

the sociology of an allocative structure: housing

*In What Ways Do Studies of the Housing
Market in Command Economies Modify
Our View of Ecological Processes?*

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There is very little written, so far, about the allocative structure for housing in command economies. What information is available from Andrezejewski, Musil and Donnison provides only an outline and not the detailed insights into the actual workings of the system(s).

This paper attempts to summarise what is known about housing in command economies and examine how far this changes our view of the ecological process in housing both in theory and in practice.

housing in command economies

Engel believed that the housing problem was only a product of capitalist society and once the revolution had been accomplished there would have been sufficient accommodation given a redistribution of the existing stock. Post war governments have not found the solution so simple. Partly through the destruction of the war years, partly through increasing population and partly through obsolescence all command economies have been faced with a large investment in new housing. This has been most prominent in Poland and in USSR.

In command economies it is normal for all land to be nationalised and this in theory should make planning simpler and house building programmes cheaper than in other countries. There are basically three categories of ownership; state ownership, co-operative ownership, and owner-occupiership. The state builds and rents mainly for workers in key industries but also recognises a responsibility to the poor and those displaced through slum clearance. In the USSR the state is directly responsible for 60% of the market, 20% in Czechoslovakia, 40% in Poland. The co-operative housing schemes have become an important part of the housing market since about 1960. The cost of these schemes is made up of three parts; a membership fee from each individual, a grant from the state, and a loan from the state to the individual. The proportions vary with time and according to the particular state.

In Czechoslovakia, for example, before 1963 the cost of a flat in a co-operative was a 40% membership fee, 30% government grant and 30% government loan at 3% over 30 years. But after the 1963/4 Rent Act, the membership fee was reduced to 20%, the government grant raised to 50% and the loan reduced to 20% at only 1% interest. These more generous terms were presumably intended to persuade more people to join co-operative schemes rather than rely on state housing and also to put a curb on consumers expenditure for other goods and services. The third category of ownership is owner-occupiership and perhaps surprisingly this accounts for more than half the housing stock in Czechoslovakia,

Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, and about 39% in the USSR. Owner occupiers are more common in the rural parts of these countries.

The main features of the housing stocks in the command economies are their growing uniformity, small size and low rents. Government policy in these countries was to keep the rents as low as possible to attract workers to the key industries and in particular to coal mining and the metal industries. Rents were often too low even to cover maintenance costs let alone the costs of construction. More recently rents have been allowed to rise but housing costs still form a much small part of family expenditure in command economies than in most other European countries. But there are signs that market forces are being allowed to operate to a limited extent in determining rent especially in Poland.

Industrialised building methods and standard housing types were necessary in order for a country such as the USSR to meet a huge housing programme whilst at the same time maintaining a heavy investment programme in other industries and in defence. Industrialised building, however, has been adopted by other countries where the needs were not so pressing.

allocation of housing

From the foregoing description it might appear that the average citizen has a wide choice of alternatives but in practice the options are limited quite severely. The state not only controls the allocation of land but also the raw materials and most of the finance. The state also determines the size and type of dwellings whichever category of housing the citizen chooses. In practice, too, he may be limited by his job or the area he is living in. In rural areas for example there will generally be no state housing whereas in towns the property may be almost entirely state owned or state firm owned with a few co-operative developments.

If a person applies for a state owned dwelling then he must usually join a waiting list. Priority goes to those workers in «key» industries and also to families that are poor, inadequately housed or that which have been cleared as a result of slum clearance. A condition of joining the queue is that the person must be employed in the town or city where the housing is being provided. The size of flat or dwelling allocated to him will be related to the size of his family and dependance in accordance with a national scale of unseable floorspace. In the past a standard rent was charged which applied to both new and old properties alike but since the early 1960's it has been a policy to charge a differential scale of rents. Reductions are made for lack of standard amenities or

floorspace. A difficulty experienced with the scheme of state housing was that workers in «key» industries would change jobs after a few years but retain their flat so the property was «lost» to the state sector until they died or were removed. In Czechoslovakia to overcome this, state housing was faced out in favour of state firms co-operatives. Lower membership fees and bigger government loans were offered to attract employees but if a worker changed jobs in less than ten years he would have to repay the loan.

Private housing might seem to offer the best alternative for those who can afford it. But the owner-occupier still requires permission to build and he may have to rely heavily on his own and his family's skills and resources. Craftsmen in the building trades are few in these countries and the net result is a standard dwelling with often inferior quality workmanship.

the ecological processes

By definition the «ecological process» cannot operate in a command economy unless planning breaks down at any point. In most towns and cities of command economies the planners have created patterns of housing which are the antithesis of what MacKenzie at all observed in the Chicago of the 20's. Housing is of more or less uniform size and style and densities are constant. The height and density of housing does not in general increase as the centre is approached. Large buildings have long since been subdivided into smaller units. Shops and offices are not always concentrated on the centre. Housing is planned so that no unit is more than a short distance from public transport and the process of allocation would seem to discourage commuting for those in state owned property and make it difficult for those in co-operative or private housing. Areas may vary in environmental quality but there is evidence (see Donnison) that planning authorities have located industries with the intention of destroying a bourgeoisie or potential bourgeoisie area. Thus, all areas are equally attractive or unattractive and there would seem to be little inducement to move from one area to another, other than for a better job. It is difficult to conceive of a zone in or of transition in these circumstances. Undoubtedly there are long-established city properties which have become obsolete and need replacement but these may be anywhere in a city and do not constitute per se zones in transition either structurally or spatially. MacKenzie said «ecology is process» but the evidence presented about towns and cities in Poland, Hungary, etc. is that there is little movement. Once a family has obtained its entitlement in amenities and floorspace they settle down to live there.

The descriptions of housing in command economies tell us little about the sociology of towns

and cities other than the fact that people can and do manage to live satisfactorily in settlements which apparently defy all the laws of the urban «ecological» process as described by the Chicago School. This alone, however, might be enough to destroy the whole basis of the Chicago School theory that what we are observing is an ecological process for no ecosystem could survive such massive intervention. Cities and towns in Russia and East European countries should have broken down years ago. The immediate conclusion must be that the «ecological process» does not have universal applicability. It must also follow that the process observed by McKenzie, Park & Burgess was not an ecological one. On the contrary they observed responses to a particular set of economic forces within particular spatial confines at a particular time.

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