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“The Brightest Neighborhood in the Country”

Yugoslav Mass Housing Strikes Back

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Something exceptional is happening in Siget, a mass housing neighborhood in Novi Zagreb, which was constructed as an extension of Croatia’s capital during Socialism. A TV crew is exploring the unprecedented score Siget residents got in IQ tests, “the highest of all in Croatia” as measured by the American Institute of Anthropology in Massachusetts. This can be seen from nerdy graffiti such as $E=mc^2$, groundbreaking discoveries of the local Naval Institute, the emergence of rapid chess and Rubik’s cube as favorite local games. The erudite microclimate suddenly attracts an influx of tourists. The Croatian minister of tourism readily announces the 180 degree turn of the local environment and the forthcoming construction of an intellectual amusement park. People begin to flock to Siget, where they are welcomed with an introductory class summarizing Siget’s keywords: “Super Andrija” (a brutalist housing block), “Naval Institute”, “Boulevard of Seafarers”, “blue buildings” and, finally, “Siget cake shop”. This 9-minute mockumentary, *The Brightest Neighborhood in the Country* (*Najpametnije naselje u državi*, 2009) by Marko Škobalj and Ivan Ramljak, is a self-conscious and amusing take on the clash of ready-made, one-size-fits-all stereotypes about mass housing and their unique features. However, *The Brightest Neighborhood* is not just an endemic curiosity. Starting in the late 2000s, cinematic reinterpretations of mass housing stereotypes appeared across the post-Yugoslav space, be it in documentaries, feature films, or TV shows.

A wide range of popular images and narratives about mass housing build on negative tropes such as ghettoization, uninspiring architecture, and social decay. Social scientists have demonstrated that the corrosion of the image of an urban environment comes before social decline and can rapidly incite dangerous societal effects. As sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn put it, buildings are “vulnerable to wrecking balls or discourse”.[1] In this sense, housing is a

particularly sensitive issue, as public opinion makes or breaks the social mix and the desirability of certain neighborhoods. By the 1960s, postwar mass housing estates received a flash of negative criticism throughout the capitalist Global North. In the US, the state of underfunded, racially segregated projects quickly deteriorated, culminating in the filmed demolition of Pruitt-Igoe in 1972.

French *grands ensembles*, originally designed outside of larger cities by prominent modernist architects, were initially free from negative connotations. However, they quickly came under scrutiny in public discourse, shifting from symbols of a celebrated modern lifestyle to becoming labeled as "victims of modernism". These communities were then considered to be plagued by disease, crime, and all kinds of imagined perils of immigration.[2] In Socialist Yugoslavia, criticism started to amass in the 1970s among sociologists and anthropologists leaning to the New Left. They were drawing not only on French theory such as Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the "right to the city" but also borrowed heavily from both images and statistics tailored to the circumstances in the Global North to predict future scenarios for Yugoslav mass housing.[3]

The Brightest Neighborhood in the Country makes us laugh because the authors are counting on the imagery of dread and despair that pervades representations of mass housing. Apart from Socialist promotional features – happy-go-lucky portraits and fictions of new neighborhoods erected in no time, rushing towards better futures –, genuine instances of happiness, nourishment, and intellectual flourishment within these mass housing estates are rarely showcased in the media. We are not used to seeing post-1990 images of mass housing as something of special beauty, value, and importance. Instead, we are used to seeing, hearing, and reading about violence, scarcity, hate, and architectural dead-ends. This imagery was condensed in Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995), a study of the "systematic exclusion"[4] of *grands ensembles* and their residents from the city and public life in France, which backfired in an eruption of violence (riots, drug trafficking) among those who do not have much to lose – such as discriminated Arab immigrants or those financially struggling. In the manner of self-stigmatization[5] and drawing on Black hood culture in the US, German rappers painted mass housing estates as dodgy immigrant ghettos, although immigrants in such neighborhoods were nowhere near to becoming the majority. Both US-American ghetto films and *La Haine* turned out to be influential blueprints for the different cinematic representations of New Belgrade's criminal underground that took shape during the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.[6] Mass housing narratives centering on despair, violence, and crime circulated with little regard for the change of context. Along with Socialist self-deprecation,[7] such stories abound and make up an important segment of mass housing representations. Still, as I argue, there is a whole other range of cinematic interpretations and fiction that "talks back", offers a less worn-out image of mass housing estates and, engaging self-consciously, engages with existing criticism in a playful, often self-ironic way.

