

## The socialist housing estate with a garden: A shift in living orientation in large Romanian cities.

Daniel L. Șerban<sup>\*1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning. 72-76 Observatorului Str., 400363, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

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### Abstract

*The article follows the changes in perception of the inhabitants of large cities in Central and Eastern Europe and especially in Romania regarding two of the prevalent housing types in the region, over the last 25 years. The suburban single-family house has been the aspirational type throughout the period for the largest part of the population, in accordance with contemporary models in the Western world, but also with older local housing specificities. This choice was made at the expense of urban types of living, and in the case of the postsocialist European city this means mostly against the living in socialist collective housing estates. Today, after the experience of suburbanisation, the single-family house still stands as a model, at least under “ideal conditions”, but living in socialist estates receives better appreciation. Becoming lately a good compromise for a significant part of the population of large cities in the region, the socialist estates are reevaluated today in the larger context of present day urbanity in Eastern Europe, and as a peculiarity, this is done by also translating upon them or rediscovering in their case certain qualities associated for the most part with suburban environments.*

### Rezumat

*Articolul urmărește de-a lungul ultimilor 25 de ani schimbările de percepție ale locuitorilor marilor orașe din Europa Centrală și de Est și în special din România, referitoare la două dintre principalele modele de locuire specifice regiunii. Locuința individuală de tip suburban a reprezentat modelul aspirațional de-a lungul întregii perioade menționate pentru marea parte a populației, în acord cu modelele curente în același timp în societatea occidentală, dar și cu specificități locale mai vechi. Alegerea ei se făcea ca în alte părți în defavoarea locuirii de tip urban, în speță cea tipică pentru blocul de Est - și anume locuințele în ansambluri colective din perioada socialistă. Astăzi, după experiența suburbanizării, deși modelul casei individuale rămâne o referință importantă, cel puțin în „condiții ideale”, locuirea în ansambluri socialiste se bucură de o nouă apreciere. Devenite un bun compromis pentru o mare parte din populația acestor orașe, ansamblurile de locuințe colective socialiste sunt reconsiderate azi în contextul mai larg al urbanității est-europene, iar în acest proces sunt redescoperite anumite calități ale lor, asociate de obicei cu locuirea individuală de tip suburban.*

**Keywords:** public preferences, single-family house, socialist housing estates, Romania

<sup>1</sup> \* Corresponding author: Daniel Șerban Tel./ Fax.: (+40) 747345844  
E-mail address: DanielSerban@mail.utcluj.ro

## 1. Introduction

In the Western world the appreciation natural and rural landscapes are gaining today, both as depositories of the memory of human civilization and of nature itself, but also as frameworks of everyday activities, is under a progressive evolution. This is a complete turnover from a hundred or two hundred years ago. Then, to have wanted to live in the countryside would have been rather frowned upon: it was one thing to like the countryside and something different to accept the company of those living there, not to speak of wanting to live there yourself [1]. Ironically, this opinion would share stage at the time with the Romantic vision of the countryman as the bearer of a deep ancestral wisdom – but maybe one which was too esoteric for the (urban) public at large. In the meantime the countryside has been commodified, living conditions there have become acceptable and the effort of working the land almost unnecessary, at least in the Western world, and increasingly more in post-industrial societies everywhere.

*"No longer need the rural incomer feel shame because he milks no cow, sows no seed, reaps no corn. Often no one else does either, or only rootless hirelings. Of the rural economy little may be left but chopping wood and picking apples. The countryside is becoming a place for living, not for making a living."* [1]

