

Thinking beyond the material: the discursive production of post-communist urban space

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Defining the gap

- The tangible, material dimensions of contemporary post-communist urban transformations have been widely studied by social scientists
- Comparatively less has been written about the manner in which ideological, discursive and political **imaginations** of urban space influence, and are influenced by, the production of post-communist cityscapes



What is 'discourse'?

- A system of statements and practices of representation that defines meaning and reasoning (Hall, 1997; Lefebvre, 1974/91)
- **In the post-communist urban context:** the manner in which the media, experts, politicians, policy-makers and residents use images, texts, language etc. when referring to new socio-spatial formations



The key question ...

- How might discourses be implicated in the rise of new socio-spatial formations in post-communist cities?
- Why does this matter?



The 'enlightened' suburb

- Individual freedom and choice
- Escape from the social mix of post-communist housing estates
- Clean, peaceful, well-organised: getting back in touch with nature
- Auto-mobility



New suburban housing estate in Katowice

Source: www.4321.co.il

BUT:

Lack of critical attention

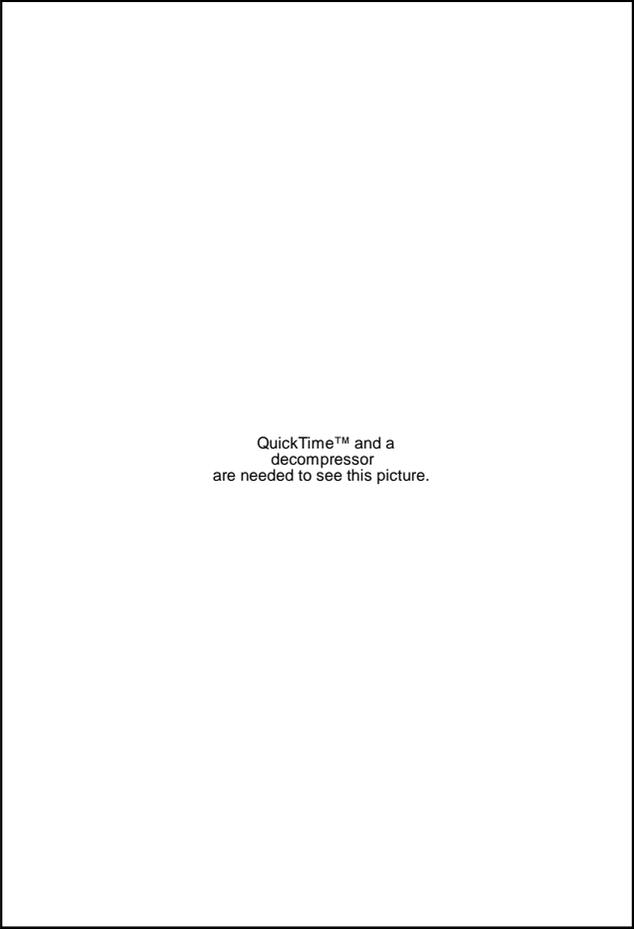
**Discursive production of values and aspirations
remains unexplored**

The 'passive' and 'stagnating' inner city

- Press representation of working-class areas in Poland (Stenning, 2005):
 - 'feckless'
 - 'dependent'
 - 'passive'
 - 'lacking entrepreneurship'
 - 'unable to adapt to the new economic situation'
- Consistent with early analyses of post-communist urban change

BUT:

What is the role of the press, politicians and experts in creating new spaces of exclusion?



QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

Inner-city Krakow

Source: <http://foto.westu.info/>

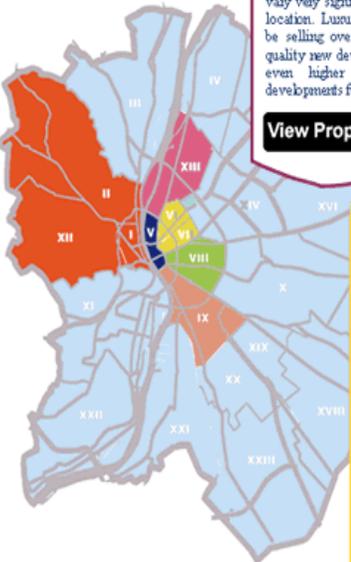
The 'sexy' urban core

Example: parts of the historical centre of Budapest described as:

- 'the district of business and trade'
- 'the district of dynamism and renewal'
- 'where the city's finest sleep'
- 'district of great potentials', etc.

BUT:

What are the political and economic interests behind these particular representations?



Where the City's Finest Sleep

The hills of Buda have traditionally been the favourite neighbourhood of the well-to-do. The best places have a beautiful view of the city or the woods, and very often have a garden that already looks like a park – just ten minutes drive from the city centre.

