

SOCIALIST URBAN LEGACIES AND CONTEMPORARY MORPHOLOGIES: HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN EASTERN SKOPJE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the spatial and institutional transformation of Eastern Skopje, with a focus on Aerodrom Municipality, in the context of post-socialist urban change. Drawing on archival plans, policy documents, and spatial analysis, the study explores how socialist-era planning principles—such as standardized housing typologies, micro district-based zoning, and collective infrastructure—continue to shape the city’s urban morphology. Framed through the urban mosaic approach, the research highlights the enduring influence of path dependency and institutional fragmentation. Findings show that despite attempts at modernization through liberal planning instruments and visual upgrades, post-socialist interventions often exacerbate spatial fragmentation and overlook structural legacies. The study contributes to critical urban theory by offering a historically grounded analysis of transformation in transitional urban contexts and calls for a planning paradigm that integrates inherited spatial structures with contemporary governance challenges.

Keywords: Post-socialist urbanism, Socialist planning heritage, Urban morphology, East Skopje, Urban mosaic theory

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SOSYALİST KENTSEL MİRASLAR VE ÇAĞDAŞ MORFOLOJİLER: DOĞU ÜSKÜP'TEKİ KENTSEL DÖNÜŞÜMÜN TARİHSEL ANALİZİ

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ÖZET

Bu makale, sosyalizm sonrası kentsel değişim bağlamında Aerodrom Belediyesi'ne odaklanarak Doğu Üsküp'ün mekânsal ve kurumsal dönüşümünü incelemektedir. Arşiv planları, politika belgeleri ve mekânsal analizlerden faydalanan çalışma, standartlaştırılmış konut tipolojileri, mikro bölge temelli bölgeleme ve kolektif altyapı gibi sosyalist dönem planlama ilkelerinin kentin kentsel morfolojisini nasıl şekillendirmeye devam ettiğini araştırıyor. Kentsel mozaik yaklaşımıyla çerçevelenen araştırma, yol bağımlılığının ve kurumsal parçalanmanın kalıcı etkisini vurgulamaktadır. Bulgular, liberal planlama araçları ve görsel iyileştirmeler yoluyla modernleşme girişimlerine rağmen, sosyalizm sonrası müdahalelerin genellikle mekânsal parçalanmayı şiddetlendirdiğini ve yapısal mirasları göz ardı ettiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, geçiş dönemindeki kentsel bağlamlarda dönüşümün tarihsel temelli bir analizini sunarak eleştirel kent teorisine katkıda bulunmakta ve miras alınan mekânsal yapıları çağdaş yönetim sorunlarıyla bütünleştiren bir planlama paradigması çağrısında bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Post-sosyalist şehircilik, Sosyalist planlama mirası, Kentsel morfoloji, Doğu Üsküp, Kentsel mozaik teorisi

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban transformation in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe has produced a diverse and often contradictory set of spatial, institutional, and morphological outcomes. Following the collapse of state socialism in the early 1990s, cities across the region began a complex transition away from centrally planned governance and collective welfare-based urbanism toward market-oriented development and decentralized governance structures. This shift redefined how cities were conceived, planned, and experienced. Yet, despite the introduction of new policy frameworks and liberal economic mechanisms, much of the built fabric and institutional logic of the socialist era has persisted, challenging notions of rupture and replacement that often dominate discourses on post-socialist urbanism (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006; Tosics, 2005).

This article focuses on **Eastern Skopje**, and specifically **Aerodrom Municipality**, as a critical case for understanding the historical continuity and emerging contradictions of post-socialist spatial transformation. Developed as part of Skopje's reconstruction following the 1963 earthquake, Aerodrom was designed in accordance with Yugoslav socialist planning principles: a rational, zoned, and standardized spatial framework featuring prefabricated housing, integrated public amenities, and generous open spaces (Lazarevska & Markoski, 2019). It followed the tenets of the 1965 Basic Urban Plan, which envisioned a polycentric city organized into self-contained micro districts. These spatial forms were not merely functional but deeply ideological intended to support collective life, spatial equality, and the social reproduction of the socialist citizen (Hirt, 2012).

