

Szirmai, V. (ed.): **“Artificial Towns” in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Social Polarisation in the New Town Regions of East-Central Europe**. Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2016. 501 p.

In different parts of the world, Artificial Towns, new towns and planned cities frequently represent materialised visions and utopian concepts of community. Due to the close relation between functional and architectural structures and societal ideals, this type of settlement is influenced by changes of the socio-economic system in a particular way. There is a requirement of adapting to new societal needs, and the question emerges how this adaptation affects socio-spatial relations in different contexts. This is the main focus of the book “Artificial Towns in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. It is dealing with characteristic processes of societal re-evaluation and considers the potentials and problems of fitting such towns to new social realities and needs.

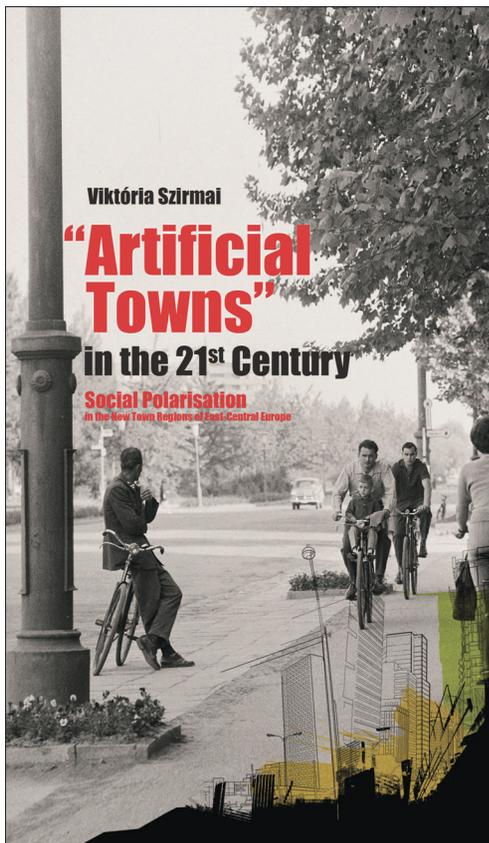
The 501-page-long edited volume is an outcome of the research project ‘Social Polarisation in the Hungarian and Eastern-Central European

“New Town” Regions. Impacts of Transition and Globalisation’. The leader of the project and editor of the volume, Viktória SZIRMAI, head of department at Kodolányi János University of Applied Sciences, proposes the main aim of the volume as follows: “The mission of this book ... is to present polarisation mechanisms, contemporary social structural relationships and their economic, political and architectural determination in new towns...” (p. 15). As the subtitle of the book indicates, the focus is the new towns that were developed in communist times in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). However, at the beginning of the book, which introduces the characteristics that are inherent to this type of settlement and distinguish Artificial Towns e.g. from socialist high-rise housing estates, a clear definition of Artificial Towns would have been helpful for the reader.

New towns are usually interpreted as prototypes of the socialist way of life and, in some cases, nation-building projects, as well as a solution of the housing question without reproducing social inequality. Their development is associated with forced industrialisation in the communist regime. Hence, their economic base was often mining or heavy industry.

After the political changes in and after 1990, these economic sectors experienced a fundamental reassessment and devaluation. As a direct outcome of the shift new patterns and dynamics of regional economic development emerged, and socio-spatial polarisation began to increase in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. These processes had a strong impact on the development of the new towns as well. Areas which were affected by the decline of traditional industries and which were not capable of developing a new economic basis often showed high and increasing dependencies on public transfer payments. This is, beyond others, reflected in the standard of housing and living conditions.

Many regional economies within CEE countries are severely challenged by asymmetric power relations in the globalised economy. Hence, socio-spatial disparities have been rising considerably in rural as well as urban contexts (see e.g. TSENKOVA, S. 2006; SMITH, A. 2007; BRADE, I. *et al.* 2009; SMITH, A. and TIMÁR, J. 2010; EHRLICH, K. *et al.* 2015). It is against this backdrop that large-scale high-rise housing estates and new towns from the communist times are frequently struggling with processes of downgrading and depopulation. As different chapters of the volume show, Artificial Towns established in state-socialist planned economies have managed to cope with the profound transformation of the social and economic framework after 1990 in different ways.



