

# 13 Democracy, markets, and public space in the transitional societies of Central and Eastern Europe

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## 13.1 Introduction

Since the ancient days, when the agora became the focal point of the political, economic, and social life in the Greek polis, the idea of Western democracy has been intrinsically linked with the notion of public space. The Roman forum, the medieval market square, the Renaissance plaza have all served as a main public stage where the framework of social relations was tested, reinforced, or publicly challenged. The balance between the public and private realms has been dynamically reshaped by a multitude of social forces and duly reflected in the physical structure of the city.

Throughout urban history, the extent to which public space permeates the urban fabric has fluctuated, and so has its content. Depending on where the social energies of a particular historical moment are concentrated, the emphasis has shifted among three main functions – the political, the economic, and the social. During times of political instability, public space is charged as a vortex of social discontent, often leading to the dismantling of existing regimes and the unleashing of radical transformative forces. In our consciousness, the collapse of the communist system in Eastern Europe is indelibly linked with images from 1989 of spontaneous mass gatherings in the streets and squares of Central and Eastern European cities – the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, the Wenceslas Square in Prague, the main boulevards of Bucharest and Sofia. In the following years, the wave of citizens' protests continued to spread on, reaching Moscow's Red Square in the early 1990s, Belgrade's Republic Square in 2000, and Kiev's Independence Square in 2004. From symbols of totalitarian oppression during the second half of the twentieth century, the main public spaces of Eastern European cities turned into a dramatic and potent stage where the heroic struggle for democracy by millions of oppressed citizens was played out in front of a world-wide TV audience.

Since the heydays of the revolutions sweeping throughout Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the twentieth century, the political tensions filling up the public spaces of the former socialist towns have noticeably subsided. This has been a consequence of attaining some of the immediate goals of the reform movement, as well as a result of certain disillusionment with its outcomes, which set

in during the 1990s. Gradually, the romanticism of the revolution and the political impetus it generated were pushed away by the relentless advance of the pragmatic forces of capitalism epitomized by two main processes – privatization and commercialization. In terms of urban form, this has been reflected in a significant reduction of the public realm and a dramatic transformation of the very nature of public space vis-à-vis the socialist city.

## 13.2 Characteristics of public space in the socialist city

The unique features of the socialist cities in Central and Eastern Europe are best exhibited in a comparison with their Western European counterparts. Relative to the nature of public space, such juxtapositions reveal three main areas of distinction reflected in: 1) wide quantitative variations between Eastern and Western European cities in terms of their share of land in public use; 2) distinctly different patterns of public space distribution; and 3) stark differences in the functional content of public spaces.

In the socialist cities of Eastern Europe, most space was public by default. In some countries, such as Russia and Yugoslavia, all urban land was appropriated by the state. In others, private ownership of urban land was limited in various degrees, but it was confined mainly to individual residential properties. Yet the majority of the urban parcels – all of the areas covered by commercial, industrial, and institutional uses, all parks and recreational areas, historical districts, and the territories covered by large housing estates – were invariably held in public ownership. Added to this body of public land were the streets, the squares, and the land used for public utilities, thus bringing the share of public land in the socialist city to roughly three quarters of the total urban area. In cities of the capitalist West, the ratio between public and private land is more or less inverse, with a combined share of public space taking about a third of the total urban area.<sup>1</sup>

The amount of public land in the socialist city was not only significantly greater, but it was distributed in a pattern that was quite different from the geographic allocation of public space within the capitalist city. In Western European cities, public space typically tends to be clustered in and around the urban core, with the exception of some public parks scattered towards the urban periphery.<sup>2</sup> Such public space gradient decreasing with distance from the center was not characteristic of the socialist city where large expanses of industrial, institutional, recreational, and public housing developments dispersed public uses throughout the urban fabric.