In the decades since socialism's collapse, Aerodrom has undergone significant material and regulatory transformations. Housing privatization, the retreat of centralized governance, and speculative urban development have reconfigured the district's spatial and institutional dynamics. Yet, these changes have occurred unevenly and often without dismantling the foundational structures of the socialist city. Instead, post-socialist Aerodrom is marked by **layered contradictions**: privatized buildings embedded in collectively designed neighborhoods; informal modifications appended to standardized block typologies; and modern façade renovations applied to decaying infrastructural cores. This condition reflects what Murawski (2019) calls the "still-socialist material base"—a spatial and ideological substrate that continues to influence urban form, governance practices, and residents' lived experience.

This article argues that the transformation of Aerodrom cannot be understood as a clear break from its socialist past. Rather, it is best approached through the lens of the **urban mosaic** framework (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006), which conceptualizes urban space as a fragmented but interrelated patchwork of inherited forms and emergent dynamics. This mosaic includes both tangible elements—such as block morphology and land-use zoning—and intangible forces, such as path dependency, governance inertia, and symbolic spatial memory. Within this framework, Aerodrom exemplifies a hybrid post-socialist landscape shaped by institutional fragmentation, informal spatial negotiations, and unresolved planning contradictions.

The aims of this study are threefold:

To trace the spatial and institutional evolution of Aerodrom from its socialist origins to its current post-socialist condition.

To identify the material and ideological legacies that persist in contemporary urban morphology, governance, and design practice.

To evaluate recent planning interventions in Aerodrom regarding their capacity to address or reproduce inherited spatial challenges.

To achieve these aims, the article combines **archival research**, **policy analysis**, and **visual-spatial interpretation**. It draws on primary planning documents—including the 1965 Basic Urban Plan and later General Urban Plans from 2002 and 2012—as well as secondary literature on socialist and post-socialist planning, governance, and urban morphology. Aerodrom is used here not only as a case study but also as a site for developing and refining theoretical arguments about **post-socialist path dependency**, **institutional adaptation**, and **the re-politicization of space**.

The paper is organized into five sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 presents a literature review, engaging with debates on socialist urban legacies, post-socialist governance fragmentation, and the urban mosaic framework. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach, including archival review, spatial mapping, and qualitative synthesis. Section 4 presents the findings, examining Aerodrom's historical development, its transformation after 1990, and recent planning efforts. Section 5 offers a discussion that ties together the empirical and theoretical strands, analyzing how continuity, contradiction, and compromise define Aerodrom's post-socialist morphology. The article concludes with reflections on planning implications and future directions for research.

This study makes several contributions. Empirically, it provides a historically grounded analysis of spatial change in a key district of Skopje. Conceptually, it advances the urban mosaic framework by applying it to some concrete, layered urban context. Methodologically, it combines spatial and institutional analysis in a way that bridges urban morphology and governance studies. Finally, it contributes to broader post-socialist urban theory by showing how the transformation of space is always a **negotiated process**, not a linear shift from “old” to “new,” but a mosaic of overlapping logics, priorities, and identities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The urban transformation of cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) following the collapse of socialism has generated a rich body of scholarship that interrogates how political, economic, and ideological transitions have reshaped the built environment. Much of this literature acknowledges that post-socialist urbanism cannot be characterized by a simple shift from central planning to free-market governance; instead, it entails a layered and contradictory process shaped by historical legacies, institutional discontinuities, and emergent spatial practices (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006; Hirt, 2012).

This literature review outlines four key strands of debate relevant to the case of Aerodrom Municipality: (1) the logics of socialist urban planning; (2) post-socialist governance fragmentation and spatial restructuring; (3) path dependency and institutional inertia; and (4) the urban mosaic as a conceptual framework for understanding contemporary urban morphology in transitional cities.

2.1 Socialist Urban Planning: Ideology, Form, and Function

The urban planning paradigms employed in socialist states were ideologically grounded and highly centralized. Rooted in Marxist-Leninist principles, urban planning during socialism was not merely a technical endeavour but a tool for social engineering (Stanilov, 2007). Cities were to embody the values of equality, collective welfare, and rational organization, resulting in urban forms that privileged standardization, functionality, and equitable access to public services.

In the Yugoslav context, urban planning was shaped by a unique model of self-managed socialism, which blended centralized vision with decentralized execution (Petrovski, 2019). This produced planning documents like the 1965 Basic Urban Plan (BUP) for Skopje, which envisioned the city as a polycentric, functionally zoned capital structured around micro districts. Each micro district was designed as a self-sufficient unit, containing prefabricated slab block housing, educational and healthcare facilities, and green space—all within walking distance (Lazarevska & Markoski, 2019). These spaces were deliberately anti-capitalist in form: uniform in height, publicly owned, and devoid of commercial display.