The (rural) landscape is in the meantime something everybody is entitled to, moreover, with the condition that it is ecologically correct, living should take place in the midst of it. The landscape is the legitimate realm of everyone, it can and should be inhabited, because it is a place of plenitude, of a healthy solidity and of a perfect balance – a not at all new perspective, in the background of which we see the old Arcadian myth. What is new, however, is the widely spread opinion that this must be accomplished [1]. If formerly the landscape was coveted and revered during holidays, or maybe weekends, today it has to be wholly had, much like fulfilling a dream or even benefiting of one's right. Three out of four Britons, for instance, expressed a choice for living in the countryside since at least two decades ago [1], and other studies indicated in the case of other regions as well a general high interest for this type of living environment [2] throughout most of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup>. Apparently, the rural is quite often the winner in the comparison between different living environments and the appreciation it receives increases with the exposure it gets, through visits or actual experiences of living there [2]. What attracts people and makes them react to, and eventually occupy a landscape or a territory is a certain degree of pleasure it can offer, a fact which applies to residential landscapes as well. An idyllic settings and its scarcity, for the matter, are highly sought features, which translate into a higher value on the market. Acquiring such a property implies not only an investment of financial nature, but a profoundly emotional one too [3]. This happens all the more the scarcer the natural, unspoilt environments become in the Western world: in the Netherlands, for example, especially in those rural areas which are considered attractive, available housing is rare, and this state of things is perpetuated by the central planning organisms and by state intervention [2]. At the same time landscapes are increasingly claimed as commodified areas for leisure and tourism [4], and somehow paradoxically, there is an increasing public interest towards nature conservationist issues. In reality, today the most radical ecologists and the most unconscious consumers would both like to live "in nature", at least once in a while.

## 2. A strong incentive towards suburbanization

However, rural doesn't necessarily mean countryside, while the character of a space defined this way could be easily found in suburban or even urban environments. Very often, that set of qualities which the (urban) public find appealing when referring to the rural – greenery, tranquility, open space, a

feeling of security [5] and a certain community feel – are to be easily found in most suburban areas [2]. The rural can, therefore, be anywhere [2]. And in fact, these qualities are the same over and over again in the descriptions people make of their living environment of choice, one which always resembles the generic suburban setting [5]. According to Paul Hackett, in the Anglo-Saxon world, from the US to Australia, the vast majority of the public chooses a suburban lifestyle, against all the efforts of professionals in planning, of critics and of the specialized press to promote the advantages of urban living [6]. Pissmann et al. [7] also show that half of those living in the cities of the US today, would prefer to live in a rural community or one which is closer to the traits of a rural community. In Britain and the United States there is a strong anti-urban bias, which influences, among others, living densities [8]. Single-family housing on a large plot in the suburbs is the most desirable form of housing for about 80% of Americans [9], a figure confirmed by other studies [7]. There is even a stronger consensus towards the importance of having a private garden. At the same time 77% of Britons do not see an apartment as an alternative to single-family housing, and more than half of them affirm that they could never be convinced otherwise. Their percentage would further rise if the option of a secondary house in the countryside would cease to exist for those affording one today, but living otherwise in a city [6]. Originally associated with the Anglo-Saxon world, this inclination is today nothing else but the norm in most other areas of the world, a fact to which an enormous literature is standing proof. That is also the case in Central and Eastern Europe, which witnesses growing trends of suburbanization [10], as the preferred living conditions indicated by the majority of population in most of its regions, under the best of circumstances, are those usually associated with the suburban space. Here, for the majority of the population, suburbanization is an option which until several decades ago was unavailable, a fact which added impetus to the tendency to move to the suburbs, as soon as the means allowed it and the political restrictions lessened [11]. *"Remove conditions of poverty, and the ideal of owning a conveniently located house with a small piece of land around it – that is, of residing in suburbia – becomes all but universal."* [6]

A survey designed to investigate public preferences regarding the preferred form of housing, irrespective of cost, revealed that among citizens of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe there is as well a preference for the single-family house with a garden, half of the respondents choosing this type before a home in a renovated downtown building or in a large collective housing estate built during socialism. Without the constraints of costs, many of those interviewed would exclude the option of living in major housing estates [10]. Today, two decades after the emergence of the suburban housing model, and within 10 years of it becoming more accessible, the Romanian public not the less, including the educated classes, opts almost entirely for the single-family home [12]. Where there were possibilities, this choice was put forth beginning with the '90s, when the vision of living in a villa with a garden and pool led to the migration at the city margins of the wealthy at first, and not the middle class, which was practically nonexistent at the time. In the meantime, however, this model has fueled many of the motivations and reactions of the public at large and spread throughout more of the social strata [13]. In a Central and Eastern European context, the issue of changing the dwelling after the political regime changed is accompanied by another narrative - that the social status which has been repressed during socialism, which gave a strong impulse to the later processes of socio-spatial differentiation, including the process of suburbanization [10]. Still, this process and the typologies usually associated with it evolved in particular social and historical conditions in every country in the region, a fact overlooked by literature, which often exaggerates the novelty of this type of living at global level [14]. For that matter, most writings on single-family homes or other type of enclosed housing in Eastern Europe focus on gated communities, of the type which offer a set of services alongside housing and rarely, if ever, deal with the fenced housing developed on single plots, very much typical to the region.

