of densely positioned low buildings around service buildings for common use remained a standard also after 1948.

When the Communists came to power in 1948, the professional circumstances of Czechoslovak architects proceeded to undergo substantial reorganisation – private practice disappeared, replaced by a national system of state-run architecture and engineering offices Stavoprojekt, which was part of

<sup>1</sup> K. Elman Zarecor, *Manufacturing a socialist modernity: Housing In Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2011, 384 s., il., ISBN 978-0-8229-4404-1.

<sup>2</sup> P. Meuser, *Die Ästhetik der Platte. Wohnungsbau in der Sowjetunion zwischen Stalin und Glasnost*, Dom Publishers, Berlin 2015, 728 s., il. nlb.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of such publications are: *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. David Crowley, Susan E. Reid, Berg, Oxford 2002; *Constructed Happiness. The Domes-*

*tic Environment in the Cold War Era*, ed. Mart Kalm, Ingrid Ruudi, Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn 2005. The social aspect of panel-based housing in East Germany is discussed by Christine Hannemann in *Die Platte. Industrialisierter Wohnungsbau In der DDR*, Hans Schiler, Berlin 2005 (3 extended edition). An analysis of the mechanisms determining the housing practice in the Polish People's Republic has recently been proposed by Dariusz Jarosz in *Mieszkanie się należy... Studium z peerełowskich praktyk społecznych*, Aspra-JR, Warsaw 2010.

a newly established enterprise called Czechoslovak Building Works (Československý stavební závod). The latter took over and consolidated into one massive structure the nationalised private construction companies. Its objective was to continue implementing the housing programme of the five-year economic plan, albeit in a much more streamlined and cheaper way than before. A general drive was thus initiated to harness the forces of the entire architectural community and direct its efforts towards implementing the economic policies imposed by the central government. Meanwhile, new institutions were being established, whose role was to support the productivist vision of the authorities. All these factors brought architecture closer together with engineering. One of the best examples of this strategy at work was, according to Zarecor, the Typification and Standardization Institute set up within the structures of Stavoprojekt. In-depth research into the typification of housing allowed architects to draw on their interwar experience. The director of Stavoprojekt was Jiří Voženílek, previously an employee of the design offices of the Baťa Shoe Company in Zlín, one of the pioneer institutions of standardisation and prefabrication. The typified house designs drafted at Stavoprojekt, ranging from one-family houses to large apartment blocks (in practice, the latter were the preferred kind), went on to quickly dominate architectural production. In 1950, over 90% of newly erected housing was considered 'typified'. Its modest exterior was a reflection of both the frugality inscribed in the governmental policy and, to some degree, the characteristically modernist fascination with vernacular architecture. The amenities and arrangements in the flats (toilet, bathroom, hot water, heating, double-sided air circulation) were of a standard that exceeded the living conditions of a considerable proportion of the population.

In her book, Zarecor pays much attention to the process of introducing socialist realism. Discussing the inner workings of the propaganda machine and the institutional change imposed by the central government, the author stresses how reluctant most architects were to embrace 'Sorela' and how superficially they treated it in their design work. As the most complete realization of the socialist realist urban planning, she describes Nová Ostrava (today: Poruba), a perfect example of the Stalinist vision of a bright future put to practice. The settlement was built on an unprecedented scale compared to previous urban projects, and in complete disregard for

the existing spatial context. The monumental streets bring to mind classicist traditions, and the forms of some buildings contain references to the historic architecture of St. Petersburg and feature the 16<sup>th</sup> century Czech decoration technique called sgraf-fito. Zarecor remarks that unlike its historic predecessors, Poruba was designed first and foremost for pedestrians. A place of comfort and relaxation, the socialist realist city in a Stalinist society was meant to facilitate the implementation of the industrialisation programme.

A biographical addition to the discussion of socialist realism in Czechoslovakia is the chapter on Jiří Kroha, the then most prominent architect in the country, the designer behind e.g. Nová Dubnica and the model settlement in Ostrava. The rise and fall of Kroha is the epitome of an architect's career through Stalinist Communism and the thaw that followed it. His professional practice in 1950s shows how the ideas of socialist realism shaped housing. Kroha studied regional historic buildings and used his observations in decorative modifications to the typical designs. In mid-1950s, however, his conviction in indispensability of artistic expression and his rejection of the pursuit of industrialised construction embedded in the vision of the socialist architecture of the future pushed him outside the mainstream as a conservative outsider, who eventually lost his privileged professional status after 1956.

