

LANDSCAPE IN THE HOUSING ESTATES OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN 1960s-1980s

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Abstract

Mass housing estates of the second half of the 20th century represent a poorly described and appraised topic of recent history. Mainly professionals overlook their garden design related aspect. It seems unbuilt areas within them were neglected by their authors; still, they represent an essential change in the urban structure in the 20th century and the rising significance of elements representing nature in urbanized environments. The present text focuses on housing estates in the Czech Republic that were built between the 1960s and 1989, especially their garden design related and landscape related aspects. First, circumstances of post-war building of mass housing and the role of modernist theories are introduced. Second, the development of forms of public areas in specific conditions of socialist central planning is observed. Our exploration concentrates on significant projects presented in the press of the time as well as housing estates that did not stand out from the average. The results, which we are presenting, are an overview of particular types of public spaces within mass housing estates with their basic characteristics and a definition of the roles of vegetation and other garden design means related to housing. In conclusion, we formulate a general development direction which the relation between landscape and housing took, as we can observe it in the example of housing estates of the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords: Housing estates, landscape architecture, urbanism, landscape

Introduction

After World War II, Europe witnessed an exponential growth in building of mass housing in response to the urgent housing crisis. Due to the developing industrialization, rationalization, and standardization, vast monofunctional estates were built as a result of interwar architectonic and urban theories, summarized in the Athens Charter (1943)³²³, being applied. Most changes were reflected in the field of housing for which the essential significance of free space, greenery, sun, and fresh airs, as well as possible recreation under the sky was emphasized. After a significant period of avant-garde interwar architecture, Czechoslovakia diverted from Western Europe in 1948 and became a part of the Eastern Bloc. Provision of flats was a part of the state policy; from the 1960s development was planned within the socialist central planning and its system of norms, which strictly controlled housing until 1989. The limited technical and economic conditions as well as the production of standardized elements impacted urban planners' and architects' work; many housing estates from that period are monotonous and uniform, with a low quality of outside areas. On the other hand, the fact that the state promoted production of mass housing estates

³²³However, their origin is much older, reaching to the period of essential social changes related to the industrial revolution. Forerunners of housing estates were the workers' colonies built from the 19th century as well as utopian ideas on the ideal society.

provided opportunities for experimentation in the fields of garden design and landscape architecture and gave rise to several unique projects.

I.

The following text explores the significance attached to vegetation and landscape in relation to housing and observes how the ideas of functionalism on healthy dwelling were satisfied. Our analysis³²⁴ of free area forms in housing estates is based on town urbanism as was applied until the onset of interwar modernism. The measure used will be the traditional forms, such as streets, squares, and parks. We are going to search for their parallels and modifications, or completely new forms, in housing estates. Our exploration will not be limited to purely public spaces; it will start on the boundary of the private sphere.³²⁵

The smallest spatial unit that can be identified for the garden design related discussion on housing estates is a **balcony** or an **enclosed balcony** (loggia). These are private spaces lying on the boundary of the public space and their arrangement is the inhabitants' responsibility. At the time of their origin, they were not designed for plants or other elements mediating the contact with the environment. Their limited size does not offer sufficient space for comfortable use; in spite of this, they have a high importance for dwelling. First, they can serve as a modest technical area (laundry drying, storage, minor works), second, they provide sunshine and fresh air, view of and contact with the outside. For these reasons, they were a very progressive convenience in comparison to the estates of the 19th century. They are often present in even very small flats. They dramatically increase the dwelling standard.

Another form is the **terrace** of terrace houses. However, terrace houses appeared only exceptionally in the period under observation so this form is only peripheral for our observation. A specific type is the **roof terrace**, which appeared in the projects of interwar functionalist architects, or more often in their visions. The roof terrace represented the occasion to provide the inhabitants with the beneficial sun rays and fresh air, views of the outside; however, roof terraces were a technical complication and financial burden in the postwar housing so they did not find their place in the mass housing. Very rarely, there were **terraces-gardens** with a clear definition (by a fence, wall, terrain step, etc.) linked to ground-floor flats.

Although no private ownership of land was possible in the 1960s to 1980s, we can often find areas with specific features in the housing estates. These most often resemble **front gardens**. They are bands along houses linked to entrances that were originally designed not different from the remaining public space or were only fitted with simple elevated flower beds, flower boxes, benches, or marked with overhanging roofs. More often, the inhabitants appropriated these areas by their spontaneous work and planting.

An **inter-house space** (space between large houses, a green courtyard) is a transition between private and public space. It was a rare element of the housing estates in the period observed. In spite of this, we can find examples - houses were arranged close to each other (although very loosely) so that the difference between the spaces outside and inside the house "circle" was indicated. Under the persisting influence of postmodernism, the 1980s saw various experiments with the way to arrange the houses so that the free areas became more structured. This trend peaked in the return to a nearly closed bloc structure as we can see it in the final stages of some large housing estates in Prague or Zlín.