The abundance of public space in the socialist city and the dispersed pattern of its distribution resulted in a lower intensity of its use relative to the utilization of public space in the capitalist city. Added to that was the fact that socialist cities lacked or significantly curtailed one of the most vital functions of public space – its utility as a marketplace. Curbing private entrepreneurship and limiting commercial activities to a few state-run retail centers drained from the socialist city the energy that has been invigorating urban spaces since the early days of the Western civilization. In

spite of its relentless efforts to infuse public space with ideological meaning, the socialist state could not fill in the vacuum created by the withdrawal of commerce from city streets and squares. The importance of the formal public spaces inserted by the communist regime in the urban fabric of the Eastern European cities seems greatly overstated in urban literature. The ideologically charged monumentality of the central squares, decorated for the proper “celebrations” of the Communist Party’s glorious leadership, stood in stark contrast with the abundance of desolate, unkempt, and undifferentiated open spaces characterizing the majority of the urban landscape in the socialist city. Under these circumstances, social interaction remained the only viable function of public space. Unlike the Western European city, however, where those functions are channeled to a fairly limited number of reasonably well-defined streets, squares, and parks, and where social interaction is supported and induced by commercial activities, in the socialist city social interactions were diluted throughout the urban fabric in an entropic fashion.

Overall, within a few decades after the end of World War II, the socialist system dramatically changed the nature of public space in Central and Eastern European cities by imploding its share, diffusing its patterns, and curtailing the mix of functions it contained. Naturally, the dismantling of the socialist system, with the ensuing shift in the balance between the public and private realms, has led to a massive reorganization of public space within the changing structure of the post-socialist city.

### 13.3

#### **Post-socialist transformations of public space**

The realignment of public space in the post-socialist city has been a result of two powerful processes. The first one is defined by the need to address the imbalances and distortions in the relationship between the public and private realms inherited from the socialist past. Within the physical structure of the post-socialist city, this process is reflected in the reestablishment of a spatial organization characteristic of the Western European settlements through: a dramatic reduction of the share of public space; a centralization of its patterns of distribution; and its infusion with a wide assortment of commercial activities. The outcome of these processes has coincided to a great extent with the direction in which global forces have been reshaping public space in cities throughout the world since the beginning of the 1980s. The precipitous rise in the power of international corporations and the revolution in communication technologies, both gaining momentum towards the end of the twentieth century, have combined to render traditional concepts of public space obsolete (Banerjee, 2001; Mitchell, 1995). The overlapping of these two major factors – the internal pressure to transform the outdated and dysfunctional spatial structure of the socialist city, on one hand, and the advances of global capitalism and technology as major agents of change in the region, on the other – have generated a tidal force sweeping through cities of Central and Eastern Europe, resulting, among other things, in a massive privatization of public space.

### 13.3.1 The privatization of public space

In the climate of glorified market liberalism permeating all spheres of life in the reform-driven societies of the former Soviet Block, privatization has become a panacea for all social ills. The new dominant neo-liberal ideology called for a wholesale privatization of urban land, housing, and most economic activities, including production, commerce, and the delivery of services. The spatial impacts of this strategy on the fabric of the city reveal a radical shift in the shares of public and private space.

The policy of privatization through restitution of urban properties has had the strongest impact on the reduction of public space in the post-socialist city. This process has transferred the majority of urban parcels into private hands, including many areas that were previously utilized for public uses – modest pieces of land serving as playgrounds, small neighborhood parks, undeveloped slivers of open space nested within the densely build inner city neighborhoods. The impacts of land privatization have been even more visible in the peripheral socialist housing estates, where numerous new residential buildings, oddly placed retail centers, and a staggering number of gas stations have sprung up on restituted property carved out from the open spaces surrounding the prefabricated high-rise dwellings. The process of land restitution has inevitably created significant amount of tension between the old residents, who see the disappearance of open space as a negative trend deteriorating the quality of life in their communities, and the new (old) land owners, who want to exercise their reestablished property rights by developing their lots at maximum densities. In this battle, the defenders of public space frequently find themselves on the losing end as the new laws, adopted in a hurry after the fall of the communist regimes, invariably place individual property rights above public interests. The drive to reestablish private property rights has been so strong that it has not spared even the territories of the urban park systems.<sup>3</sup> The process of restitution has been carried out in some CEE countries with such zest that rumors of municipal governments restituting existing streets have gained considerable credibility among citizens affected negatively by the disappearance of cherished community spaces.