### 3. A predictable house and garden

In Estonia, four in five people would choose to live close to nature, outside cities [15] and beyond any statistics, to the common perception the Estonian is a individualistic person and a nature lover who has a "natural" need to keep contact with the land [15]. On the one hand, in Estonia, as in other countries in the region where urban population or at least the urban elite was historically of foreign origin (German, later partly Russian), typical housing for the Estonian majority was of rural type until the mid-twentieth century. On the other hand, the lack of food in the Soviet era shops later on necessitated the maintenance of vegetable gardens behind the house, a feature which made people feel they could decide on personal matters, something they had been otherwise denied at a communal level. In this context, the option in post-socialist times for a house with a garden is not at all surprising [15]. Urbanization in Estonia followed partly the logic of economic development, and partly ideological decisions, such as the forced collectivization in the countryside and building of urban centers of Soviet type. The process was, therefore, imposed at the macro level on a population that feels in general that their relocation in such centers was not their choice. The result is that today, although about 70% of Estonia's total population lives in urban areas, only half of the population believe they have the mentality of a townsman. Keeping in touch with the land, either keeping the former rural household as a secondary home or buying a summer home, had an important role in assuming an identity and also provided a subsistence strategies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century [15].

In Romanian cities a free standing house, usually with a garden and enclosure was mostly associated with a higher standard living than an apartment in an estate, because of its embedded proprietary status, which translated to an increased personal space, one could as well take decisions upon. The difference in standard derived also because such a housing type would usually be part of an older city district and therefore with a more established urban status than the apartment block in the socialist built housing districts, stretching out to the city limits. The origins of this view refers to the very origins - the inhabitant of the house was already an urbanite when the one in the apartment block, receiving the keys of new housing would also make his first steps in a new, urban life. Beyond any objective differences, this start will seal for a long time the status of the housing estate, pervaded also by a certain sense of authoritarian and often eradicator socialist modernization [12], further on to its detriment. There are of course other quirks to support this order of preference: an experience of open (even loose) urban environments, a certain reservation in regard to the private space, which the apartment building lacking buffer zones manages to embarrass, and a long history of living on the ground floor in relation to a garden and yard.

In Russia too, the traditional dwelling of the majority of the population is closely linked to the natural environment. Similarly to Romania, with the exception of several larger cities, the hystorical urban housing is also a low-density type. And here too there is a component of suburbanization whose evolution can be put in relation with the socialist way of living. In Russia, during socialism, a peculiar type of suburbanisation started to spread, in the form of secondary temporary homes in the countryside (dacha). If originally a privilege of the upper classes before Communism, along with the socialist urbanization and industrialization, the dacha begins to spread gradually, first among the members of the Nomenclature and then to more and more categories of population as a weekend alternative to the urban "constriction". This argument of "escaping the city" was working in Romania as well in the early '90s when the first holiday homes or weekend cabins started to spread in recreational areas near big cities, marking a nascent suburbanization at the beginning of the post-socialist period. And in fact, there is a same all over narrative of the Eastern European suburbanite – that of escaping from the suffocating and depersonalizing "matchbox", referring to living conditions inside the collective housing estates of the socialist city.