³²⁴The information on the configurations within the housing estates provided in literature and maps has been supplemented and specified based on interviews with some of the authors. Moreover, field surveys of the housing estates have been done.

³²⁵We derive the polarity between private and public from the human perception of a built-up area and the behaviour within because mainly spaces on the boundary are of high significance for habitability, as many theoreticians on psychology and sociology of architecture have proved: e.g. J. Gehl., K. Schmeidler and others.

A **square** in the traditional sense of the word (as a multipurpose central space defined by buildings) can be found only to a limited amount at the end of the 1980s. The Athens Charter completely suppressed this type of public space. Its role was performed by **centres of community facilities** in housing estates. These were often arranged around an internal atrium. They are characterized by a variety of garden design means used, detailed working, and respect for the human scale. Besides the most frequent concrete paving or tar, there are also other materials, such as elevated flower beds, potted plants, minor architecture (walled pergolas and roofs, structures with roles of poster boards) as well as elements with water. Usually, they also house some works of art (as solitary pieces as well as parts of the architecture), which make the centres more attractive and closer to traditional complex urban spaces.

A **street**, one of the basic compositional elements of a traditional town, disappeared from the space of housing estates. In compliance with functionalist rules, walking paths were separated from the traffic, extracted from their original corridors defined by house façades, and they became rather functional links of targets than multipurpose urban spaces. Other multipurpose spaces disappeared when shops and services were driven out of house ground-floors. While the street significance was rehabilitated in Western Europe in line with the first critical responses to functionalist urbanism, no considerable development could be seen in the Czechoslovakia. However, typically for the observed period, we can find single cases predicting future trends. As early as in the 1960s, for the first time in Prague, **shopping streets** appeared as an early but natural response to the modernist loose housing arrangements. They are not unique in the context of European housing estates - shopping streets were built also at other places. Another specific form of a linear space (street) that developed in housing estates was **promenades elevated over the surrounding terrain**. They appeared close to shopping centres or were used to overcome transport “streets” so that collisions between traffic and walkers were prevented. With respect to their location in social centres of housing estates, they were designed with artistic and garden design details. These were unfortunately limited by the available series-produced prefabricated elements. They were devoted more attention at the end of the 1980s in the effort to imitate the attractiveness and liveliness of public spaces in historic towns - they were abundantly equipped with artistic objects or designed to provide attractive vantage points.

Parks were designed beyond the framework of the housing estate greenery. They were differentiated based on their size, significance, and catchment area. A specific garden design form, which deserves special attention, was **central parks** with areas over 100 ha and capacity for over 100,000 inhabitants, where recreation, sports, education and other facilities concentrated (Rothbauer 1985, p. 429). However, they were infrequent and, if designed, they were often left unfinished. Separately, we want to point out central parks designed for a phenomenon called “new towns” in Prague³²⁶. They all had a different fate so they defy generalization. The first of them, the central park of the Northern City (Severní Město) - Friendship Park - is a full-fledged work of garden design. It is based on Otakar Kuča’s design that won a competition in 1968. The establishment of the second one, the central park of the Southern City (Jižní Město), proceeded in two stages: the first architects’ idea visualized by a plastic model was followed-up by the sculptor Magdalena Jetelová and her design of a stylized Czech landscape, supplemented by other functions and facilities (underground gardening centre). Neither of these stages was fully finished; only terrain modelling took place and the park is today a non-functional torso of the original idea. The last central park,

³²⁶The largest housing estates in the Czech Republic, each with dimensions of independent towns: Severní Město (Northern City) with about 100 thousand inhabitants; Jižní Město (Southern City) was planned for about 70–80 thousand inhabitants, later expanded to house 31 thousand more; Jihozápadní Město (Southwestern City) for 130 thousand after the expansion of the original intention.

the central park of the Southwestern City (Jihozápadní Město), is being finished at the present day and there is a chance of the original concept being realized.

A park is the largest spatial unit; but we cannot end the list of public spaces here. Most often, we find a new type of a **flowing free area** in housing estates (figure 1). It represents the landscape and it pervades the entire urban unit. It is modified differently in different housing estates: it is omnipresent, concentrated in internal enclaves or a green belt; it enters the surroundings of the estate or is scattered into smaller remaining areas. In each of the cases, it totally reflects modernist principles based on a specific relationship between the landscape and the built-up areas and is in contrast to their traditional relationship in historic towns. At the time when the mass housing was developed, there was no reason to separate from the landscape and the countryside; by contrast, elements representing the landscape are desirable in close vicinity of houses. The boundaries between a town or city as an organized cultural form and the free landscape are blurred; the town expands into the landscape and blends with it.