Zarecor believes that what turned out to have the most impact on the future of socialist housing was industrialisation experiments, conducted without much propaganda publicity, to which she devotes the last part of her book. The appearance and ensuing predominance of panel construction was, in the author's opinion, not a result of an oppressive, authoritarian policy of the government, but rather a compromise which helped bring together the needs of a centrally planned economy that considers architecture to be a type of production process with the need for designers to keep some level of control over their design decisions. This aspiration was supported by the changing outlook of architectural practice, which meant architects had to pay more and more attention to technological aspects. Zarecor stresses the continued character of the efforts which started with the pre-war prefabrication and standardisation experiments conducted by designers at Baťa. These same architects came to prominence also after 1945, and Zlín (renamed Gottwaldov in 1949) was a major experimentation site.

The book's timeline ends in 1960. The author concludes that despite all the adversities and complications, within the 15 years of the establishment of BAPS, all its principal objectives were essentially attained: solutions for quick and cheap housing were put to practice, buildings were erected that bore resemblance to the architectural heritage of the country, and architects became more engineers than artists. In the context of the problems which affected Europe at the time – post-war destruction, desperate economic conditions of housing and the menace of cultural imperialism, either American or Soviet, these objectives must have sounded highly reasonable, also to professionals from the capitalist West. In her summary of the later challenges of “socialist modernity”, Zarecor points out: “industrialization should be about efficient, cost-effective, and sustainable building practices, not about generating form through data-driven processes. The essential function of architecture is designing spaces for human interaction and experience.”

The book merits appreciation for structuring narration around the gradual evolution of the professional practice of Czechoslovak architects, which makes it possible to expose the phenomena accompanying the first years of post-war Czechoslovakia more fully, comprising issues which have so far largely escaped the attention of architectural historians. What emerges is a fairly reliable image, but with room for further interpretation and questioning – e.g. about the role of technological issues during the architectural debates of de-Stalinisation (among Polish architects of the thaw period concerns were voiced that this was a mere substitute topic meant to replace the discussion of post-socialist-realist aesthetics)<sup>4</sup>.

Such a structure of the book came at an unavoidable price of rendering the Czechoslovak evolution in a somewhat absolutising way. There is no reference to the Soviet context, which is not always a convincing strategy. For instance, when discussing the beginnings of predominance of typification

around 1948–1949, the author disregards the Soviet context, even though typification in housing (both regarding sections and entire buildings), which had been promoted in the USSR since 1930s, was one of the main principles of socialist realism as it emerged in people's democracies in 1948–1949.<sup>5</sup> It appears that, not to ascribe a unilateral interpretation to the accelerated typification efforts in Czechoslovakia at that time as an implementation of a direct political order of the Communist administration, one cannot deny that the hopes of economic decision-makers were indeed to some extent instrumental in the process.

While it makes for an appealing statement, it is questionable to argue that limited capacity of the Czechoslovak industry was the reason why the Soviet Union opted for French technologies. It should be noted that the USSR purchased both the licence and factories of the Camus system. The system had already been implemented as part of several projects and was being promoted as a spectacular success, so the decisive factor might have been the fact that the solution was generally considered well-tested and had already reached the productive stage.<sup>6</sup> More to the point, panel technology at that time evolved very quickly, and in the Soviet Union alone frame and slab structures were still being used alongside those based on bearing slabs. Efforts were also made to develop the simplest possible structure of panels, with fewer layers, and therefore Czechoslovak technologies could not be considered the ultimate solution. Interestingly, later on also Czechoslovakia made use (albeit to a limited degree) of an imported solution in the form of the Danish system Larsen-Nielsen.<sup>7</sup>

Comparing this with the transformation that was taking place at the time in Polish architecture raises even more questions, e.g. about the dynamics of transformation in the planning practice of socialist realist settlements. Zarecor's book makes no reference to the economically motivated criticism of housing which emerged in the Soviet Union in early

<sup>4</sup> W. Baraniewski, *Odwilżowe dylematy polskich architektów*, [in:] *Odwilż. Sztuka ok. 1956 r.*, ed. P. Piotrowski, catalogue of the National Museum exhibition in Poznań, Poznań 1996, p. 129–132.

<sup>5</sup> Cf.: L. Tomaszewski, *Projektowanie mieszkań typowych*, “Architektura i Budownictwo”, 10, 1934, issue 2, p. 56–67; N. Solopova, *Le préfabrication en URSS : concept technique et dispositifs architecturaux*, doctoral dissertation, Université de Paris VIII, 2001, p. 41–42.