Indeed, most Eastern European local governments have quite eagerly squandered the majority of their municipal assets. Squeezed by the sharp drop in state subsidies and the rising costs of providing public services, city authorities have not only willingly transferred properties to restituted owners, but resorted to auctioning off most of the remaining municipal assets as a way of increasing revenues and cutting down expenses. The list of privatized properties, previously in public use, has included not only the majority of the public housing stock, pieces of undeveloped land, playgrounds, and segments of existing parks, but community halls, sports arenas, and historical landmark buildings as well. Widespread corruption among government officials has fueled the wholesale disposal of public land and space through shady deals and the formation of questionable public-private

partnerships as a result of which valuable community resources have ended up in the hands of private developers with little concern for the public wellbeing.

The extent of the public realm in the post-socialist city has been further eroded by the proliferation of development patterns that have curtailed public access to ever increasing portions of the urban fabric. The instant popularity of gated communities throughout post-communist Eastern Europe is a phenomenon that has not received due attention in urban literature, a surprising fact given the magnitude of the process and its impact on the dynamics of urban life in the post-socialist cities. The process of fragmentation of the urban fabric into small isolated pieces has spread as a brushfire, claiming ever greater chunks of urban land for exclusively private purposes. The “balkanization” of the urban fabric has mimicked to some extent the processes of dissolution of the Eastern Block, and the Soviet and Yugoslav federations. The desire for greater autonomy, coupled with the decline of centralized power, has created a mosaic of smaller independent units within of states and cities alike. The results, however, have been quite different at the two levels. While at the national scale this process cut off artificially imposed bounds, allowing the healthy growth of individual states, on the level of the city the fragmentation and isolation of pieces of the urban fabric has seriously eroded the functioning of the urban systems. The two most visible outcomes of this process have been the radical increase in traffic congestion and the precipitous rise in socio-spatial stratification. The striking popularity of gated communities in the post-socialist city (see Chapters 11 and 12, this volume) underscores the failure of both the preceding communist regimes and the governments which followed to build an equitable and just society. Seeking rescue from the chaos of the post-socialist reality, most residents with means have decided to build their own insulated version of personal paradise, letting the rest of the city crumble to pieces. If they have chosen not to do this in the mushrooming new suburbs, they typically opted to parcel off pieces of land in the city, equipping those urban islands with an impressive assortment of tall fences, private guards, and security cameras. The fear of the messy and unpredictable urban environment, which has dominated the patterns of post-war development in North American cities, has taken hold of the Eastern European psyche, or at least of that segment of the population who has subscribed to their own version of the “American dream” (Blakeley and Snyder, 1997; Hayden, 1984).

The concept of partitioning urban space into pieces designated for the exclusive use of specific groups has been embraced not just as a formula for the new upscale residential developments, but it has become the new dominant philosophy of appropriating urban space employed in the design of numerous fashionable shopping centers and office parks alike. As a rule of thumb, those developments have made little effort to embrace the idea of making themselves accessible to all residents by linking their location to the system of public transit or by integrating their site design within the existing framework of public spaces. With the majority of such projects built in the suburban periphery, the idea of enhancing the vitality of existing neighborhoods is given little consideration, ruled out by the traditional

developers' predilection for parcels with low land costs and high automobile accessibility. The design of such shopping and office developments is based on the same logic determining the selection of their location. The glossy new buildings are intended to attract the eye from the urban freeway, not to entice pedestrians. Most often, these developments are surrounded by vast expanses of parking or, in cases when they are forced to coexist with surrounding neighborhoods, the buildings are arranged around an interior space turning their backs on whatever happens to be around (unless of course it is a high-speed arterial road). Such development patterns have fractured the continuity of public space, twisting its structure and characteristics in a dysfunctional, automobile-dominated environment, shifting the focus from social interaction to individualized consumption.