#### 4. The post-socialist suburban experience

In many of the regions in Central but mostly in Eastern Europe, the “true” suburbanisation saw an advancement only relatively recently. In St. Petersburg, for instance, there has been registered an increase in individual housing developments especially starting the 2000s, with mostly gated communities, which in a relatively short period of time already counted 135 such ensembles [10]. On the local housing market suburban dwellings represented only 5% of the total housing supply, but suburbanization is expected to continue, given the preferences of the city's inhabitants for this type of living [10]. Other large Central and Eastern European cities register similar figures, with some particular evolutions in every case. In the late 2000's Sofia, for instance, has seen a dramatic increase in residential communities of single-family houses, which are characteristic of the current state of urban development of the city, reflecting the housing preferences of Bulgarians at the time [10]. Especially in the southern part of the city, stretching to the Vitosha National Park in the vicinity of the capital, there are numerous new dwellings of suburban type, many in enclosed ensembles. The highest status residential areas are nevertheless the ones developed in the prewar era, which have in the meantime become the favourite of the new rich class [10]. In Budapest, the most sought after residential communities of single - family houses lie along one of the city's northwestern hills, far from the industrial areas. These settlements have grown and developed especially in the '90s, due to an influx of young population from the middle and upper classes. In contrast, suburban development and population growth was more modest in areas south of the city, where lower prices attracted generally lower-income families [10]. A similar situation was present in Bucharest as well, with the most sought after new residential areas situated in the north of the capital, grown around many of the area's lakes. In Vilnius, especially after the year 2000, there was an explosion of the construction market in the suburbs, which in this case are relatively homogeneous areas in terms of social strata, usually inhabited by people with high incomes, to which the upper-middle class is starting to add. The appreciation of the new suburban settlements is on the increase, despite the poor or unfinished technical and social infrastructure. Once again, in Vilnius too the preferred housing type in the 2000's was the single family home [10].

Relocating home to the city margins in many Central and Eastern European cities, although similar to the US process of exurbanisation, both for reasons of low density and monofunctionality of land uses [16], has a set of mechanisms which have been identified on the one hand as the universal economic ones, coupled to some strategies also present on global scale, but on the other hand there are nominated certain cultural circumstances, particular political dynamics and uncertainties inherent to the transition process. These contributed significantly to shape of the builtscapes, even if apparently the overall context of entrepreneurship and governance is the same as in Western cities [16]. For instance, changes in the countries' economic structure also affected the social stratification and led to an increase in polarization. At the same time living has become more expensive, housing prices in major cities were significantly higher than those in the further away suburbs and who faced economic hardship people with began to leave the cities. Meanwhile, those low incomes and those whose incomes have increased over the same period, had left the cities in a higher percentage than the average income population, both groups heading to the suburbs - though not necessarily the same areas. If economic difficulties have seriously limited the options for migration of the low-income groups, to high income earners, the preference for a particular living environment was a more important factor in relocation [17]. The reason is quite simple, this category could afford to leave their socialist built homes easier and build or purchase a bigger home in the suburbs, being further supported by a rather affordable mortgage system. Those more likely to have high incomes also came from large cities, where the higher cost of housing offered them the possibility of selling better [17]. Incidentally, the socialist dwelling was in fact the main benefit of the transition; in Estonia for example, privatization of housing was made especially to tenants and to a lesser extent to the former owners. With the introduction of the market

economy, the value of privatized housing grew, and grew differently, so that residents of larger cities became owners of more expensive homes. The sale of such an apartment from the socialist period was a prerequisite of suburbanization [17]. Concurrently, land restitution has brought significant resources to those who were given land, which allowed them to leave the cities towards suburban areas and also activated the land market, because many of these landowners have preferred to sell to real estate developers. In other countries a somewhat similar process was already occurring in the previous political era: in socialist Yugoslavia private agricultural land in rural municipalities neighboring cities could be capitalized some way other than by simply cultivating it, and that is by re-parcelling it and selling plots of land for house construction [18]. In socialist Yugoslavia it was also possible to hold up to two holiday apartments in any of the republics, and because there weren't available or allowed other means of capital investment for private individuals, as was the case in Western countries, for many Yugoslav families building houses was one of the most widespread forms of investment [18].