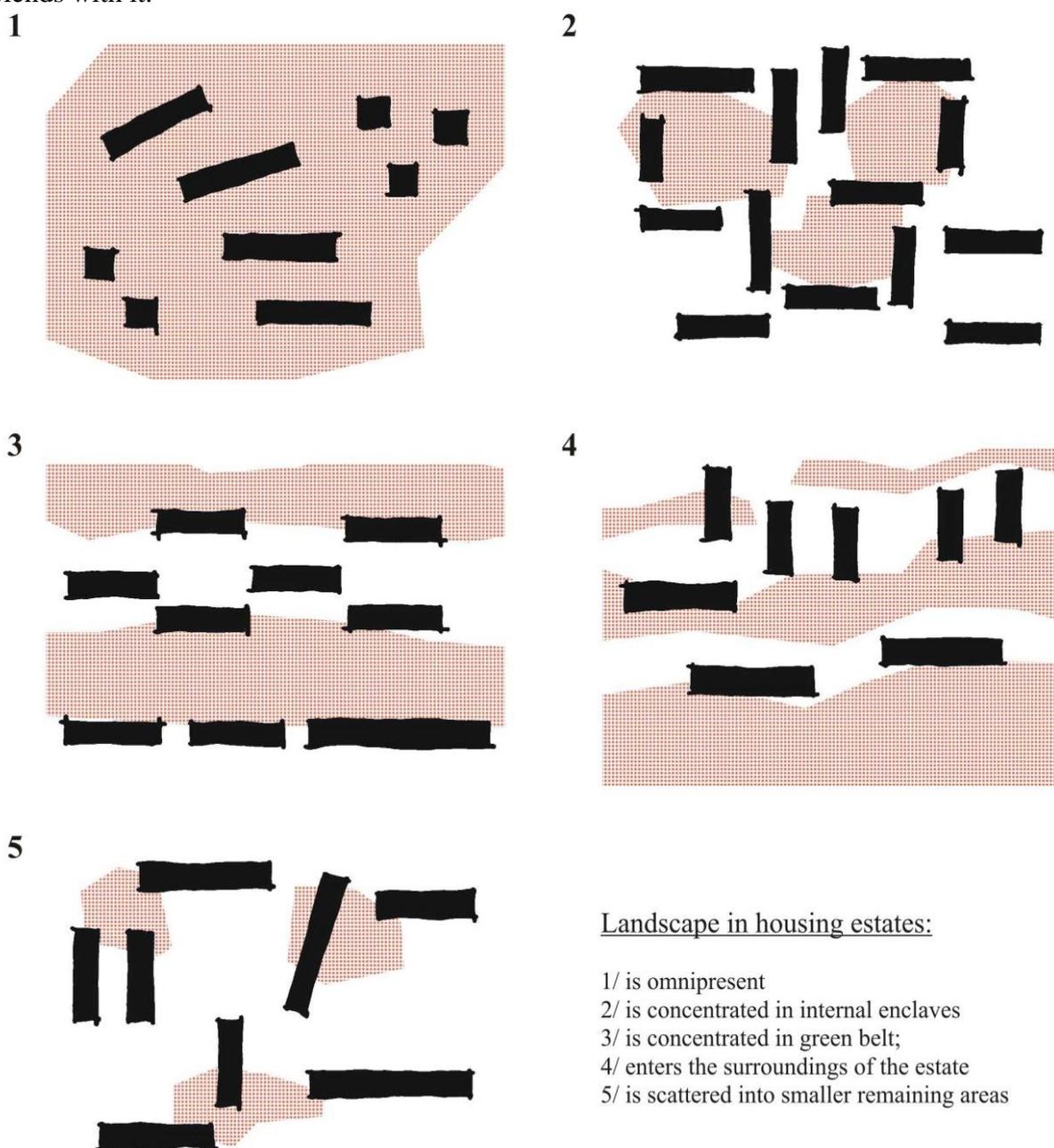


Figure 1: Schemes of landscape present in the housing estates (author's sketches).

Conclusion

At the end of the 19th century, the term **urban landscape** (Chenet-Faugeras 1994) appears in literature for the first time in relation to intensive urbanization. This term would have been absurd until that time; today, it is commonly used³²⁷ to denote “a combination of the town tissue with landscape fragments” (Versteegh 2005). Mass housing estates can be considered the peak of the changes described in the town-landscape relationship as well as urban landscape in the true sense of the word. They combine previously incompatible elements into one organic whole: **Town**, which is represented in the housing estate by the urban manner of dwelling in multistorey houses and other buildings and facilities, and the **landscape**, represented by the green area pervading the estate without strict boundaries. The result of this combination of opposites is twofold. First, the scale of the spaces is enlarged and it eludes a human being - the inhabited outside areas are worse comprehensible for their users as regards both space structure and meaning. Second, by contrast, functionalist ideas on dwelling in healthy and safe environment with leisure activities available are realized in housing estates. While the development of housing estates has been abandoned since the 1970s due to the first problems that appeared, the countries of the Eastern Bloc preserved and applied this system until 1989. The large proportion of natural elements in the close vicinity of housing means a great potential for the present and the future.

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³²⁷A review about the urban landscape as the central topic of variously focused studies has been published by e.g. H. Jannière and F. Pousin (2007).