

## **Revitalization of spaces between panel blocks of flats (Anthropological perspective)**

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### **Introduction**

The topic about the space between residential blocks (SRB) in Sofia, which in the past was regarded as a purely urban development issue, has acquired distinct anthropological dimensions recently. Over the last decade, citizens have increasingly been declaring themselves as social actors who would like to take part in deciding on the future of these areas. Dozens civil protests have taken place in the capital in defense of the areas between the blocks against the construction of new buildings inside of them (in the neighborhoods of Reduta, Obelya, Geo Milev, Mladost, Dianabad, Buxton, Druzhiba I, etc.) or against their transformation into zone-paid parking (Vazrazhdane District).

In this regard, the anthropological analysis of the spaces between the panel blocks of flats aims to support the process of decentralization in urban planning decisions. It aims to achieve greater involvement of marginalized citizens in the design and revitalization of peripheral neighborhoods in Sofia through the application of social science methods. The consideration of the needs, expectations and cultural identities of the residents of the panel complexes is a condition for achieving sustainable urban development and inclusive policies for the restoration and development of these residential areas.

This exploratory research is based on a fieldwork on civic attitudes towards the revitalization of a particular SRB, characterized by a typical profile of a marginalized area between residential buildings in the capital. The fieldwork and its subsequent analysis are part of a scientific project *Cultural Identity and Energy Efficiency for Revitalization of the Areas between the Panel Block of Flats in Sofia* funded by National Science Fund in Bulgaria under contract DFNI E02/20.

### **Methodological notes**

A fieldwork was carried out to identify a sustainable approach to the revitalization of urban spaces, that would take into account the cultural identity of the inhabitants living in the SRB.

Based on the preliminary selection by the scientific team of the *Cultural Identity and Energy Efficiency project in the revitalization of the inter-block spaces of the panel complexes in Sofia* of three inter-block spaces, I chose to carry out the fieldwork in the designated space between blocks 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 in the district "Vasil Levski-V". The main argument for the selection of this urban area for conducting in-depth interviews is that it is identified as a typical

marginalized area between the panel blocks of flats based on 4 criteria - (1) area, (2) communication with the center, (3) low sales cost and relatively low welfare of the inhabitants as a whole, (4) remoteness from the social infrastructure (medical services, schools and kindergartens, urban parks, etc.)<sup>1</sup>

Following an initial desk research phase, interviews were conducted using in-depth semi-structured interview method with residents in the blocks around the SRB in three consecutive days. The duration of the interviews was from 30 minutes to one hour. There were both female and male respondents aged 20 to 60 years old. In addition, direct observation as well as informal talks were conducted with people passing through the SRB.

Personal interviews aimed both at gathering ideas for revitalizing the SRB, as well as identifying the experience of panel building residents and their motivation for future participation in eventual revitalization - voluntarily or under certain conditions. Additionally, interviews aimed to clarify the satisfaction from the quality of life in the neighborhood and the assessment of the individual elements of the urban environment in the SRB.

In view of these objectives, questions were shaped around four main problem areas: (1) identification of respondents with the areas between the prefabricated block of flats, (2) the extent of residents' activity in the maintenance and modification of the SRB at the moment, and their readiness to participate in future revitalization of the SRB, (3) relation to the individual elements of the SRB and residents' priority areas for change, (4) satisfaction and evaluation of the current status of the SRB, etc. The questions were structured on the temporal axis past - present - future in order to take into account the sustainability of respondents' attitudes over time.

### **Analysis of the fieldwork data**

Two types of reactions to our attempts to interview people living in the blocks around the SRB could be distinguished. The first group of people was apathetic and refused to take part in the research. Asking if they would spend a few minutes to talk about the possible development of the SRB, about a third of the residents said they had no time and that nothing would change in it anyway.

The topic of distrust in the possibilities for a positive change in the SRB appeared during the interviews as well. The skeptical attitude was particularly visible in response to questions whether they think the SRB is changing in time for the better or the worse, and how they imagine the space in the next one, five and ten years. As one respondent put it: "We are all gathered and looking for ways to survive. Moreover, most of us do not think about this space, we are used to the landscape. We are condemned; this (place) is your verdict."<sup>2</sup>