The new shopping centers, such a novelty in the Eastern European urban landscape, have undoubtedly attracted sizeable crowds and the argument is often made that they would become the new public spaces of the post-socialist city. Yet, it is hard to imagine that the next revolutions could be instigated on the parking lots or food courts of the suburban malls and discount stores. Whether these places will achieve the status of "new downtowns," as their American counterparts did in the 1980s (Rybczynski, 1993), is an open question. There are already some signs that the popularity of suburban malls and big box retail is quickly wearing off and that the city centers will survive the competition from the onslaught of suburban development, relying on the strong European traditions of urban life. A critical component of tipping the balance one way or another is going to be played by the set of public policies adopted by municipal and state governments. During the period of transition, they have unquestionably favored the forces of decentralization and privatization, but public concerns for the negative impacts of commercialization, suburbanization, and the fate of the inner city are slowly gaining traction in political circles.

### **13.3.2 Commercialization of public space**

Some of the strongest public reactions towards the ways in which the built environment of the post-socialist cities has being transformed have been provoked by the blatant commercialization of the public realm. This process was to a great extent an inevitable outcome of the release of the entrepreneurial energies following the crash of the socialist system. After a half-century, during which most expressions of private initiative had been suppressed by the communist state, the citizens of Eastern Europe broke free from the grip of the central authorities controlling all facets of economic life. For many residents impacted by the closure of the state-run enterprises, starting a small business was the only chance for survival. Thus, a large number of new entrepreneurs emerged overnight, some of them quite enthusiastic about the prospects of economic freedom, others quite hesitant in their first steps in capitalist marketplace. All of them, however, needed to find space for their newly established businesses, triggering a wave of intense urban space appropriation.

Residences, basements, and garages were turned into offices and shops, infusing the dormant public spaces of streets and squares with energy, which spilled over to the most secluded corners of strictly residential communities. In a manner reminiscent of urban life in the Middle Ages, all nooks and crannies of the city fabric were utilized as spaces of small-scale production and trade (Andrusz, 1996).

In this process of urban transformation, not all cities fared equally, some quickly gaining advantage as hubs of trade and commerce over others, which struggled to gain their footing in the emerging new economy. The most dynamic changes took place in the national capitals, big regional centers, and cities in border regions benefiting from their greater connectivity with the world beyond the former Iron Curtain. The energy field generated by the sprouting commercial nodes and corridors infused the streets of those cities with people, traffic, and lights.

Urban form was another significant factor determining the pace of economic transition and, by extension, the character of public life on the streets. Cities with a larger proportion of pre-socialist quarters were better positioned to adapt to the restructuring of economic life, compared with the settlements developed mostly during socialist times. In these urban areas characterized by traditional urban fabric, restitution quickly turned over larger shares of the urban environment into private hands, spearheading redevelopment and conversion of former residential or institutional properties into commercial uses. The newly restituted parcels were speedily refitted and placed on the market where the demand for commercial space exceeded greatly the supply. The relatively small size of the parcels and buildings located in the older, pre-socialist quarters was a good match for the needs and means of most business startups at a time when real estate and business financing opportunities were fairly limited. The quick turnover of properties to commercial use and the vibrant street scenes in these older cities and districts stood in stark contrast to the latent public spaces of post-war origin where the monuments of socialist architecture loomed over lifeless oversized boulevards and squares. Gradually, small-scale businesses made inroads into some of the larger structures but the majority of them remained vacant for a number of years. It was not until the second half of the 1990s when the appearance of the global corporations on the Eastern European scene signaled a new stage in the commercialization of urban space.

Once the global capital determined that Eastern Europe is a fertile ground for spreading the seeds of consumerism, the international corporations made sure to establish their presence in no uncertain terms by filling up the most visible territories of the public domain – the primetime TV slots and the main squares and street corners of every large city in the region. The billboards of Sony, McDonalds, and Shell replaced the ubiquitous communist slogans, adorning many building rooftops and bombarding the senses of a mesmerized Eastern European audience with vigor on par with that of the communist apparatchiks in the pre-1989 days. Today, the insignia of the corporate world tower over a sea of smaller commercial banners and garish advertisements obliterating the Eastern European streets, desperately trying to catch the attention of a public that has grown callous over the barrage of commercial messages oozing from all corners of public space.