Although there are numerous studies on urban development after communism, most of them focus on capital cities (see e.g. STANILOV, K., 2007; BORÉN, T. and GENTILE, M. 2007; ANDRUSZ, G. *et al.* 2008; BRADE, I. *et al.* 2009), whereas in-depth analyses of new towns are rather scarce. The present book is bridging this gap to a certain extent in the field of post-socialist urban studies. The development of Artificial Towns is a prime example for how challenges of the transformation process take shape on the local and national levels, and how they influence the social well-being of the local population. Thus, investigating socio-spatial development of these towns seems a particularly relevant issue. Moreover, extensive empirical information on socio-spatial structures in case study towns mainly in Hungary but also in Poland and Slovakia, as well as the comprehensive comparison with other urban types, provide a sound basis for urban planning strategies.

Pierre MERLIN, professor of the Town and Regional Planning Institute of the University Paris-Sorbonne, emphasises in his recommendation to the book that the variety of the presented studies might help develop strategies to support that “the socialist towns of Central Europe” are turning to “successful old towns”, even if numerous factors have an impact on the process which are hard to predict (p. 13). Detailed description of the eleven new towns in Hungary and the specific local trajectories of selected case studies (also including architectural characteristics and urban structural features) provide a remarkable insight into urbanisation processes in the communist and post-communist periods. Still, it would have been a benefit for the book to better embed the results of these studies in contemporary discourses in international urban research.

The book consists of four major parts written by sociologists, economists, geographers, architects and urban planners. The first part discusses general theoretical considerations of the development of new towns in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It scrutinises such diverse issues like the period when socialist new towns were established, general characteristics of CEE urbanisation, and national peculiarities in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. In her introduction Viktória SZIRMAI juxtaposes the development of new towns in Eastern and Western Europe after World War II with the transition period after 1990, and even makes an outlook to new towns or planned settlements in the developing countries. Her main question while looking for signs of failure or successful renewal is “whether the development of new towns was the possibility of a new urban development model or an unfulfilled promise” (p. 38).

Chapter 2 focuses on the development of socialist new towns, its underlying doctrines of urbanism, as well as their dominant social and ideological mechanisms. SZIRMAI describes the impacts of the transformation during the 1990s on Central and Eastern

European (CEE) urbanisation, too. In the scientific literature, the identified processes have often been connected with the question if the urbanisation in communist and post-communist contexts represents a typical catch-up development or follows a specific trajectory (e.g. BRADE, I. *et al.* 2009). SZIRMAI takes a modern and global approach to urbanisation. For her, cities are shaped beyond global and transnational power relations “by each country’s specific historical features or regional power and political-social conditions” (p. 48).

The following chapters outline the impacts of communism, post-communist transformation and globalisation on urban development and urban socio-spatial structures in the national contexts of Hungary (SZIRMAI), Poland (Grzegorz WĘCŁAWOWICZ) and Slovakia (Péter GAJDOS). Here the authors provide detailed historical information on interdependencies between the change from socialist to post-socialist societies and socio-spatial differentiation on the local and regional levels. The focus is the complex connection of urban-rural relations against the backdrop of industrialisation and deindustrialisation.

The second part of the book gives an in-depth description of the historical development and social-spatial polarisation in selected new town regions, which were established in line with programmes of rapid industrialisation communist governments implemented in these countries. Out of the six new towns the authors of the book scrutinise four are located in Hungary. They include the regions of Tatabánya (analysed by Júlia SCHUCHMANN), Dunaujváros (Nóra BARANYAI), Komló (Levente HALÁSZ) and Kazincbarcika (Márton BERKI). A case study from Poland on Tychy by Grzegorz WĘCŁAWOWICZ and Dagmara MŁICZYŃSKA-HAJDA, and another study from Slovakia on the Nová Dubnica region by Péter GAJDOS and Katarína MORAVANSKÁ supplement the findings of the Hungarian case studies.

Beyond discussing historical considerations, the authors extensively analyse the impact of economic transition and social polarisation on the selected town regions. Descriptions are mainly based on census data, the results of in-depth interviews as well as local policy and planning documents. The authors point out key problems that are typical for most of the towns they investigate, like over-aging and depopulation due to declining birth rates and negative migration balances, and social problems, in particular unemployment. It would be interesting here to learn more about the personal living conditions of the inhabitants and about how they evaluate the quality of urban surroundings in the study areas. Socio-economic disparities, both between and within urban areas, also mirror the residents’ ability or inability of social participation, and determine their unequal access to social goods like health and education.