In the history of mass housing, images and social reality are intertwined, forming mutually dependent factors that collectively shape the meaning of mass housing estates. Considering the varied experiences and narratives related to life in mass housing extends beyond challenging common negative tropes. It is not only a matter of academic precision and nuanced cultural critique aiming to steer away from personal prejudices and preconceived notions. Adopting a consistently negative lens can harm residents, contribute to stigmatization, devalue entire neighborhoods, and concentrate underprivileged citizens in increasingly disadvantaged communities.

The idea that mass housing is the worst-case scenario of urban living is especially misleading when applied to former Socialist countries. In the history of European state socialisms, the “urban middle class was overwhelmingly served by the public sector”, as sociologist Iván Szelényi, a pioneering researcher of Socialist housing inequality, has demonstrated.[8] Mass housing was not charity for the unlucky few, but rather a sort of privilege. In Socialist theory and legislation, housing was a human right, but the demand steadily exceeded the supply. By the 1980s, housing inequality provoked vocal protests such as the campaign “You have a house, return the flat” that started in Kosovo.”[9]

High-skilled professionals and those in affluent industries were more likely to quickly secure apartments, which were also more spacious and better located.[10] Amid the violence and economic disarray following the breakup of Yugoslavia, the emerging post-Yugoslav states could not afford to even consider ditching mass housing estates for something new. The sheer quantity of mass housing apartments was crucial in relieving the housing crisis, a rapid privatization of individual apartments that helped to absorb the “shock therapy” of transformation.

In Zagreb, the history of mass housing recently took another favorable turn. Following the 2020 earthquake, earthquake-proof mass housing became more attractive for potential residents, while historic apartments in city centers often showed vulnerability to such risks. Between the lines, *The Brightest Neighborhood* emphasizes distinct qualities of Socialist mass housing estates. Siget might not be a breeding ground of extraordinary talent, but well-educated residents are still overrepresented in many neighborhoods of this kind, reflecting the logic of housing distribution in Socialist Yugoslavia. The built environment is not a uniform collection of identical structures, as evidenced by recognizable and easily identified buildings. Yugoslav mass housing emerged from a decentralized institutional framework of self-management with a variety of local centers in charge of the design decisions. This stood in contrast to a centralized institute implementing only a few standardized design types. Generously proportioned open spaces surrounding high-rises still offer plenty of possibilities for high-quality public spaces, such as the tables for chess players featured in *The Brightest Neighborhood*. After the

hasty privatization and the lengthy state of emergency during the Yugoslav Wars, a more ambitious concept of public space began to gain ground in the 2000s. Contested large-scale projects, such as churches and shopping malls, started to appear on the "empty" patches in mass housing neighborhoods. In *The Brightest Neighborhood*, the fictive TV speaker interprets the prevalence of churches as well as escalators in a shopping mall leading into emptiness as signs of heightened intelligence and a deliberate rejection of the commercialization and desecularization of public spaces. This alternative to commodification and privatization is rooted in Socialist visions of public urban space as a common good.

Whereas *The Brightest Neighborhood* offers a cheerful exaggeration of the positive sides of mass housing, *Seven and a Half* (*Sedam i po*, 2006) by Miroslav Momčilović plays with the worst sides of mass housing in an equally self-reflective way. One of the chapters in the collection of short films about the seven deadly sins revolves around a duo of low-key tricksters plotting a scam that involves asking Diego Maradona for donations. For the sake of the promotional video they create for the scam, one of them pretends to be a wheelchair user while the other films his appeal for donations. Tucked in a blanket on a cloudy day, the man sitting in the wheelchair is intentionally placed so that the backdrop shows the Genex Tower, also known as "*Zapadna Kapija*", two skyscrapers connected with a storeyed bridge and crowned with a tower making up New Belgrade's iconic "Western Gate". In this case, the use of Socialist architecture as a backdrop evoking misery, amplified by fog and clouds in a conscious effort to provoke pity, is another creative way of repackaging mass housing stereotypes.

The post-Socialist condition brought to the fore specific qualities of urban Socialist housing. The generously proportioned spaces for recreation and leisure, the richness of local histories, and the sedimentation of memories and experiences in the neighborhood were beginning to be seen in a new light. Locals initiated neighborhood histories – exhibitions, digital archives, and online communities. In the early 2010s, Socialist modernism started being appreciated among architecture and design aficionados, as seen from the traveling exhibition and edited volume *Unfinished Modernizations* by architectural historians Vladimir Kulić and Maroje Mrduljaš. Recently, the appreciation and reconsideration of Socialist architecture reached a new level: along with Martino Stierli, Kulić curated the exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980* (2018-2019) in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, bringing Yugoslav architecture closer to a global audience. Mrduljaš co-created the documentary series *Slumbering Concrete* (*Betonski spavači*, 2016-2019, directed by Saša Ban) on Yugoslav Socialist architectures. The series was broadcast in prime time on Croatian National Television, reaching a broad local audience.