As Hirt (2012) argues, these environments were intended to spatialize the socialist subject. Planning was deeply moralistic, viewing market-based spatial differentiation as inherently unequal. Instead, spatial homogeneity was celebrated as a marker of social progress. However, this homogeneity also imposed rigidity, reducing flexibility in land-use and blocking organic urban evolution.

2.2 Post-Socialist Urbanism: Governance Fragmentation and Market Logics

With the collapse of socialist regimes in the early 1990s, cities in the CEE region were thrust into a period of rapid liberalization. Urban space—once tightly regulated by state plans—became the site of overlapping and often conflicting claims by private capital, devolved municipal governments, and informal actors. This governance fragmentation profoundly affected planning capacity, particularly in peripheral districts and former industrial zones (Tosics, 2005).

One of the defining features of post-socialist urbanism is the reduction of state control over land and infrastructure. In place of centralized planning, cities experienced ad hoc governance, wherein private developers and municipal authorities negotiated zoning decisions without consistent legal oversight (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012). The withdrawal of the state from housing provision and infrastructure maintenance further fragmented spatial coherence, producing uneven development patterns within and between municipalities.

This period also saw a redefinition of property regimes. The privatization of state housing—often offered at subsidized rates—transferred maintenance responsibilities to individuals and homeowners'

associations that were frequently under-resourced or non-existent (Tsenkova, 2012). This led to the physical deterioration of socialist-era housing stock and a decline in the collective ethos that had governed spatial use under socialism.

Hirt (2012) documents the spatial consequences of this transition in cities like Sofia, where once-unified blocks have become fragmented by informal commercial encroachments and individual modifications. Similar processes have been noted in Skopje, where façade renovations, informal retail, and speculative infill have undermined the original planning logic of micro districts (Petrovski, 2019).

2.3 Urban Heritage as Cultural Practice

Beyond the material remains of socialist urbanism, the notion of urban heritage must also be approached as a cultural and political construct. As Laurajane Smith (2006) argues, heritage is not simply a collection of old buildings or preserved artifacts—it is a discursive practice that reflects contemporary values, power relations, and identity formations. In post-socialist cities, this means that the spatial legacies of socialism are constantly reinterpreted, revalued, or discarded in accordance with shifting ideological and economic priorities.

In the context of Aerodrom, the functional and symbolic dimensions of inherited urban form intersect housing blocks, central courtyards, and green corridors are not just utilitarian spaces, but also markers of collective memory, class identity, and political transition. However, their continued use—or abandonment—is often influenced by their aesthetic associations, perceived modernity, or compatibility with emerging capitalist norms. This produces a process of instrumentalization of heritage, wherein built form is selectively preserved, erased, or reinvented to serve new development agendas (Harrison, 2013; Pendlebury, 2015).

Thus, understanding socialist urbanism as “heritage” demands more than preservation policies; it requires sensitivity to the symbolic re-coding of space and to the cultural politics that shape what is remembered, what is discarded, and why. This framing supports the argument that Aerodrom's transformation is not only spatial but deeply ideological mediated by competing narratives of progress, nostalgia, and legitimacy.

2.4 Path Dependency and Institutional Inertia

The concept of path dependency has been central to recent attempts to theorize urban transformation in post-socialist contexts. Path dependency suggests that the spatial and institutional structures established under socialism continue to shape post-socialist urbanism—not merely as material remnants, but as active constraints on future planning choices (Golubchikov, 2010).

In the built environment, this means that the morphology of micro districts, the positioning of infrastructure, and even social expectations around housing persist well after the formal institutions that produced them have collapsed. Tosics (2005) notes that although land ownership regimes have changed,

the physical layout of socialist-era neighborhoods has proven resistant to radical restructuring. The costs—both financial and political—of demolishing or retrofitting these large-scale environments often outweigh the perceived benefits.

Institutionally, the legacy of state-directed planning has left many municipal governments ill-equipped to operate in market-based contexts. Although responsibilities for spatial planning were devolved to local governments, these bodies frequently lack the resources, expertise, or political will to enforce long-term development strategies (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006). As a result, planning has become reactive rather than strategic, and development is often driven by short-term incentives rather than long-term spatial coherence.

In the case of Aerodrom, these dynamics have resulted in a hybrid planning environment: the physical grid and typology of the micro district remain intact, but they are overlaid with informal adaptations, speculative development, and fragmented governance. The result is a condition that Murawski (2019) describes as the “still-socialist material base”—a spatial field in which past and present collide in often contradictory ways.

