ABSTRACT: The paper introduces understanding architecture as a mental image, an imprint of a physical space in collective memory. It focuses on the urban qualities of the Žižkov district, a late 19th century housing development in Prague, acknowledged in discussions over its replacement by a prefabricated housing estate in late 1980s. A theoretical concept introduced by Maurice Halbwachs is applied in order to propose a perspective indicating that these qualities developed gradually over time, as Žižkov was becoming a framework of collective memory.

KEY WORDS: Urban planning, history, Prague, clearance, remodelling, urban renewal

Introduction

The confrontation between the vision of a modern, socially progressive development and the identity of existing urban structure is clearly visible in the remodelling of Žižkov. The paper traces back the contemporary discussions in order to reconstruct the changing nature of perceived identity of the confronted developments.

The aim of the paper is to point out that these properties are not inherent to the physical space as such, but are fundamentally transformed by the factor of time as they are inscribed in collective memory. By investigating architecture as mental image the paper contributes to other works researching the changing nature of these images in order to better understand permanent and temporal aspects of architecture (Ekman 2013, p. 192).
Such understanding can eventually contribute to a more sensible treatment of existing developments, that are perceived as lacking any identity or urban quality. It could reveal the often limited power of architects and planners to change that state of the art compared to the ability of time and memory to do so (Mongin 2017, p. 47).

**Terminology**

The paper understands identity as defined by the theory of collective memory – an individuality emerging from shared memories (Lehman et. al. 2014, p. 18). The broader term urban quality describes „a decent environment for human life“ (Spurný 2021, p. 343), which the historiographic research of Žižkov usually discusses as subject to change.

**The development of Žižkov**

Žižkov district is a late 19th century development on the outskirts of the historical city centre of Prague. With the main construction between 1870 and 1900, it quickly grew into Prague’s biggest suburb. Located on steep northern hills, the district became a working class quarter, with mainly tenement buildings and very small overcrowded apartments (Holec and Mikota 1966, p. 145).

![Figure 1. Plan of Žižkov at the end of the 19th century (source: ČÚZK Archive)](image)

**Clearance plans**

The district was for the majority of the 20th century condemned for its unsanitary living conditions and lack of urban and architectural quality (Holec and Mikota 1966, p. 145), and as such seen as the first in a row to deal with the unsatisfactory heritage of
the past (Poláčková 2015, p. 33). The proposed replacement, a modernist city reflecting “the life of a modern man” (Koukalová 2017, p. 233), was its direct counterpart. The planners didn’t see many options in Žižkov’s adaptation and understood clearance of the area as the most appropriate tool (ibid.). A handful of urban plans were created, all of them working with this ethos (Poláčková 2015, p. 22-37).

Eventually, along with the planners’ visions, the building industry became the deciding factor for what would replace the existing district. The industry’s centralisation and industrialisation made it almost impossible to propose an approach in such a large scale other than building from prefabricated panels (Švácha 2017, p. 208). The need of the authoritarian regime to satisfy the housing shortage meant uncritical application of prefabricated building technology in housing projects from the 1970s onwards (Ibid., p. 204). The number of apartments, costs and construction time became the relevant indicators (Roubal 2019, p. 321), resulting in dominance of the construction companies over the projects, as they were adapting them arbitrarily in order to build faster and cheaper (Spurný 2021, p. 344-345).

The quality of the urban space was made a secondary concern. Architects, well aware of the situation, couldn’t do much about the state of the art (Roubal 2019, p. 321).
The first phase of the remodelling of Žižkov was executed between 1973 and 1984 (Koukalová 2017, p. 341). The planning team had no other choice than to replace several urban blocks with buildings from prefabricated panels. The architects have made extreme efforts to customise this technology to reflect some of the specifics of the existing district – corner buildings, shopfronts on the ground floor, rooftop studios (ibid.).

In spite of these adaptation efforts, „architects failed to create an impression of being in the middle of a metropolis instead of a prefabricated housing estate“ (Švácha 2017, p. 208), a fact recognised by the authors themselves (Loskot 1983). The first phase of the remodelling of Žižkov was proof that the deficits of the prefabricated housing are also inevitable in urban renewal projects.

**Turning point**

The resulting confrontation of the 19th century development with a prefabricated housing estate was unprecedented.

„If I had lived to see the years when our street in Žižkov would be lined with white prefab towers, I wouldn’t have covered my eyes, but I would have walked down that street as a stranger through a strange and completely indifferent city“ is in this context an often quoted excerpt from the personal memoirs of Jaroslav Seifert (1982, p. 104), a writer who grew up in Žižkov.

The discussions over the second phase of Žižkov remodelling, directly following the first one (Poláčková 2015, p. 50), were strongly influenced by the lesson learned from the first phase.

The future was questioned, faith in the ability of the system to create better urban conditions than the existing Žižkov provided was lost („Seminář“ 1989, p. 14, 33, 37); this was a phenomenon even the supporters of the clearance plans were aware of, arguing that it was only a temporary state (Čelechovský 1978). There was a growing conviction that Žižkov should be restored, not replaced („Seminář“ 1989, p. 49, 55).