If in the United States gated residential communities are forms typical of sprawl, favored firstly by the low price of land in the suburbs and the developed road infrastructure, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, it isn't possible to talk about phenomena of the same proportions and of similar causes [19]. At a general level some slightly more detailed explanations of the success gated housing has are usually put in relation to a twofold agency. On the one hand there is the market supply and the eagerness of governments to ease the cost of infrastructure development, of security and services, and on the other a private sector looking for profit and for the safety of the investment. On the other hand there are those factors related to the demand, which translates to a certain preference of the public for such forms of housing, generally considered to be influenced by media discourses which fuel the social fear in the urban environment [14]. In terms of demand, there are usually identified three factors which explain preference for gated housing: security, status and lifestyle issues. As a safety measure, the enclosure is a response to the increase of crime in cities, but also to the fear of others, be they from another class, another ethnic or racial group. In terms of status, there is a preference for housing in socially uniform environments, inside (and also outside) of which the fence can denote a certain status or class privilege. A third aspect refers to the lifestyle aspirations of residents, wishing to consume and access better quality services and amenities, which the public sector cannot provide. A research on the motivations of fencing undertaken in Serbia [14] showed that only 35% of respondents chose this chiefly as a means of protection from crime, for 22% being more important the visual obstruction from and for the neighbors. This figure would rise to 35% when it comes to visual protection against foreigners. Protection against external factors - dust, noise and traffic - emerged as important for almost half of the respondents. The results reveal the bad quality of the spaces neighboring this type of enclosed housing, and a conclusion has Andreea Matache [19], amongst others, who observes that enclosing is a mean of conserving the living status and integrity "in the isolated and dismantled periphery". The enclosing was thus transforming from a feature of an aspirational model to a mere necessity, a fact which became revealing of the shift in public perceptions of the suburban way of living.

Aspirations, but also the familiarity of certain elements found in a particular environment as well as the privation of them, are very important in forming preferences for that certain environment [8]. There are different perceptions before / after adjustment to a place, just the same as these differ depending on the reference point (eg the environment from which someone comes, the environment prior to someone's exposure to it etc.) [8]. Other mechanisms that influence satisfaction levels are the cognitive restructuring and the future prospects [20], which could translate to someone accepting easier their current housing situation if it is unlikely to improve (as unavoidable), even if doesn't match their preferences and on the other hand, if in the future someone could improve their standard of living, this perspective makes acceptable (as transient) their current housing situation. Each of the two mechanisms appear to have occurred at some point in framing the satisfaction level of those who

choose to live in the suburbs of Romania. Prospects for a future that was to evolve into something better could be associated with the earlier stages of transition, and the resignation and passivation with later evolutions.

## 5. The backlash of suburbanization

Of all the cities in the Central and Eastern Europe, those of the former East German republic are following to a lesser extent the generalized trend of suburbanization. The suburban region of Leipzig, for example, has lost some of its importance lately as a living destination for its inhabitants, from the way it has been during the mid '90s. The change is related, on the one hand, with changes and disruptions of tax policies and subsidies (eg for those who buy a house), but also with demographic changes, such as the decrease in number of young families, who were the largest clientele of suburbanization. Furthermore, a number of factors related to the relative increase in attractiveness of the inner city and that of urban living compared to other environments, have derived from the increase of the overall cost of living, which affected more housing in the suburbs and decreased the market value in peripheral areas. The fact is evidenced by the relatively low preference of the city's residents for a house with a garden as a dwelling type, as shown in the study by Brade et al. [10].

A rather different route took the backsliding of suburbanisation in Romania. Briefly, similarly to what happened in other areas, the effect of the economic crisis which started here in 2008 put a relative end to the speculative real estate developments at that time, cut short the mortgage system and brought high uncertainties regarding the evolution of the economy at large and that of the private wellbeing. The sudden stop gave respite to look back and see what happened so far, and what could be seen was "not very nice" say the members of Planwerk [21]. The great dream of home with a garden was fulfilled, but how?

*"Set on a farm field with an access alley 3 meters wide between fences, without utility networks, resulted as an allotment operation carried out by a notary and surveyor, sometimes even with the servile support and understanding of an architect and a planner." [21]*

The suburban house in its bright projection proved for many an unsuccessful venture. Constantin Goagea [13] follows this drift throughout the mid-2000s in Bucharest: after the first green havens (paradisuri verzi, in Romanian) as they were advertised, in fact simply new residential areas, were built north of the capital, it started to be visible to everyone the first drawbacks too: an infrastructure far below needs, difficulties in the supply of utilities, difficulties of accessibility, long commuting times, high maintenance costs, lack of options, routine and boredom. At the same time the public was beginning to perceive the growth of the city with its residential areas as ugly, rough and inharmonious [15], some authors even signalling the public's concern towards urbanization and the annihilation of the spatial character and quality of the environment it affects.