2.5 The Urban Mosaic: Interpreting Transitional Urban Space

Given the complexity of these transformations, scholars have increasingly turned to metaphorical and hybrid frameworks to understand post-socialist cities. One of the most influential is the concept of the urban mosaic, developed by Tsenkova and Nedović-Budić (2006). This framework emphasizes that urban change in transitional contexts is best understood as a layered and multifaceted process where diverse planning logics, spatial forms, and governance structures coexist.

The urban mosaic allows for an analytical approach that recognizes both continuity and disruption, structure and informality, coherence, and contradiction. It resists the temptation to categorize post-socialist cities as either failed attempts at modernization or incomplete neoliberal experiments. Instead, it frames them as negotiated terrains—sites of ongoing interaction between institutional history, spatial legacy, and emergent urban practices.

Applied to Aerodrom, this framework illuminates the coexistence of socialist-era planning logics (e.g., zoned public housing, integrated services) with post-socialist interventions (e.g., façade makeovers, informal commercial infill). It also captures the scalar and temporal diversity of transformation: while macro-level planning documents articulate visions of modernization, micro-level adaptations often respond to immediate, localized needs.

Moreover, the urban mosaic framework enables planners and scholars to see the urban legacy not as a constraint, but as a resource for critical engagement. By understanding how past planning logics continue to influence spatial practices and social expectations, it becomes possible to design interventions that build on rather than overwrite historical structures.

2.6 Summary

This literature review has outlined the key theoretical and empirical debates shaping contemporary understandings of post-socialist urban transformation. Socialist urbanism left behind not just buildings and infrastructure, but institutional norms, spatial codes, and ideological imprints that continue to shape the development of cities like Skopje. The post-socialist period has introduced new actors, logics, and forms, but these have not erased the past—they have layered new complexities atop old foundations.

The case of Aerodrom offers a unique opportunity to apply these insights. As a district planned under Yugoslav socialism and transformed under post-socialist governance, it embodies the core tensions described in the literature: between order and improvisation, between formal planning and informal adaptation, between continuity and rupture. In the sections that follow, this article builds on these theoretical foundations to explore how Aerodrom's urban morphology has evolved—and what it reveals about the challenges and possibilities of planning in post-socialist cities.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, historically grounded methodology aimed at tracing the spatial, institutional, and morphological transformation of Aerodrom Municipality in Eastern Skopje. The methodology is structured around three interrelated components: (1) archival and policy document analysis; (2) morphological and visual analysis of the urban form; and (3) interpretive application of the urban mosaic framework as a conceptual tool. Together, these methods support a multi-scalar and diachronic analysis of the case, illuminating how socialist urban legacies continue to shape the dynamics of contemporary spatial production and governance.

3.1 Case Study Selection: Aerodrom Municipality

Aerodrom Municipality is selected as a critical case within the broader context of post-socialist urban transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Its relevance stems from its origins in the 1965 Basic Urban Plan for Skopje, which emerged after the city's post-earthquake reconstruction and represented one of the most ambitious applications of socialist planning principles in Yugoslavia (Lazarevska & Markoski, 2019). Designed as a residential extension of the capital, Aerodrom was structured through a micro district layout, prioritizing standardized housing, integrated services, green buffers, and functional zoning.

Today, Aerodrom presents a uniquely layered spatial condition: while the morphological legacy of socialist planning remains intact, the district has experienced extensive post-socialist restructuring, including mass housing privatization, informal spatial practices, and speculative development (Petrovski, 2019). These dynamics render Aerodrom a productive site for analyzing how urban planning ideologies, spatial codes, and governance structures interact in a post-socialist context.

As a spatial unit, Aerodrom provides a manageable yet richly illustrative case that demonstrates the coexistence of inherited and emergent urban forms, making it especially suitable for the application of the urban mosaic framework (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006).