<sup>6</sup> N. Bullock, *4000 dwellings from a Paris factory: Le procédé Camus and state sponsorship of industrialised housing in the 1950s*, “Architectural Research Quarterly”, 13, 2009, issue 1, p. 59–72.

<sup>7</sup> *Common Thermal Defects and Failures of Prefabricated Buildings and their Rehabilitation*, Prague/Brno 2002, 14–15, [http://www.tc.cz/files/istec\\_publications/common-thermal-tech.pdf](http://www.tc.cz/files/istec_publications/common-thermal-tech.pdf) [viewed on 3 December 2012].

1950s. It undoubtedly resonated in the widespread Polish practice of “condensing up” existing settlements (e.g. Muranów or Mokotów in Warsaw). This practice was prompted by the ideological criticism of modernist “disurbanism”. The pursuit of fuller use of areas with existing service infrastructure was an important element of the housing policies of both the USSR and Poland. If Czechoslovak modernists – as Zarecor’s silence on the subject of similar processes at work in Czechoslovakia seems to suggest – never indulged in this kind of practice, it would be an interesting divergence from the predominant housing policies in the region.

Zarecor’s book is interesting and inspiring, and provokes further comparisons and questions. Still, one cannot escape an impression that the author’s effort to keep the narration relatively positive, as can be seen in the description of Czechoslovak housing situation in 1960, is in stark contrasts to the intuitive observation contained in the introduction that by 1956 much of the early enthusiasm shown by architects only a decade earlier had already been dampened.

Phillipp Meuser’s book also fits in this new trend in research on post-war prefabricated mass housing. What is particularly interesting and admirable about his contribution is that he undertook to discuss the issue on the example of the USSR itself – the country of origin of this type of housing and a model for the governments of the Eastern Bloc, which looked up to it for ways to handle economic issues and for radical solutions regarding housing policies. Mass implementation of prefabrication which started in mid-1950s was such a radical solution, also in Czechoslovakia (regardless of country-specific peculiarities identified and discussed by Zarecor in her book).

While the subject at hand has a clear ideological and political bent, Meuser’s book is not intended primarily as a description of the technocratic priorities of the Communist government. It is no coincidence that in the very title of his book, the author brings up the notion of aesthetics (which was nowhere to be seen on the list of top priorities imposed in mid-1950s by the discourse of Nikita Khrushchev).

Beside the written word, the book also features a visual narrative in its own right in the form of hundreds of historic and contemporary photographs, reproductions of designs, and plans. For Meuser, these buildings are the starting point, a tangible testimony of a phenomenon that has remained to this day largely unevaluated by architectural historians. The author sets out to overcome ideology-driven (and therefore negative) judgments cast on prefabricated building techniques in the USSR.<sup>8</sup>

Meuser’s remark that the study of prefabricated building technologies has often been brushed off by western researchers clearly has some truth in it, as evidenced by the very superficial treatment of the subject in the publication that accompanied the 2008 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York titled “Home Delivery. Fabricating the Modern Dwelling”.<sup>9</sup>

Meuser’s book features three chapters intertwined with additional separate sections discussing selected problems, or giving more detailed information. The first chapter contains a short analysis of the presence of panel buildings in the culture and media of socialist countries (on the example of East Germany and Soviet Union) and its role in fostering a sense of identity in post-Communist societies. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the history of industrialised construction in Europe from the Crystal Palace until mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and ends with presentations of the prominent personalities whose careers revealed the existing interaction between Soviet panel technologies and western ideas: Swiss architect Hans Schmidt, who worked in the USSR in 1930s and went on to be one of the originators of mass prefabrication in East Germany, and the French entrepreneur Raymond Camus, whose *procédé Camus* became – as we have already seen – the first panel system reduced to practice in mass production in the USSR.

The second chapter goes on to address the main topic of the book. It contains a brief description of Soviet architecture from 1950s to 1991 along with a discussion of the changing ideological landscape underlying the housing policies of the period. Meuser

<sup>8</sup> *Eine ideologiefreie Reflexion soll den sowjetischen Massenwohnungsbau in Russland, Osteuropa, Zentralasien und im Kaukasus neu bewerten, um ihn von Vorurteilen zu befreien, und seiner Bedeutung für die Baugeschichtsschreibung der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts gerecht zu werden.* (p. 30).