On the other hand, unlike Western countries, in Central and Eastern Europe large housing estates haven't undergone great transformation of social erosion and decay, other than normal building wear, until the change of regime in the late '80s, and in most part not even after that [22]. Today, more than 40% of the urban population of the region is still living in prefabricated housing of this type, and these still embody much of the housing market [22]. From the beginning, however, the population of large estates in the East was much more heterogeneous, grouping not only low-income population, as was mostly the case in the West, but much of the rest of the population too [22]. Social mix has remained a feature of collective housing in post-socialist countries, and despite the loss of image these estates suffered and despite their structural decay, they continue to provide satisfactory living conditions to

many of those who live there, say Kovács et al [22]. According to them 75% of respondents in the survey declared themselves satisfied and very satisfied with their present housing conditions in such large estates. If the main explanation would seem to be stagnation of living standards in the East, in reality the causes are multiple and largely related to other issues. Thus, in some countries the level of high satisfaction should be linked to the systematic rehabilitation of these buildings, including selective demolition to lower the density and increase the quality of the living environment, while in others a relatively small market and a stronger demand than the supply still maintain a high level of interest for collective dwellings of this type. This positive assessment can also be a backlash of the suburbanization from the '90s and 2000's, which confronted people with an array of strains: the lack of proximity, commuting, higher cost of living, low quality of the living environment etc.

The explanations could be more complex, and as always a wider frame becomes necessary. Various countries, including Romania, recorded different peculiar trends in their urban processes during the same period, related specifically to the transition of post-socialist societies [23]. If many rural municipalities surrounding larger cities registered a higher rate of population growth than the cities themselves, a model which generally indicates and outward migration from the inner cities towards the city edges, in fact central districts and inner cities as a whole didn't face actual depopulation and, insofar as it is visible, nor decline [24]. Moreover, despite the presence of certain processes of suburbanization, which are more intense precisely in these cities, urban living overall, including socialist housing estates does not seem to have registered a significant downturn. In many large cities in Romania, a major demographic influx from other parts of the country, mainly from more remote rural areas and small towns which faced economic disintegration, had a great influence on the evolution of the housing stock and urban processes at large. The migration to large cities which today concentrate a large part of the region's economy, when the destination was not a Western country, lead to a high request of all housing formulas available, insofar that one can talk for now of rare cases of ghettoisation within these estates, or of an obvious social segregation, but merely of a social inflection. In the large cities in Romania, whether an inner city polarization is happening, it is more recent and its inceptive form takes shape at the city map scale, where certain districts become more affluent, while others dwindle, the housing type being in both cases, to a large extent, the socialist estate. Apart from the relatively rare examples of lower grade estates, some of which met an emphasis of social issues and significant structural decay – and in fact some degree of structural decay is present in most socialist housing estates – socialist neighborhoods as a whole have registered, throughout most of the postsocialist period, an enhancement of their social mixing, and even some physical upgrade.

This can be explained, beyond the stagnation of living standards, which limited prospects for migration of substantial segments of the population and the demographic influx already mentioned, by the weaknesses of the suburban living which have come to light. These were related to poor infrastructure development, including their poor connectivity to urban centers, to the lack of services and the high acquisition and maintenance costs compared to urban collective housing. Nevertheless, a certain convenience which was previously available for those who lived before in socialist estates was not to be found anymore in their new residential destinations. Having access to a set of amenities, such as they were, was initially traded for larger living areas and especially for a private garden, a decision which many somehow came to regret, after the actualization of this trade. Not the least, there still is today a preference for an urban lifestyle from the part of the young, a well represented group in major cities in Romania, the same concentrating the major universities and the most job offers. For them, the socialist estate housing is a main choice, for either rent or acquisition, when this second option is achievable, be it only for reasons of cost and availability. But often these are not the only reasons, because the alternative of a similarly priced and sized apartment in a newly built housing estate, comes with the downside of even higher living densities, lower quality built environments, an uncertain building quality per se, and in most cases a far worse access to infrastructure and amenities,

just like in the case of the new single family houses.