Although these projects do not focus exclusively on mass housing, they do

draw new attention to it. They demonstrate a special interest in urban projects acclaimed in the architectural community such as Split 3, a prize-winning extension of Split on the Adriatic. Marjan Bežan, Vladimir Mušič, and Nives Starc, the team of Slovenian urbanists behind the project, came up with a design rooted both in modernist architecture and local traditions of Mediterranean architecture. One episode of *Slumbering Concrete* is dedicated to Split 3, while the neighborhood also appears in the video teaser for the MoMA exhibition, accompanied by upbeat Yugoslav popular music with a Mediterranean touch, lush vegetation, and airy brise-soleils on a sunny day. The importance of these projects lies in the thoughtful production of contemporary high-quality images of buildings. Be it drone footage or photographs commissioned from renowned architectural photographers such as Wolfgang Thaler and Valentin Jeck, the visuals present us with updated imagery – the current state of the built environment – while drawing attention to its original design and the ideas behind it. Unlike the *spomenik* hype sparked by Jan Kempenaers' photographs of antifascist monuments published in a photo book without further explanation, Kulić and Mrduljaš complement stark images with an exhaustive theoretical and historical account of the Yugoslav architectural heritage. Interpretations of architectural historians, archival materials, and conversations with people who designed and frequented these spaces come together in creating a story at least as compelling as the images themselves. "In spite of the unfinishedness, the results of the region's socialist urbanisations are today still functional and vital",[11] the authors argue and eventually demonstrate through the visuals. Contemporary images of Yugoslav mass housing estates draw new attention to their history, importance, and legacy, and open questions about their future.

Sunny prospects of Split 3 in Season 2 of *Slumbering Concrete* ("Split, Where Plan Meets Chaos", 2018)

Other contemporary takes on mass housing did not focus on the architectural skin and bones, but foregrounded the social life taking place within and around Yugoslav neighborhoods of mass housing. Orgesa Arifi's 14-minute documentary *Kurrizi* (2017) offers a glimpse into the concerts, parties, and sociability of the urban youth in cafés, bars, basements, and apartments in 1990s Prishtina. During the Socialist period, Prishtina went through an intense cycle of urbanization. The scope and execution of projects in Kosovo, predominantly designed by architects from larger Yugoslav centers (Belgrade, Zagreb), was criticized by Gëzim Paçarizi, a Kosovar architect and curator of Kosovo's pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2014, as rushed, "imposed modernity".[12] One of the large-scale projects close to the city center was Kurrizi (translated as "The Spine"), a mass housing project constructed in the Dardania neighborhood. The element of a plateau between high-rises was a decisively modern way to separate pedestrians from motorized traffic. Along with related residential megastructures architectural historian Lulzim Kabashi calls it an "anomaly" out of proportions for Prishtina and points to later maintenance issues: "after decades of poor maintenance, a walk on the platform but especially a drive through the tunnel lit from above offer a surreal experience".[13]

Kurrizi toned down the author's commentary in favor of archival footage and interviews with people who lived there through the 1990s. Instead of Socialist mass housing estates spiraling into the abyss of crime and hopelessness, as Kabashi's comment might suggest, the film focuses on a new kind of social life, unforeseen by Socialist urbanists and architects. "Everybody sees it as a dark place, but mine was very white with sun rays penetrating inside", states musician Jehona Shaqiri, acknowledging the usual fog of stereotypes about mass housing while offering a potent counter-narrative rooted in her own experience – "a tunnel with a lot of light". This is even more significant considering the circumstances of Serbian repression in a city designed, to a significant extent, by Serbian architects and urbanists. In the early 1990s school and university curriculums were purged of Albanian history and language, most Albanian lecturers were laid off, and the consequent protests were violently suppressed. In that way, a segregated, "parallel Prishtina"[14] started to take shape.