<sup>9</sup> Prefabrication in the USSR was only briefly mentioned in a tiny paragraph in the essay section and poorly illustrated as *Khrushchovkas* by one (completely random and devoid of any detailed description) photograph from Kiev. *Home Delivery. Fabricating the Modern Dwelling*, ed. B. Bergdoll, P. Christensen, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Birkhäuser, Basel 2008, p. 23, 100–101.



also presents a multi-angle analysis of the many years of evolution which resulted in the proliferation of mass-scale construction in the Soviet Union. In his view, the Communist take on housing was a derivative of its ideological assumptions, the aesthetic and social ideas of avant-garde movements, the effects of the industrialisation programme, a growing fascination with centralisation and technocracy, and the perpetual need to save time and money. Also portrayed is Khrushchev's polemics with the architectural discourse of the Stalinist era (the architectural community fell victim to this reform, since in public debate architects were blamed for much of the financial trouble the construction industry was facing early into the Khrushchev Thaw). The mass-produced, typified, normalised, prefabricated houses, first unveiled to the world in the model settlement of Novye Cheryomushki in Moscow, are something of a paradox; on the one hand, they constituted perceivable evidence of the improvement in the living standard of Soviet citizens and of the technological progress that took place in construction processes, but on the other they attested to the productivist mindset of their creators and the overwhelming pursuit of extreme forms of frugality, which pushed them towards painful compromises, technical and aesthetic alike, that earned this type of housing the contemptuous nickname '*khrushchoba*'.

The high point of the chapter – and the key point of the entire book – is the proposed list of ten features comprising “a typology of typical designs” (*Zehn Parameter für eine Typologie der Typenprojekte*). Seemingly paradoxical, this title expresses Meuser's primary objective: to identify the most characteristic qualities of typical construction in the USSR in order to classify specific design series as representatives of one of three generations (which essentially means allowing for some sort of diversity and evolution in prefabricated mass housing, though nowhere in the book is it expressly pointed out). The author lists a number of very diverse factors, ranging from the form and morphology of the actual buildings to more general issues connected with the organisation of the design process and the entire construction industry:

1) The organisational structure of design and execution, which gradually, without violating the organisational hierarchy and general supervision

grid, gravitated towards delegating design work to regional institutions connected with territories of similar climatic, geologic and tectonic conditions – a process accompanied by the introduction of a more flexible, open prefabrication system of the next generation (AKTS);

2) Changing construction standards, determining the sizes of flats and the categorisation of buildings based on durability. This section also discusses the naming conventions for series of typified designs, which also underwent evolution;

3) Particularities of the climate, land and seismic situation. The differences in terms of these considerations from one Soviet republic to another encouraged introducing technical improvements and modifications in typified designs, some of which went on to be exported to countries such as Vietnam, Cuba and Chile;

4) Types of constructions used – from conventional brick to large slab and large panel, frame structures (with panel filling) and structural modules. As years went by, technologies developed and improved, but what never changed was the relationship between design and the drive for maximum material and cost efficiency;

5) The height and accessibility of the buildings. Understood – despite the importance of aesthetics – as the effect of uncompromising economies. For several years, five-storey buildings predominated, but later multi-storey blocks appeared as a way to save space;

6) Ornamentation of the facades and the question of style.<sup>10</sup> The only possible outlet of artistic expression (and only to a limited extent) was the facade. Since the desirable style in construction was believed to be determined by the industrialised production process and the efforts to unify fundamental structural units, facades could only be modified as long as the general structure of the building was not affected. Hence, the elements most often reworked were balconies, loggias, entrances, and with more lavish projects there could be some decoration of the gables, especially in the form of a mosaic;

7) The industrialised process of manufacturing construction elements, which made it necessary to plan the entire project to the smallest detail; systems were often directly connected with particular project series;

<sup>10</sup> Oryg. *Stilbildung*.

8) Transport and assembly – which became part of economy-driven theoretical considerations;

9) Sections and flats. In his classification of the three generations of prefabricated construction, Meuser makes note of the growing flexibility of acceptable solutions – from simple repetition of building sections, through more relaxed, non-linear arrangements, to building out of smaller modules comprising only one flat;

10) Residential area and residential complex (*Wohngebiet* [microraiion] *und Wohngruppe*): two basic elements of residential district structure in the USSR after 1955. The author lists three essential determinants of how a district was arranged: cardinal directions (insolation), topography, and ease of crane operation.