For many, therefore, the “matchbox” itself is not that inconvenient anymore. What does hinder are sometimes space limitations and most times the feeling of constriction or rather the perceived housing agglomeration, although objectively, living densities in Central and Eastern European socialist estates are far from being the biggest, a fact which is now starting to be acknowledged. The experience of more recent developments of collective housing was equally revealing. In this respect, the socialist estates from the 60s became more popular than those from the coming decades, despite providing usually smaller living areas, more obsolete technical infrastructure, less parking spaces than most other estates, but also less car traffic. What they do provide is considerably larger outdoor spaces and a nowadays abundant greenery which manages a better visual mediation between living units. Socialist collective estate districts like Gheorgheni in Cluj, Drumul Taberei and Titan in Bucharest are today among the most sought after socialist neighborhoods. Anywhere vegetation has grown enough in these estates there seems to be a consolidation of housing standards, observable somewhat in their social upgrade, unlike the denser, less vegetated estates, with the exception maybe of the socialist apartment buildings located along more central city boulevards. A particular example is the district Grigorescu in Cluj. Here, a superimposition of newer housing formulas upon older strata, produced an environment which many of the inhabitants still feel rather fond of, and this instead of the alienation usually associated with larger districts of the kind and with mutating city planning operations. With additions, partial substitution and densification in between existing structures instead of their complete elimination and rebuilding of a different type, the scale of the urban structures and housing estates is not in fact different from those employed in other socialist districts. A melange of collective housing and single-family houses with gardens in between, sometimes completely surrounded by apartment buildings, Grigorescu is not particularly beautiful or coherent, although there is something about it that makes it more desirable and more livable than other districts in Cluj. There is even a certain community feel which it exhales, a community of which the house dweller and the apartment tenant looking at the former's garden from their upper floor window are equally part of. To this state of congruence contributes the quality of the district's geographical setting, nestled in between a steep hill, visible from a distance, but not at all noticeable in many parts of the district, the river Someș, and the suite of parks on the other side of the river. Significant is also its positioning in relation to the city centre, with no incline or decline when commuting between the two, unlike any other large socialist district in Cluj, and until now, without a massive through traffic of the kind burdening other districts.

## 6. Conclusions

It is relevant today, under the circumstances of a stranded suburbanization, about changing societal values and perceptions related to housing. So far, however, what seems to deter more than anything else the suburban housing model are general economic conditions and the recession of past years, and to a lesser extent the changes in the options and perspectives of the public. If its dissatisfaction of today's cities can produce a paradigm shift or at least incentivise a change in its own behavior remains to be seen. For many, however, the return to a situation of economic growth or stability portends a reversal of the same non-critical processes and practices of consumer suburbanization. Examples from other regions provides sufficient proof and scenarios - if in Southern Europe there is a reluctance of the public for single housing suburban living, due to a still greater preference for proximity to the city center and for compact urban environments, growth figures in some cities in the region prove instead the opposite [25]. Meanwhile, in the Anglo-Saxon world the suburban model is reinforced by a certain antipathy towards the urban, not because of its spatial attributes, which actually in many small and medium towns are largely similar to those in the suburbs, but because how the urban continues to be seen: disorder, corruption, subculture, crime and violence [5]. But the ultimate argument against urban

living for the majority of the Western population remains the unacceptable ratio between small living spaces and high prices. That seems to be the exact opposite of what happens in Romanian large cities such as Cluj, where the prices, due to a lack of proper upgrade, stay the same in most socialist estates, more central districts and peripheral developments alike, with the only major difference between in-city and proper out-of-city developments, in which case the city as a whole remains more expensive. Here, nevertheless, the choice of an inner city, well serviced district, with a mature infrastructure, though not unequally old, and a green setting in an urban fabric which discourages through traffic, with the occasional extra feature of a small scale community feel, becomes meanwhile the best compromise.

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