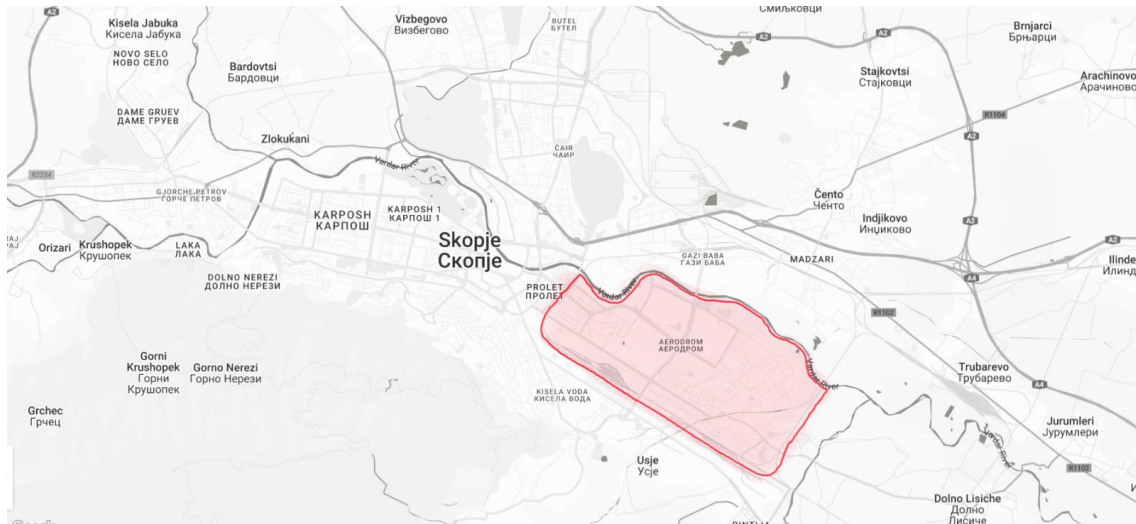


Figure 1. Geographical location and administrative boundaries of Aerodrom Municipality within the City of Skopje (Source: Author, based on Google Maps, 2024).

3.2 Archival and Policy Document Analysis

The first methodological step involves an in-depth review of archival and contemporary planning documents that have shaped the development trajectory of Aerodrom. These include:

The 1965 Basic Urban Plan (BUP) developed after the Skopje earthquake.

Amendments and detailed regulation plans from the 1985 Plan Review.

The General Urban Plan (GUP) 2002, and its update, GUP 2012, issued by the City of Skopje.

Supplementary municipal planning documents, land-use regulations, and official reports from the Aerodrom Municipal Council.

These documents are analysed using content analysis techniques aimed at identifying shifts in planning rationales, zoning priorities, and design intentions across time. Particular attention is paid to how these plans conceptualized density, housing typology, green space, and functional separation, and how subsequent documents responded—or failed to respond—to the evolving needs of the district. This approach enables the identification of continuities and ruptures between the socialist and post-socialist planning paradigms.

Archival sources are supplemented by secondary literature on urban planning in Skopje and comparable post-socialist cities to contextualize the case within regional planning history and transformation trends.

3.3 Morphological and Visual-Spatial Analysis

To interpret changes in the physical form of Aerodrom, the study employs morphological analysis, informed by principles of urban design and urban geography. This includes the study of:

Block configuration and building typologies, with comparisons between original slab-block structures and post-1990 infill developments.

Land use patterns, focusing on the conversion of green space, the erosion of service facilities, and emerging commercial uses.

Vertical and horizontal expansion, noting trends in building height, plot subdivisions, and densification.

Visual data—including historical maps, planning schematics, satellite imagery, and field photographs—are synthesized to compare original urban layouts with contemporary alterations. Changes are interpreted in terms of their implications for spatial coherence, functionality, and social accessibility.

Visual-spatial analysis is used to assess whether recent interventions have followed the logic of the original micro district planning or have introduced **incongruous elements** that undermine spatial legibility and collective use (Hirt, 2012). This process reveals both the **resilience and fragmentation** of the socialist-era spatial logic in Aerodrom's current urban form.

3.4 Interpretive Framework: Urban Mosaic as Analytical Lens

The interpretive component of the methodology applies the **urban mosaic framework** to synthesize empirical findings within a broader theoretical context. This framework conceptualizes post-socialist urban space as a **composite of overlapping spatial and institutional regimes**, shaped by contradictory legacies and emergent dynamics (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006).

Using this lens, spatial and institutional observations in Aerodrom are read not as symptoms of failed transformation, but as manifestations of a complex, negotiated evolution. For example, the co-presence of privatized housing and communal spatial infrastructures is interpreted as a hybrid condition rather than a deviation from normative planning ideals.

The urban mosaic approach enables an **interpretive analysis** that accounts for:

Institutional continuity and fragmentation.

Coexisting formal and informal practices.

Temporal layering of spatial interventions.