The documentary vividly demonstrates that the people who live in mass housing estates add to the urban(ist) scripts. They challenge them and adapt to changing circumstances. At the same time, it was no coincidence that, of all places, Kurrizi became home to Prishtina's underground culture. The status of Socialist mass housing as everyday architecture opposed to representative projects meant less minuscule regulation and therefore offered some protection from oppression. As recalled in testimonies in the film, Serbian cultural hotspots quickly moved closer to the city center and institutionalized places, and Kurrizi emerged as the epicenter of urban underground culture.

The specific circumstances of Serbian repression aside, Yugoslav mass housing estates have nurtured youth culture and underground movements roughly since late Socialism. Demographic factors played an important role in this development: since the 1960s, predominantly couples with young children started to move into new apartments. By the late 1970s, kids became teenagers and adolescents with new needs and interests. In Novi Zagreb, the self-managed Center for Culture emerged in 1977, almost two decades after the first dwellers moved to new mass housing neighborhoods. Beyond institutional frameworks, youth culture appeared in informal ways, such as loose gatherings in neighborhoods' public and semi-public spaces. In Belgrade, a New York-inspired graffiti scene first appeared in the Block 45 neighborhood in New Belgrade.[15] Mass housing estates had three crucial advantages: a critical mass of urban youth living there, some distance to the city center and cultural establishment, and plenty of space that could be used in a variety of ways. For example, in April 1978, artist Vera Fischer used the plateau of Mamutica ("mammoth"), an iconic megastructure in Novi Zagreb housing more than 5000 residents, as a pop-up exhibition space presenting discarded objects selected by employees of the city cleaning services. In many cases, public art, benches, and playground equipment were subsequently added to neighborhoods.

Cultural workers, politicians, and academics featured in *Kurrizi* remember the area as "a place where one could imagine one's connection to the world", "the only place where you could have fun and socialize", "the only meeting spot of our youth" – one that " was considered as divine" –, "a place of accumulation of pressured energy by the system of that time", or as a "big aquarium" brimming with social activity. Consistent with its onomastics, Kurrizi figured as an element that held the urban culture of Kosovo Albanians together as they resisted Serbization in Prishtina. Rather than a passive satellite neighborhood merely used as a "sleeping room", in the 1990s Kurrizi proved to be a hub that brought Prishtina's youth together and helped connect them with the rest of Europe and international cultural trends (such as grunge for instance). In the film, ephemeralities such as the first hot dog shop and the names of long-gone cafés and bars emerge as common reference points that used to shape a baseline of normalcy under extraordinary circumstances.

The statements and memories of the generation coming of age here roll out to views of Kurrizi in 2017. However, the architecture is not just a neat, static backdrop: we hear children playing, the hum of traffic and conversations, we see lit apartment windows, construction sites, the newest layer of street art, stores, and passers-by in a shopping arcade. The life of the neighborhood comes through and interacts with the material traces of its past and memories, with some passages overwritten by new spaces, uses, and crowds.

As Beatriz Colomina notes, "modern architecture only becomes modern with its engagement with the media".[16] Ackbar Abbas argues that fleeting cinematic

images might be more suitable to capture what he calls “the exorbitant city”, an incredibly complex, multilayered fabric that cannot be captured in its entirety and do justice to the “elusive quality of cities”.[17] In all of the films discussed, the connection between the moving image and mass housing estates is especially pronounced. *Slumbering Concrete* and the teaser of the MoMA exhibition focus on carefully crafted images of mass housing architecture – the force of a new critical gaze. In *Kurrizi*, the flourishing music and entertainment scene take center stage, including the girl band Terrorr. Archival footage in the intro is stitched together with retro elements such as static noise. Beyond that, Kurrizi is called “Prishtina’s intranet”, a site of vibrant networking and communication flow. The characters from *Seven and a Half* reached for the video camera in pursuit of their shenanigans. Finally, The *Brightest Neighborhood in the Country* starts with a technical rehearsal, an autoreferential gesture of a TV crew reporting from the rooftop of Super Andrija against a carefully arranged backdrop of New Zagreb crowned with the megastructure Mamutica.

In the short story “Ravnodnevica” (“Equinox”), from the collection *Novobeogradske priče* (“New Belgrade Stories”) written by New Belgrader Mihajlo Pantić, the narrator goes a step further and argues that this connection is relevant not only to modern architecture, but to mass housing in New Belgrade in particular. The main character is invited by an old friend to be a consultant for the scenography of a theater play set in New Belgrade:[18]

> She lives across town in the professors’ colony and thinks New Belgrade, where I’m from, doesn’t exist. She’s never been there, and openly despises anything younger than hundred years, except men under thirty, tells me New Belgrade is a pure, empty illusion, a hologram made out of TV images. There is some truth in this, television was first introduced on the territory of Yugoslavia within the framework of the exhibition of new technical achievements at the fair on the other side of the Sava just before the start of the Second World War.