However this area is usually fully priced and there is a limited room for growth.

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District of Business and Trade

This district has shown the most impressive change in the last 15 years. The run down factory sites have been replaced by office buildings and shopping malls and new residential developments are aiming the people doing business here. Its a huge area and there is still a lot of potential for growth.

This district is one of the biggest and prices vary very significantly depending on the actual location. Luxurious riverside apartments may be selling over two times the price of good quality new developments a few streets in, and even higher premium over other new developments further from the city centre.

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District of Culture and Tradition

Truly downtown area with a lot of potentials. Grand Boulevards with fine restaurants, cafes, shops, theatres, and side streets with traditional residential areas. The new developments and rehabilitation projects here mix the old with new and defining a new urban quality of life.

Property prices vary quite significantly within the district. The inner parts of these districts are the most expensive downtown areas after District 5 and riverside locations but still provide a good growth potential. On the other hand, these apartments can be rented out very easily ensuring constant rental income to the investor.

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The heart of Budapest

Undoubtedly District 5 is historically the most expensive area of Budapest. The buildings are similar in design to those in the inner Districts 6, 7 and 8, however price per square metre here can easily be 20-30% higher than in neighbouring districts.

The result is that prices are now too high for the vast majority of Hungarians.

What led to an influx of non-Hungarian buyers is presumably the district's centrality, exclusivity, richness of monumental attractions, closeness of the Danube and the relatively good condition of many of the blocks, all for a bargain compared to prices at home.

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District of Dynamism and Renewal

The District has arguably led the way in Budapest's inner-city redevelopment. This explains to an extent why the district has attracted a larger number of foreign property investors last year than any other part of the city.

The rise of average price per square meter of residential properties in this district has been the most dynamic in the capital. The property purchase agreements concluded between January 2000 and January 2003 indicate a nominal value increase of 83% for this period. According to the analyses the appreciation experienced earlier will continue at the same pace for the next 4-5 years to come.

Average prices per square metre are still at least 30% discount to the same quality apartments in district 6 and 7, however riverside penthouse apartments – like in District 13 - are sold over two times the district average prices.

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District of Great Potentials

The new flats being constructed, not just in rehabilitation areas but across the middle of the district, are some of the cheapest new-build in the city. Several developers are offering new flats, not far from the city centre for with 20-40% discount compared to the neighbouring District 9 or less than half price to more prestigious areas.

The other factor beside the rehabilitation program which brings a high capital appreciation potential to the District is the realisation of the 4th Metro line which is planned to be up and running by 2010. This metro line will run through District 8 making the area easily accessible from other parts of the city.

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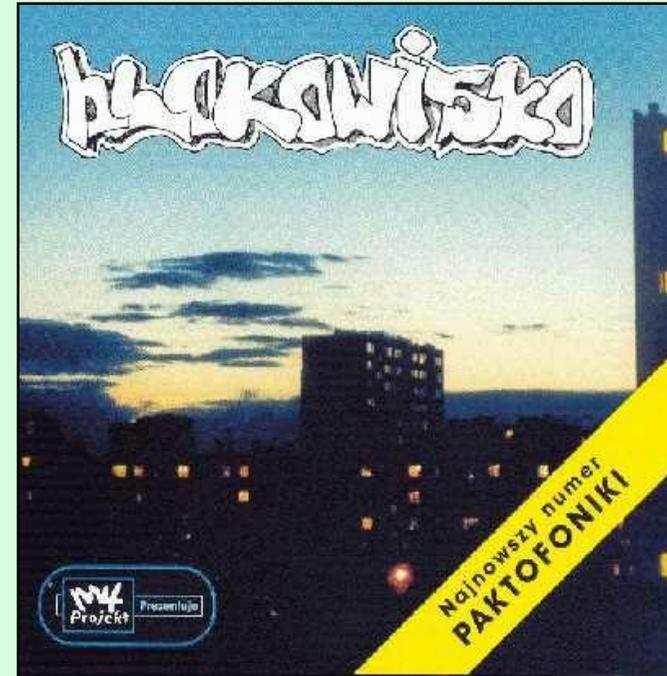
<http://www.sunshineestates.net>

Controversial socialist housing estates

- 'the slums of the 21st century' (Szelenyi, 1996)?
- Culturally iconic
- Seen in an increasingly favourable light
- Upscale infill developments

BUT:

- **How have representations of urban space shaped, and been shaped by the residential attractiveness of such areas?**



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Bretowska Brama

<http://ii.forum.mojeosiedle.pl>

We should study discourses in the post-communist urban settings because:

- We lack a common framework to understand them
- They are 'sunk' in relations of power and have major social justice implications
- They are path-shaping (result in inefficient lock-ins)
- We produce them ourselves!