The essence of the tumultuous evolution of public space in Central and Eastern Europe during the twentieth century is most vividly exemplified in the history of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. Located on the very edge that divided Europe and the city of Berlin for three decades, this site was an epicenter of Europe's cultural life in the 1920s. After World War II, this jewel in the crown of Berlin was turned into a dreadful urban wasteland by the madness of the Cold War ideology. Today, the site draws again large crowds of people, flocking to the cornucopia provided by the cutting edge entertainment and shopping opportunities nested between the towering headquarters of the Daimler-Benz and Sony corporations – the true patrons and guardians of this quasi-public space.

### 13.3.3

#### The transformation of streets and urban transport

When thinking about urban public spaces what first springs to mind are the parks and the plazas of a given city. They are considered the preeminent elements of public space, mostly because their primary intent is to serve as places for social gathering and interaction. A fact that is often overlooked, however, is that the largest share of public land in cities is taken up by another element of their spatial structure – the street. Streets perform primarily utilitarian functions to which the social component is attached as a consequence rather than a *raison d'être*. They serve as spatial connectors, conduits of movement, and a primary element of ordering urban development, setting up the basic pattern of land subdivision and the spatial framework of public service provision (including not only transportation, but electricity, gas, water and sewer, fiber optics, etc). Yet, streets provide also the spatial container where most unscripted social interactions take place. In some urban areas distinguished by their public spaces, such as the extension of Barcelona's historical core planned by Cerdà in the mid-nineteenth century, or the downtown area of Portland in Oregon, streets take up to 40 percent of the land (Siksna, 1998). In contrast, in urban areas that are intensely private, such as most of the post-war North American suburbs, the share of land dedicated to streets hovers around 10 percent (Moudon, 1992).

Not surprisingly, the trend in the post-socialist cities of Central and Eastern Europe has been marked by a sharp decline in the provision of public space. The boom in urban construction, channeled to peripheral new developments and the densification of some inner city districts, has not been paralleled by a corresponding increase in the capacity of the street system. The provision of new streets and public infrastructure, as a general rule, has been kept to a bare minimum due to developers' reluctance to increase their construction costs and the inability of financially strapped city governments to keep up with private construction, particularly in the expanding suburbs.

Overall, the twentieth century evolution of the street network in CEE cities parallels the one followed in the West, but here the spatial patterns are better articulated as they are directly related with changes in the dominant ideologies of



the time – from the small-scale pre-war urban grids of the bourgeois past, to the superblocks of the socialist industrial mega-projects and large housing estates, to the fragmented cul-de-sacs of the post-socialist gated compounds. The trajectory in the evolution of the street network in Central and Eastern European cities highlights a path leading to the increasing erosion of the quality of public space. This trend has been fortified by the intense post-socialist privatization of the modes of transportation, which, in turn, has resulted in increasing levels of congestion, pollution, and social isolation. The old age of the automobiles crowding the streets of Central and Eastern European cities<sup>4</sup> has become a main cause of pollution in urban areas, surpassing the level produced by industrial sources.<sup>5</sup> Data on road accidents indicate that traffic safety is another major problem for the region, the newly accepted members topping the list of EU countries with most deaths caused by traffic accidents in 2004 (EU Press Releases, 2006).

The process of massive privatization of urban space and activities that followed the dismantling of the socialist system has affected significantly urban transportation. During the period of the transition to a market economy, the efficient system of extensive public transit characterizing the socialist city has been replaced by a heavy reliance on the private automobile as a dominant mode of transportation. In most CEE cities, the share of trips served by public transit dropped from a high of 80 to 95 percent at the end of the 1980s to about 60 percent by the end of the 1990s (International Transit Studies Program, 2003). In the last few years, in cities like Budapest, Prague, and Zagreb, the share of public transit has fallen below 50 percent (Tosics, 2004). At the same time, automobile ownership has increased to levels comparable to Western European standards. Between 1990 and 2004, the number of registered cars per 1,000 residents almost doubled in Eastern Europe (tripling in Lithuania and Latvia) (Table 13.1) while in Western Europe it increased by an average of 20 percent. The fast growth of automobile ownership has propelled Sofia, Ljubljana, Prague, Bratislava, and Warsaw among the top ten capitals in Europe in terms of the number of cars per 1,000 residents (Urban Audit).