We pay special attention to the problem, as the theme of the despair from the state of the SRB and the neighborhood as a whole was present in almost all respondents to some extent, indicating a strong degree of dissatisfaction with the environment that affects not only the standard of living but also the self-respect of people living there (some have said they feel uncomfortable when they have to say in which neighborhood they live). Particularly strong influence of the environment on cultural identity and self-esteem occurred in one of the respondents: (by improving the space we need) "someone to show some care for us, to be at least a little pleasant here. The feeling of a desert, a field, some blocks that you are forced to live in is heavy, oppressive, depressing, insulting, because we pay taxes there for everything. Children have no place to play because it is dangerous for them there."<sup>3</sup>

There was also a second group of reactions - of people who easily agreed to talk about the SRB and were encouraged by my attention to them, expecting some help from me or, more generally, from this project. They shared that they were willing to participate voluntarily in a possible revitalization, but they need someone to initiate it and to create a more comprehensive plan of what to do with space, not to work "piece by piece"<sup>4</sup>. In this regard, it should be noted that all interviewees, as well as those with whom I held informal talks as part of the field research, expressed their readiness to take part voluntarily in the eventual revitalization of the SRB.

At the same time, they insisted that they are not the only ones responsible for the improvement of the environment and that the obligations should be shared between them and the institutions: "The municipality has a major role to play in the maintenance of the SRB, then comes our role, of course. But it's unfair that for 15 years there has not been created a single playground while I pay taxes all this time. I agree that I have to also maintain the SRB myself. But I believe that if there is a possibility to construct something (new for children) in other parts of the city it should be possible to do it here too."<sup>5</sup>

Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that people are mostly motivated to invest in improving infrastructure for children in this SRB, especially when they have small children or grandchildren. This was the most common suggestion for improving the SRB - building a larger playground (as there is now only a slide and a swing that are also used by children living in farther blocks). This is also confirmed by the fact that both neighbors' initiatives to make some improvements to the SRB over the years have been linked to the construction of playgrounds. The first one was created after an amount of money was collected by some neighbors for the purchase of the facilities while the second one was built with the manual labor of residents from different blocks and after they insisted the Municipality installed a slide in it.

Second, again mentioned by all respondents, was the lack of a park, a garden, and benches. Both the elderly and the youngest respondent clearly identified the need for new benches to sit on and to gather with friends. The oldest respondent, sharing his long-term plans, said with a smile that "in 10 years, I imagine gathering with the other oldsters around the benches with tables and drinking a cup of rakia and commenting on something."<sup>6</sup> The desire for more benches and pavilions was also accompanied by suggestions for alleys and flower gardens to create an atmosphere when people sit down to chat: "Creating comfort, a sense of security and cleanliness"<sup>7</sup>. Again in this direction, green areas were rated as a top priority by almost all respondents. However, residents usually added that in their current state green areas are unsupervised and even dangerous for health (because of ticks and fleas).

Most of the respondents also noted the lack of parking spaces. They explained this problem with the fact that when the neighborhood was planned, the family usually had only one car, whereas now every adult member would like to own a separate vehicle: "Parkings are needed, no one thought it would become like this - everyone to have a car."<sup>8</sup> One of the few mentioned causes of tension between neighbors is precisely because of the cars as when there is no place to park, vehicles are placed on the lawns: "At the moment this green meadow - half of it is eaten by cars, the worst is that they are already stopping around the playground, and children are playing there"<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, all the respondents mentioned that there are not enough sports facilities: "There is a need for pull-up bars, parallel bars, such things; it's not much".<sup>10</sup> At the moment, the neighbors have installed two self-made football gates and a basketball basket where children play.

When it comes to the individual elements of the SRB, the respondents said that although it is not perfectly arranged, they are generally satisfied with the buildings, the pavements, the sidewalks, the lighting, the garbage containers and have no problem with the street dogs. They expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of sport facilities, security<sup>11</sup> and the difficult access to some parts of the SRB of people with wheelchairs and parents with strollers.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to summarize some reflections on the subject - the occupation of panel complexes and revitalization policies that emerged during fieldwork. The anthropological analysis is important as it takes into consideration the human factor in urban development decisions. It also ensures compliance with the cultural aspect of sustainable urban planning. This happens at least in two ways.

On the one hand, by applying the qualitative method of in-depth interviews with residents of panel blocks where an architectural revitalisation of the spaces between the prefabricated concrete housings is planned, the degree of readiness to participate in the changes of the local population itself can be established. In the present semi-structured interviews research, this was firstly addressed through topics related to the experience of residents with environmental improvement actions in the SRB. These were, for example, the questions: "Have you commented on any transformations of your SRB with your neighbors so far?", "Have you been involved in cleaning actions or other activities in this SRB?", "Have you made any attempts to improve this SRB to date?", etc. Secondly, the readiness for active participation of apartment owners in the blocks around the SRB surveyed was also addressed by questions related to the future: "Would you like to be involved in the revitalization of the area between the panel blocks of flats?" and "What would stimulate you for that?". The readiness of the owners to co-participate in the revitalization of their habitat is a key factor for the sustainability of each urban development decision because it demonstrates to what extent they recognize themselves in this new place and will accordingly take care of its protection and maintenance in the medium and long term.

