

From community space to no man's land? – The use of public space by vulnerable social groups in post-socialist housing estates. A case from Budapest, Hungary

A key issue in the design and development of cities, neighbourhoods and residential areas is what kind of living conditions and quality of life they provide for the local community. It is no coincidence that a major area of research in urban studies is the development of space utilisation (Jacobs, 1961; Lefebvre, 1991; Gehl, 2010; Montgomery, 2007; Sepe, 2025). Ideally, urban space should be a socially inclusive territorial unit. Spatial inclusion in the urban environment refers to the process and state in which all social groups are guaranteed equal access to urban spaces, services and opportunities, as well as the opportunity to participate in their design and use (Patrick & McKinnon, 2022).

Large housing estates are obvious areas of research in terms of community space, space utilisation, spatial inclusion and mobility. Keeping in mind that in post-socialist cities of Central and Eastern Europe, large housing estates became dominant features of post-war housing development and housing estates represent a significant part of the local housing stock, a more thorough examination of space utilisation in housing estates is certainly warranted. Especially because these housing estates satisfy the needs of a great variety of socio-economic groups, mainly the less affluent segments of society (Kovács, et al. 2018).

The construction of large housing estates in the communist bloc of Central and Eastern Europe, dominated by the former Soviet Union, was influenced not only by the housing shortage but also by political ideology. One of the main promises of the communist system was the right to affordable housing and access to free community services for all. Although the rejection of any architectural/urban planning ideas originating from beyond the Iron Curtain was a matter of principle, the Soviet Union adapted Clarence Perry's concept of neighbourhood units under the name "rayon theory" (Gogishvili, et al., 2017; Perry 1998), and its guidelines lived on as major organisational principles in post-World War II housing estates constructed as part of housing development programmes in Communist countries (Hirt, 2012). The importance of community life was a key message of the political system, and the specific function, size and design of public spaces were also the focus of attention for designers (Kalm, et al., 2023). As the importance of community life was an important message of the political system, open spaces were also well designed and intensively used. Thanks to all this, the public spaces of large housing estates in former socialist countries were particularly inclusive and not exclusionary.

The change of regime brought significant changes in ownership and the composition of housing estate communities. Due to trends in the housing market, large housing estates in Hungary and Budapest have become gathering places for the lower middle class over the past three decades (Kovács et al 2018). The political system that promoted respectable communist morality and the liberation that came with the end of central control also led to significant changes in the use of space. Nevertheless, the inherited built environment and the physical characteristics of the spaces between buildings have not fundamentally changed.

Under state socialist planning, large housing estates were built as inclusive, community-centred environments. These spaces were particularly safe for women and children, reinforced by intense social control and close neighbourhood ties. Our study examines the transformation and use of public spaces in post-socialist housing estates, with a particular focus on vulnerable social groups. The research sample area was the central housing estate of Budapest-Pesterzsébet (20th district). The research is based on a complex methodology; in addition to secondary methods, we conducted quantitative and qualitative primary research

(resident questionnaire survey, walking interviews - in-depth field interviews, mental map studies, and mapping of pedestrian movement patterns).

According to our findings, housing estates and their public spaces are not inclusive environments in terms of how the population uses space today. Feelings of exclusion are also generated by the poor model of space use. Public spaces that give the impression of being abandoned and underused increase the feeling of insecurity and further select the circle of space users, excluding more vulnerable groups (Perrigo et al., 2025). In this regard, our general conclusion is that public spaces must also respond flexibly to environmental and social changes, which did not happen in the housing estate under study.

Overall, the results of the research indicate that the general sense of security in public spaces in housing estates is favourable and that the assessment of public safety is generally positive. Although the results of the questionnaire survey show that the difference between men and women is less pronounced in the under-25 age group, the results obtained using qualitative methods paint a more nuanced picture. According to these results, women, young people and parents with small children avoid the internal pedestrian routes that cut through housing estates and prefer traditional streets with heavy motor vehicle traffic.

The carefully planned, segregated traffic system and protected green spaces of housing estates have now lost their community-building role. The loss of function of previously intensively used community spaces, the lack of personalisation and the weakening of social relationships directly contribute to a deterioration in the sense of security, especially among women. International research clearly supports the view that fear-related behaviour patterns stem not primarily from an objective fear of crime, but from weak social cohesion in the residential environment (Sampson et al., 1997; Ferraro, 1995). Liveable and safe public spaces are not merely the result of physical interventions, but are closely linked to the functioning of local communities and the strength of social relations (Moreno, 2024).

The development of large, unstructured, often poorly controlled and therefore unsafe public spaces into areas with specific uses (outdoor barbecue, community garden, playground for teenagers, etc.) has several advantages. Community content can return to public spaces that are increasingly becoming "no man's land", allowing these areas to regain their community-building and strengthening role, thus allowing a responsible and caring attitude to regain ground. The impact of community control over public spaces that are put back into use can also spill over into the wider environment. By putting the area back into use (revitalising it) and filling it with living functions, control and, through this, public safety will also improve (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023).