The reasons for the explosive growth rates in automobile ownership in the region of Central and Eastern Europe are manifold. The most frequently cited one is that buying a car in Eastern Europe has become a lot easier. Studies have confirmed that, in the context of rising income levels in the region, the costs of owning a car have declined while the costs of using public transit have effectively increased (International Transit Studies Program, 2003). Moreover, due to the introduction of market economic principles, the supply of automobiles to Central and Eastern Europe has increased sharply meeting the pent-up demand created by decades of insufficient supply and restrictions imposed by the socialist economic system. Since the early 1990s, the growing fleet of private automobiles was joined by the pickups, vans, and small trucks needed for the operation of thousands of new private businesses supporting the daily operation of the post-socialist city.

Another significant factor in the proliferation of private automobile use is related to the increased rate of suburbanization triggered during the transition period. The majority of the new residential and commercial development taking place at the

**Table 13.1** Number of registered cars per 1,000 residents

	1990	2004
CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE		
Czech Republic	234	373
Estonia	154	350
Latvia	106	297
Lithuania	133	384
Hungary	187	280
Poland	138	314
Slovenia	289	456
Slovakia	166	222
Bulgaria	196	318
WESTERN EUROPE		
Denmark	309	354
Germany	485	546
Greece	171	348
Spain	309	454
France	415	491
Italy	483	581
Netherlands	368	429
Sweden	421	456
United Kingdom	375	463
NORTH AMERICA		
Canada*	445	550
United States*	739	776

Source: Eurostat

\* Data for US and Canada are for 1995 and 2003.

urban periphery has been located on sites poorly connected with public transit, taxing the capacity of a limited number of existing roads (see Chapters 11 and 12, this Volume). The socialist mikrorayons, on the other hand, proved to be ill-suited to meet the new traffic demands as well. Their layouts, planned on a system of superblocks and a limited number of wide arterial roads, have induced some of the worst spots of traffic congestion outside of the metropolitan cores.

One of the most damaging impacts on the system of urban transportation in the post-socialist years, however, has been caused by certain policies adopted universally throughout Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s and leading to a sharp withdrawal of support for public transportation. Pressured by the reigning neo-liberal philosophy of the transition period and the directives of the international financial institutions, state and municipal governments cut drastically their transit subsidies, confirming Pucher's observation that the more market-oriented a state is, the more neglected is its public transportation system (Pucher, 1990). The dwindling subsidies for public transit led to sharp fare increases, which, coupled

with the eroding quality of service delivered by obsolete fleets (Crass and Short, 1995), resulted in further ridership losses. Between 1990 and 2000, annual ridership in Riga fell from 700,000 to 250,000 passengers. Similar decreases were recorded in Tallinn where the number of annual public transit passengers declined from 400,000 to 150,000 (Fig 16.9). The rate of decline has slowed down since the end of the 1990s as some investments have been made in rehabilitation of fleets and tracks. Most cities in the CEE region, however, continue to experience ridership decline. In Sofia, for instance, the number of public transit passengers dropped from 700,000 in 1998 to 500,000 in 2005 (Stanilov, 2006).

### 13.3.4

#### Public policies and public space

Sadly, the majority of public policies adopted during the transition period have inflicted considerable harm to the system of public spaces in the post-socialist city, particularly evident in the sphere of transportation planning. The main thrust of the effort there has been aimed at accommodating the growing number of automobiles at the expense of undermining all other modes of transportation (European Academy of the Urban Environment, 2003). Voices calling for managing the use of private vehicles have been perceived as an outright assault on the newly gained individual freedoms (Crass and Short, 1995; Suchorzewski, 1999). Thus, most of the public financing for improvements in the transportation system has been directed to expanding the vehicle carrying capacity of streets by adding new traffic lanes and building multi-level intersections, with the main purpose of moving more cars faster. Such policies have achieved little but induce more automobile use, thereby considerably aggravating the existing traffic and transport problems, and eroding the quality of public space.