The 19th century housing begins to be examined more closely, describing the identity and urban quality present in the old and absent in the new development (ibid., p. 29), aided by sociologist expertise (Roubal 2019, p. 322). „It is an obvious cultural misconduct to demolish these parts of the city, including Žižkov, and replace them with new development, which...only has technical and material qualities. The spiritual ones are lacking and cannot be implemented even by the so-called ‘humanization‘“ („Seminář“ 1989, p. 55).
**Early Žižkov critique**

Interestingly, this urban structure, recognised as valuable by the 1980s, was at the time of its construction condemned with the very same arguments as the prefabricated housing – its lacking any architectural quality, being merely a product of economic indicators, a simple production of floor area.

Former fields and vineyards were being rapidly developed by private investors, seeking only a business opportunity in high housing demand of a growing city (Holec and Mikota 1966, p. 144). The houses were built as cheaply as possible, some of the buildings even collapsed during construction (Ibid, p. 140). The apartments were minimal and provided only with shared amenities. The only goal was to fit as many people as possible (Zelinka 1955, p. 66).

The architects and planners at that time understood Žižkov as a „product of ruthless capitalist exploitation of land and man“ (Hruška 1974).

Not much quality was attributed to the urban plan either. Designed by the landowners themselves, business interests won over any qualitative attributes, creating the smallest city blocks so that as many plots as possible could be created (Janák 1939, p. 122).

**Results and Discussion**

Contemporary historiography usually explains the recognition of urban qualities and identity of the 19th century developments by the paradigm turn to a postmodern approach in the 1960s (Švácha 2017, p. 207; Koukalová 2017, p. 241; Roubal 2019, p. 318; Spurný 2021, p. 348), implying they are inherent to the physical structure.

The paper is challenging this notion by arguing that this perspective doesn’t take into account the collective memory of the place. There are two moments in the investigated discussion suggesting the paradigm shift cannot fully explain the entire process, but could be elucidated by the theory of collective memory.

**Žižkov as framework of collective memory**

Contemporary critique shows that the Žižkov district at the beginning of the 20th century was developed with similar motives as the prefabricated housing estates in the 1970s and 80s, with quantity being the key parameter. Yet by the 1980s, there was more quality recognised in the 19th century development than in the new housing estates.
This quality appeared as time went by. Time was needed for the identity of Žižkov to emerge as a framework of collective memory. A term coined by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1940s is one of the central notions of his theory (Halbwachs et. al. 2009).

“A central claim of the collective memory is that all individual memory is conditioned by the social groups the individual is inscribed in – the family, a profession, a religious community etc.” (Ekman 2013, p. 85). In order to understand each other we organise our memories by shared reference frameworks, defined by the community we belong to (Lehman et. al. 2014, p. 17).

“The frameworks are above all of linguistic, spatial and temporal nature” (ibid., p. 18). The linguistic frameworks ensure communication, spatial and temporal frameworks are crucial for the identity of the group, its individuality over time by a shared memories of own history (ibid.).

For example a notion of home – house, street, district – is a memory of spatial nature. It’s not a memory of a physical form, but a separate “construct of mind that is employed to localise and reconstruct other memories” (Ekman 2013, p. 6), that can exist also without the physical counterpart.

Looking back at Žižkov, the identity and urban quality ascribed to it in the discussions in the 1980s was exactly of this nature. “There are small squares with fragments of greenery, steep streets, small blocks with inner courtyards and gallery access houses of various heights. These are all specific and unmistakable features of Žižkov” („Seminář“ 1989, p. 33). The small squares and steep streets became a spatial framework of memory. The same spaces used to be condemned by the planners as they only saw a valueless space produced, because there were no memories of it, thus no identity and individuality; however, as Bergson describes (1919, p. 11-18), there are always new memories coming as time goes by.

**Missing collective memory of new developments**

The turning point in the discussion of Žižkov remodelling was actually seeing parts of it being replaced by new development. This moment shows the significant difference between a mental image of a vision versus a mental image of a physical space.

A vision or a plan is in the theory of collective memory of similar nature to a spatial framework of memory; a mental image of space generated in a reversed process – not a framework generated by a physical space, but a memory, that is supposed to constitute a future space (Ekman 2013, p. 315). As a vision, for the planning community an
image of future Žižkov always had more urban quality and better living conditions than the existing Žižkov, although they were aware of its emerging identity (Nový 1957, Štván 1960, Čelechovský 1978).

That changed significantly after they had the option to experience what actually came to replace the existing development. The identity and urban quality ascribed to the existing Žižkov district was missing in the new prefabricated housing (“Seminář“ 1989, p. 57).

Frameworks of memory don’t emerge simultaneously with the physical space, they require time. At first, the materialised vision is in confrontation with the existing spatial frameworks of memory, the notion of stability and continuity of everyone involved is altered (Halbwachs et. al. 2009, p. 185). At that point, the vision of the future fades and the existing Žižkov has more identity and urban quality that the prefabricated housing.

Conclusions

As much as any urban area may report specific, often measurable deficits that should be addressed, the example of Žižkov shows that lack of identity or urban quality, for which large portions of urban area are being condemned (Christ et. al. 2012, p. 7), is not necessarily one of them.

As the theory of collective memory suggests, identity is a matter of time and emerges as the materiality and space find their way into collective memory as its framework. Further research should focus on finding more evidence proving what the example of Žižkov indicates happens in a process of emerging identity.

Footnotes

[1] Compare to Janák (1939, p. 122): “The blocks are absurdly irregular, the poor little squares are scraps of space, the streets run up, down the slopes. Altogether, Žižkov has created an environment that, to our astonishment, is not lacking picturesque-ness, but is pathetic.”

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