In contrast to the peculiar mix of superiority and ignorance found among the cultural elite, the narrator locates the core of New Belgrade’s identity in technological advancement. Rather than theater, the medium most adequate to represent Socialist mass housing estates is video, Pantić’s narrator claims.[19] In his account, New Belgrade is an epicenter of modern media with a significant tradition of experimentation and affinity to technological novelty. This example, like the films discussed above, operates with a two-fold argument, departing from a clear understanding of ubiquitous stereotypes and arriving at an elaborate answer to them. A pale illusion or uninspired backdrop as found in the fictional script (“the entrance is typical of New Belgrade, scrawled, semi-dark and gray”)[20] best describes the effect the duo in *Seven and a Half* is

aiming for.

Another work playing with negative stereotypes is the TV series *Mamutica* (2008-2010, directed by Zoran Margetić, Robert Orhel, Vlado Bulić, and Nenad Stipanić), a peculiar case of crime fiction revolving around a single megastructure in Novi Zagreb. In a time-lapse intro, city lights go on and off while traffic flows non-stop, contributing to the impression of a city that never sleeps, rather than it being a notorious "sleeping room" stripped of any daily relevance. On paper, the setup of *Mamutica* seems to be the worst embodiment of the narrative that equates mass housing with social flashpoints. Indeed, the series was criticized for piling on the stigmatization and "generat[ing] an identity for the neighborhood as a social ghetto".[21] However, the mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion are much more complex. They do not exclude mass housing estates as a whole, but work against marginalized groups (minorities such as Roma), newcomers, and foreigners. The picture painted by *Mamutica* and many other post-Yugoslav productions set in mass housing landscapes is not one of stigmatized mass housing, but one in favor of modern(ist) urbanity at a time when informal semi-urbanity is on the rise. For example, *Clip*, a 2012 drama by Maja Miloš revolving around the intersection of teenage sexuality, violence, poverty, and drugs – themes that are explored through smartphone videos of a teenage girl –, is not situated in the mass housing estates of New Belgrade, but on the informal outskirts. A similar localization of violence occurs in Branko Schmidt's *Metastases* (2009), in which a wife beater and soccer hooligan inhabits a makeshift shack bordering on a Socialist mass housing estate. In these cases, cinematic crime had already moved to a margin fundamentally different from Socialist mass housing. With the attention too focused on mass housing as a suspect, this shift might go unnoticed.

The trope of representing Socialist mass housing as a stage flat, that is through a static image that appears in the background, deserves more attention, as it is one of the common modes of appearance of Socialist mass housing estates in visual media. The striking architectural features are used to set the scene, but more often than not the film or video does not continue to engage with them, as they move to the interior or to other spaces in the next shot. A short display of the cityscape is enough to provide context for the locals. Mass housing as a backdrop can be a legitimate and sensible stylistic feature when the film primarily tends towards exploring architectural history and microhistories of neighborhoods. Such "drawing on recognizable urban landmarks as stable points of reference"[22] appears in many post-Yugoslav movies. Still, for viewers unfamiliar with post-Yugoslav urban topographies, such establishing shots, often filmed in cloudy circumstances, are taken as a shortcut to the imagery of mass housing tristesse. There is a difference between the use of mass housing as a static bleakness lurking in the background and an active engagement with the place. The latter is driven by curiosity. Reflecting thorough awareness of existing stereotypes, such approaches are filled with speculation and open-

ended searches for traces of life, be it through explorations of historical specificity, the current state of the art, or future possibilities.

The pieces singled out in this article do not uncritically repeat mass housing stereotypes; they offer a counter-narrative, often a witty and eloquent one. Nevertheless, their narrative arch is still structurally reliant on pre-existing stereotypes; the answer and the question seem to be glued together. Is there a way to tell complicated and critical stories about mass housing without the looming obligation to tend to the threat of apocalypse? The responsibility to offer complex images and interpretations of mass housing does not solely lie with filmmakers, artists, and writers. Scholars such as anthropologists and historians can either perpetuate, and even amplify, the stigma, or work towards a more nuanced understanding of microhistories, historical constellations, transnational circulation of harmful tropes, and a range of lived experiences such neighborhoods are brimming with.

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