There has been very little evidence that public authorities in Central and Eastern Europe are cognizant of the issues concerning more sustainable mobility patterns. Some cities, such as Warsaw and Bucharest, have adopted transportation master plans, but their implementation has been slow, impeded by resistance from automobile users and a lack of political will to enforce the plans (International Transit Studies Program, 2003).

In addition, many of the transportation plans and policies adopted by Central and Eastern European cities since the mid-1990s have been mired by serious shortcomings. The most common one has been the poor integration between transportation and spatial planning. In the context of supporting private initiative, development projects with significant impact on the urban environment have received quick approval without much concern given to their integration into the existing or proposed transit and public space networks. While investors have been genuinely interested in the prospects of development in areas around existing or future transit nodes, the lack of readily available properties, the uncertainty of sustained government support, and the difficulties of implementing projects on these sites have pushed the majority of real estate investors to location that are easier and

cheaper to develop. Quite often, these locations are removed from the transit network, yet municipal governments have been reluctant to deny development for the lack of connectivity alone. Thus, the poor coordination between development plans and urban transportation systems has led to chaotic and inefficient traffic patterns, which have generated bottlenecks in the existing street network.

Conservative thinking among planners and public officials is another factor for the worsening traffic problems in the post-socialist city and the eroding quality of its public spaces. Alternative modes of transportation such as walking and bicycling are given very little consideration viewed as irrelevant for the scale of the modern twenty-first century metropolis. Investments in older forms of public transit such as streetcars are seen as waste of public resources as these older, slower, and less convenient systems have been deemed to stand no chance in competition with the private automobile (Suchorzewski, 1999). The severe and most obvious problem with parking in the central districts, where parked cars clog most streets and sidewalks, is addressed primarily with proposals for spacious underground garages. The impact of such measures to be implemented in Prague and Sofia is not difficult to predict – they will attract more cars to the city centers, thus increasing further traffic congestion (Sýkora, 1999a).

It is disheartening to see how cities in Central and Eastern Europe seemed doomed to repeat the mistakes made by Western European and North American cities after World War II when the West embarked on ambitious projects to reshape the urban environment in order to clear way for the automobile. One would have expected that the lessons learned from this experience would be transferred to the East, particularly when the intent is to integrate the former socialist countries in the European Union. Unfortunately, the majority of EU's pre- and post accession programs and financing has been directed towards transnational corridors and improvements in regional road infrastructure. National policies in the CEE countries have followed blindly this agenda, committing a majority of their limited resources to the implementation of such projects without much reference to local context and needs (Stability Pact Watch Group, 2004). Undoubtedly, the improved accessibility to interregional networks within metropolitan areas resulting from such investments will have a significant impact on the rearrangement of urban activities. Land along to these corridors is already being set aside for the construction of new shopping malls, production facilities, and distribution centers, supporting the forces behind suburbanization and public space evasion. The damaging practice of weak integration of transportation and spatial planning on different scale levels has been continued and extended under the supervision of the EU administration.

## 13.4 Conclusions

The nature of public space in the post-socialist city has been significantly altered during the period of transition. In the last 15 years, the basic characteristics of the system of public spaces have undergone a process of intense revision in Central

and Eastern European cities as a result of: 1) internal forces highlighting the inefficiencies of land allocation inherited from the socialist regime and adjusting the urban spatial structure to the requirements of the new socio-economic system; and 2) advances of globalization and technological innovations spreading to most countries of the world during the last couple of decades. An overview of these two factors – the internal forces of reorganization and the impact of external processes – reveals that they are in many aspects intertwined, yet the processes driven by the internal factors, including historic legacies and present public policies, exert a stronger influence on the direction in which public space is transformed. Several trends have been highlighted here as a result of these forces.

Public space has shrunk drastically as a result of a wholesale privatization of urban land and properties, with little concern given to former use and value to the public. The emerging new pattern of public space has been concentrated towards the city core, while a number of quasi-public commercial places have appeared scattered towards the periphery.