The last chapter of the book is an overview of the transformation and evolution of prefabricated serial construction on the examples of Moscow, Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) and Tashkent. These cities allow for a review of both the historic evolution of typified housing and construction technologies, and a degree of diversity within its realm. This diversity is particularly noticeable in Tashkent. During the much publicised reconstruction after an earthquake in 1966, a highly diverse set of typified designs was introduced there, and later some concessions were even made in favour of local traditions; folk decorative motifs were used and in designing the arrangements of flats account was taken of the traditional Uzbek family model.

Conceivably, the biggest merit of the book is the author's comprehensive approach in describing prefabricated construction systems in the USSR and – which is particularly valuable – his attempt at tracking the evolution of prefabrication systems in 1970s and 1980s, coupled with extensive visual documentation. Naturally, it is evident that Meuser's work draws to a large extent on the conclusions of the 2001 monograph by Natalya Solopova, where the beginnings of Soviet prefabrication and the key decisions of Khrushchev's new administration in mid-1950s are articulated exceptionally well.<sup>11</sup> Solopova also included there a brief account of a dozen or so design series used for years in the USSR, but only in Meuser's book do they come to life as fully

tangible. Excellent photographs and descriptions demonstrate how the buildings actually differed, even within one series, and prove that not only the most general assumptions, but also specific, individual solutions in terms of materials, finishing or design details are what makes up the eponymous *Ästhetik der Platte*. One might even venture a concern that choosing as examples the two biggest and most prestigious metropolises in the Soviet Union, and Tashkent – also an exceptional case in that it served as a showpiece of post-earthquake reconstruction in 1966 – could overshadow the actual impact typified industrialised construction had on the landscape in less fortunate places in the country.

Essentially, the development of post-war prefabricated housing in the USSR is actually a success story (*Erfolgsgeschichte*) for Meuser, measurable by the numbers of flats built and the degree to which they improved the living conditions of the general public. The reader is left with an impression that the author is full of admiration for the durability and efficiency of the housing management system created in 1950 and developed in the following decades. It is quite striking how carefully the author shuns any kind of ethical judgments and generalisations while trying to describe, in “typified design parameters,” the ideological, political and economic considerations which so deeply influenced the work of architects and builders. The efforts made by Meuser to emphasise their creativity which, despite all the imposed limitations, managed to surface in subsequent generations of buildings is indeed a significant advantage of the book. It might have merited even more from taking into account the published opinions regarding prefabrication and typification, which would have given yet a fuller picture of the way the architectural community handled and adapted in its professional practice the one direction of construction development imposed top-down by the Communist authorities. An interesting example of a debate among architects and engineers about the appropriate layout of flats, published in *Izvestia* in March 1960, is discussed by Steven H. Harris<sup>12</sup>.

It would also be interesting if Meuser made a point of venturing an opinion on eng. Mikhail Glebov's

<sup>11</sup> N. Solopova, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> S. E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street. Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington 2012, p. 102–106. Meuser cites this book, but makes no reference to the fragment mentioned here.

sarcastic account of the Soviet construction industry and the reality of a design office.<sup>13</sup> Glebov devotes a few pages to typified building series, describing, among other things, the principles of creating the relevant nomenclature, and goes on to describe in more detail several particular typified designs. The emerging picture is that of a rather inefficient system not driven by progress, but suffering instead from a regression of technical competence of designers, who limited themselves to using the easiest, most typical solutions, and from an inflation of continuous outflow of technical documentation of ever more abundant but never actually implemented variants of typified designs produced by a design office. Glebov also emphasises the absolute impossibility of making any kind of economic calculation in this kind of system – the only calculable variable was the duration of construction works.

Glebov's account is, however, the voice of the old generation who considered typified design as one of the hardships of professional life in a centralised Communist state. For Meuser, a more valid and more important point of reference is the presence of panel buildings in contemporary urban fabric and its place in the identities of post-Socialist nations. As a German, his point of view is that of an outsider, who experiences these structures almost as historic buildings, trying tenderly, like Ruskin, to see in them the original idea of their creators. *Ästhetik der Platte* can therefore be considered as a difficult and controversial, but inevitable step towards seeing value where no one has seen any before.

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<sup>13</sup> М. Глебов, *Советское строительное проектирование*, typescript, 1999. Published online, available e.g at: <https://dwg.ru/dnl/11491> [viewed on 15 November 2016].