On the other hand, through the interviews, I was able to identify the real needs of citizens. Being semi-structured and open-ended, they allow respondents to determine their own problems to a certain extent. This highlighted several areas of concern that could be addressed by possible architectural plans for development and revitalization of the SRB. Considering the suggested by residents changes in the elements of the urban environment, its improvement will be integrated in a more harmonious and natural way in the already established routine actions, habits and expectations of the people who inhabit this space, without adding unfamiliar elements to the local culture.

On the basis of the problem areas shared by the respondents, it can be concluded that for them the main priority is the construction of larger, attractive and safe playgrounds. Secondly, in the framework of an eventual revitalization, they hope that new benches, arbors, flower alleys and generally places where they can relax and have a social interaction in a pleasant environment will be created. At present, all benches and tables in the SRB and in front of some of the blocks are made with hand-made materials by the citizens themselves. Surprisingly, concern for children and spaces for communication were perceived by residents as more important for their well-being than, for example, the rehabilitation and thermal insulation of their apartment buildings (which was also reported as a problem but less important).

The second important conclusion that I would like to draw is the importance of the SBR revitalization for the mental and physical health of people. Although the respondents were aware for the advantages of their neighborhood - the proximity to the center, quiet and peaceful, with space between the blocks, all felt a sense of hopelessness, injustice (compared to the others, even neighboring neighborhoods) and lack of perspective when they talked about the environment in which they live. As one of the respondents, a mother of a 10-year-old child, said - the recovery and development of their space between blocks will not make the whole neighborhood better, but when one thing improves, it follows one another and so slow change happens.

The third important conclusion I could share is that residents have a great potential for co-participation in an eventual project for revitalization of their area between blocks. They already have experience in this direction but it is insufficient to make optimal use of this space and to meet their needs for a decent life. Interviewees expressed readiness and even enthusiasm to support the process of revitalization of their SBR, saying that such an act would be highly appreciated and that they would make efforts to maintain the facilities. This gives hope that there is a sound foundation, if the joint efforts of citizens and experts come together, to realize a vital and self-sustaining its own balance and development environment. Or, as stated in the UNESCO report, the joint efforts of local residents and urban professionals are a fundamental condition that a process of revitalization will be sustainable, compaticle with local culture, and ultimately will be a project with a soul<sup>12</sup>.

## **Bibliography**

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<sup>1</sup> *Spaces between residential blocks were defined-cases for research*, official page of the Cultural Identity and Energy Efficiency for Revitalization of the Areas between the Panel Block of Flats in Sofia project, 2015, <http://blockareas.bg/bg/izsledvane/operdeliha-se-mejdublovkovite-prostranstva-kazus-izsledvane.html>

<sup>2</sup> Interview with respondent 2 in the 35-40 age group, whose house was expropriated in socialist time to build one of the panel blocks in its place.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Respondent 2 in the 35-40 age group.

<sup>4</sup> "I would take part as a volunteer [in the revitalization of the SRB], this is my neighborhood, I want to live well, but it has to be initiated from somewhere. It is very difficult otherwise - my husband was the house manager. We cut the bushes and cleaned as it turns into a forest and nobody cares. But it is very difficult to convince the neighbors to do something. From our part [of the panel block], how many times did we have an initiative, but the neighbors are not interested." Interview with a female respondent aged 55-60

<sup>5</sup> Interview with a respondent in the 35-40 age group.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with a male respondent aged 55 to 60.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with female respondent 2 aged 35 to 40.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with female respondent 2 aged 35 to 40.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a female respondent aged 35 to 40.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a male respondent aged 20 years.

<sup>11</sup> "We can not feel it as our own - you can park your car here in the yard, and the next day it'll be scratched all over with keys or nails". Interview with a male respondent of 20 years.

<sup>12</sup> Report 4: Culture and sustainable development: examples of institutional innovation and proposal of a new cultural policy profile, in the framework of the process "Towards a new cultural policy profile", 1 September 2009. // Official website of Agenda for Culture 21, p. 6.