Second, the content of public space has been revised by replacing its empty ideological function, promoted by the communist regime, with new energy derived from the proliferation of private initiative and commercial enterprises throughout the urban fabric. The flipside of this process has been the extreme commercialization of public space, with private interests – from small businesses to global corporations – aggressively invading the public domain.

Third, the process of public space privatization has impacted the way in which people move around the city as well, and, as a consequence, the quality of the public domain. The emphasis on private motorized transportation has generated higher levels of congestion and pollution on city streets. Public policies supporting automobile use have contributed to making streets less hospitable to pedestrian use, thus furthering the erosion of the public realm.

All of these processes impacting the quality of public space have coincided with a period when new ways of communication are threatening to undermine the traditional ways of interaction. Digital communication is widely embraced in Central in Eastern European countries characterized by a highly educated urban population with an insatiable appetite for knowledge and entertainment. From the satellite dishes, which adorned many apartment balconies in the early 1990s, to the broadband internet connections provided today even in the smaller provincial towns, Eastern Europeans have confirmed their ability to adapt to the swing of the times. Could the traditional culture of extended community ties, quite strong in most countries of the CEE region, counterbalance the trend towards making space irrelevant as a medium of communication? It is quite likely that if this trend is supported through radical realignment of urban space, the old ways of social interaction would wither away.

A survey of contemporary urbanization reveals that there are three main models from which the post-socialist cities may choose a path in terms of the development of their urban structures and, more specifically, their public realms. The first model could be called the *Open City*. Its features are best exhibited by some of the

most celebrated cities of Western Europe such as Paris, Vienna, and Amsterdam. Public space here is treated as an integral element of the urban fabric, structuring space and movement in the city. This framework is supported by an excellent public transit system in an overall transportation scheme that treats the automobile as an equal participant in the urban circulation. Priority is placed on the needs of the people experiencing the city by foot. The second model could be called the *Private City*, and it is in many respects the opposite of the previous model. The public realm is shrunk to the corridors serving exclusively the utilitarian function of moving motorized traffic, with a heavy accent placed on the needs of the private automobile. Places for gathering are limited to: the parks (some of which are also private); the streets downtown (dominated by the offices of private corporations); and a few market places (developed by corporate sponsors as theme parks for shopping and entertainment). Cities in the southern parts of the U.S., such as Atlanta, Phoenix, and Houston, come to mind as fitting this description. The third model is the *Bazaar City* found in many of the booming mega cities of the developing world. Public spaces here are shaped by the clash of traditional ways of appropriating space and the spatial imprint of global corporations. Circulation patterns are rather chaotic, relying on the inventiveness of local entrepreneurs to navigate their vessels through the urban jungle of traditional (old) and haphazard (new) development.

The following three chapters present cases from relatively remote corners of Eastern Europe, or, at least, from places lying outside of the core group of East Central European cities that has attracted most of researchers' attention in the last decade. There seems to be little conclusive evidence as to which way the places reviewed in this section are heading relative to the three models outlined above. The chapters do make a strong argument, however, that the path which the post-socialist cities will follow is determined to a great extent by the ways in which public space is integrated and defined in the urban fabric and the everyday life of its residents.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The exact figures, of course, vary from city to city, but the overall distribution of public space in the two contexts maintains this reciprocal relationship.

<sup>2</sup> While large amounts of land in public ownership (public utilities, water districts, etc.) are also found in the suburbs of U.S. cities, these areas are usually not accessible to the general public (Southworth and Parthasarathy, 1996) and, as such, could not be considered true public spaces.

<sup>3</sup> The Architecture and Planning Department of the City of Sofia has estimated that in the last 15 years the amount of open green space in the Bulgarian capital has been reduced by 900 ha, or half of its late-1980s' size (Granitska, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> According to Eurostat data, 70 to 90 percent of the cars in the Baltic republics are over 10 years old, while in Western Europe the share of automobiles in this age bracket is between 20 and 30 percent (Eurostat).

<sup>5</sup> A study by the Romanian Auto Registry found that 80 percent of the cars in the country do not comply with pollution standards (Stability Pact Watch Group, 2004).

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