The third part of the book takes different comparative perspectives. It aims to identify and explain the ways new towns in Hungary responded to the economic crisis. Adrienne CSIZMADY and Zoltán FERENCZ investigate whether these towns have been experiencing a similar increase in socio-spatial differences as large towns in Hungary with more than 100,000 inhabitants, and juxtapose the two urban types along population statistics and questionnaire surveys. Beyond others, the authors consider migration plans of the residents and different structural zones within those city regions. They focus on changing centre-periphery relations and processes of social segregation. As their results reveal, the social structure of inner city areas in bigger traditional cities reflects the conventional Western trends with an increase of higher status groups, while this tendency does not apply to the new towns.

János RECHNITZER, Judit BERKES and Ádám PÁTHY investigate the position of post-communist new towns in the Hungarian urban network. They carry out a cluster analysis based on data concerning occupational structures, employment potential and social indicators like education. They demonstrate that industrial cities in the same cluster are struggling with similar difficulties. Nevertheless, some of them managed to cope with the challenges of transformation in a more successful way, while others failed. Adrienne CSIZMADY provides detailed explanation for such different urban perspectives through a long-term comparison of socio-economic development in the eleven Hungarian new towns, which are gradually becoming old towns. Relying mainly on economic and demographic indicators she distinguishes three types of development, namely advanced, stagnant and declining towns. Her finding that some cities managed to succeed by utilising their socialist heritage might be surprising on the one hand. On the other hand, it points to the crucial question of how the symbolic and ideological content of new town architecture can contribute to a new urban identity and therefore improve future development prospects.

Based on urban structure, the image of urban architecture and the location, function and composition of the city centre in the selected six towns Kornélia KISSFAZEKAS aims to confront planning ideas of communist times with current reality. In fact, she highlights the similarity of planning principles in various countries despite different national contexts due to the massive dominance of Soviet-modelled urban planning policy. However, peculiar historical, local and geopolitical trajectories resulted in some differences. An important finding is the need for a new view on communist new towns in light of the fall of communism, and the Westernisation of society. KISSFAZEKAS emphasises the reinterpretation and increasing attention to the architecture of socialist real-

ism as an important urban strategy. This idea opens up new perspectives regarding the potential of such new towns as loci of national or cultural heritage and social identity-making.

The concluding final part discusses the impact of the heritage of communist new towns for contemporary urban societies. This raises the question whether, and if yes, to what extent, the preservation of characteristic features inherited from the communist period provides some potential for future community life. The research presented in the frame of the volume made clear that, despite a considerable trend of social differentiation, the new towns are still workers' towns, where living conditions of the population are less favourable than the national average. Referring to the different degree of social and socio-spatial changes as well as changes in architecture since 1990 Viktória SZIRMAI finally puts the question whether Artificial Towns are sustainable environment for their residents or rather an unfulfilled dream of a new urban way of life.

The book does not claim to answer this and related queries finally. However, it sketches out a range of development opportunities and provides comprehensive information on new towns in CEE, mainly based on demographic, social and economic statistics. In contrast, little information is provided on how the inhabitants themselves perceive their environment and what they think about the future of their hometowns. I suppose it would be fascinating and important for further research in this field to learn more about the subjective perspectives of the inhabitants. It would require a stronger focus on qualitative approaches and methods, however, to reveal the significance of the structural heritage from communist times for the self-perception of the people and for their everyday lives.

In sum, the anthology is a very detailed and informative scientific contribution to a better understanding of social development in new towns of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, but also of socio-spatial development in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in general. All studies and chapters provide remarkable expert information and local knowledge. The analysis of different case studies clarifies that a comprehensive assessment of communist new towns is problematic for the variety of individual settings and development trajectories that are shaped by local impacts and general socio-economic processes in a globalising world. Notwithstanding, some reflections on how these findings on communist Artificial Towns could contribute to the international scientific debate and what we can learn from them for urban contexts around the world could increase the value of the volume.

The book contains 54 figures, 33 tables and 20 maps. The appendix with a number of informative photographs taken by the authors give excellent

impressions of architecture and the condition of the built environment in the new towns presented in the studies. The volume is warmly recommended to social scientists, architects and representatives of urban and regional planning as well as to university students interested in regional and urban development, especially in the Central and Eastern European context.

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