Competing visions of publicness, access, and modernity.

Rather than seeking a teleological narrative of progress or decay, this methodology embraces the **multi-temporal, multi-scalar, and multi-actor dynamics** that characterize Aerodrom's spatial condition.

3.5 Limitations and Scope

The study acknowledges several limitations. First, the scope is limited to a single municipality within Skopje, which may limit generalizability. However, as a **critical case**, Aerodrom offers transferable insights into broader processes of post-socialist spatial transformation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Second, the study relies primarily on qualitative and visual data, as quantitative housing or demographic datasets at the micro district level remain limited or inaccessible. Third, while informal practices are interpreted from visible modifications and public records, **ethnographic or interview-based insights** into resident motivations are not included in the current scope and are proposed as a future research direction.

3.6 Summary

This methodology combines archival, spatial, and interpretive methods to offer a layered analysis of urban transformation in Aerodrom Municipality. Through content analysis of planning documents, morphological mapping, and the application of the urban mosaic framework, the study seeks to reveal how **planning ideologies, built forms, and governance regimes** intersect to shape the lived experience of post-socialist urbanism. This approach emphasizes both continuity and contradiction, offering a multi-dimensional perspective on the challenges and possibilities of urban governance in transitional contexts.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of this study are organized into three chronological and thematic sub-sections that reflect Aerodrom Municipality's urban transformation across distinct socio-political regimes. These are: (1) the socialist planning period (1965–1990); (2) the early post-socialist transition (1990–2010); and (3) recent urban developments and planning contradictions (2010–present). The analysis focuses on the persistence and reconfiguration of spatial forms, the transformation of institutional frameworks, and the layering of contradictory planning ideologies within the built environment.

4.1 Aerodrom as a Product of Socialist Planning

Aerodrom's urban morphology is deeply rooted in the logic of socialist-era planning, especially as outlined in the 1965 Basic Urban Plan for Skopje. The district was developed as part of a large-scale, internationally supported reconstruction effort following the 1963 earthquake. The BUP, led by Doxiadis Associates and Polservice (Poland), presented a vision of Skopje as a **polycentric and functionally zoned city**, with Aerodrom located in the eastern sector as a residential expansion zone (Lazarevska & Markoski, 2019). Aerodrom's layout was organized into **micro districts (mikrorayons)**, designed to support 4,000–7,000 inhabitants per unit. Each micro district was anchored by a cluster of mid-rise slab block housing (typically 4–6 storeys) constructed using prefabricated panel technology. These blocks were arranged orthogonally and interspersed with large green spaces, pedestrian walkways, and service cores that included schools, clinics, markets, and community centres. Traffic was managed through a **hierarchical road network**, ensuring the separation of pedestrian and vehicular flows—a hallmark of modernist planning.

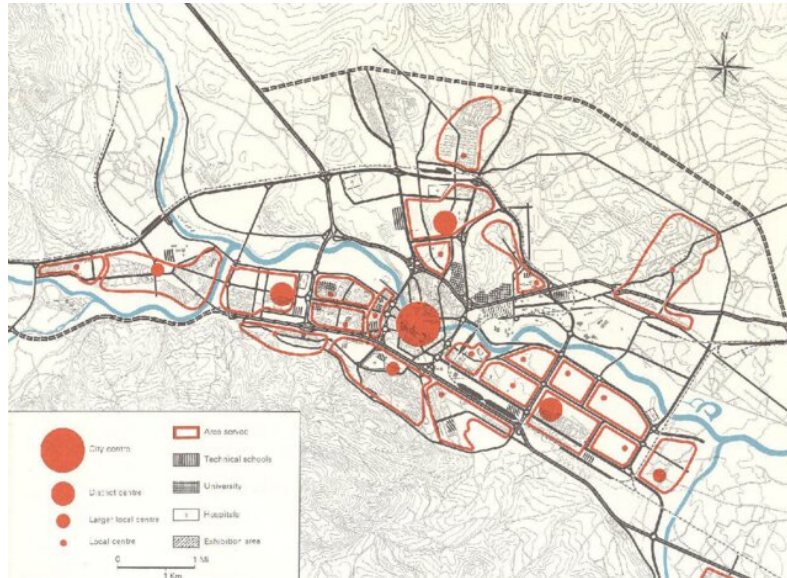


Figure 2. Schematic representation of Skopje's planned urban hierarchy under the 1965 Master Plan (Doxiadis Associates, "Master Plan for Skopje", 1965).

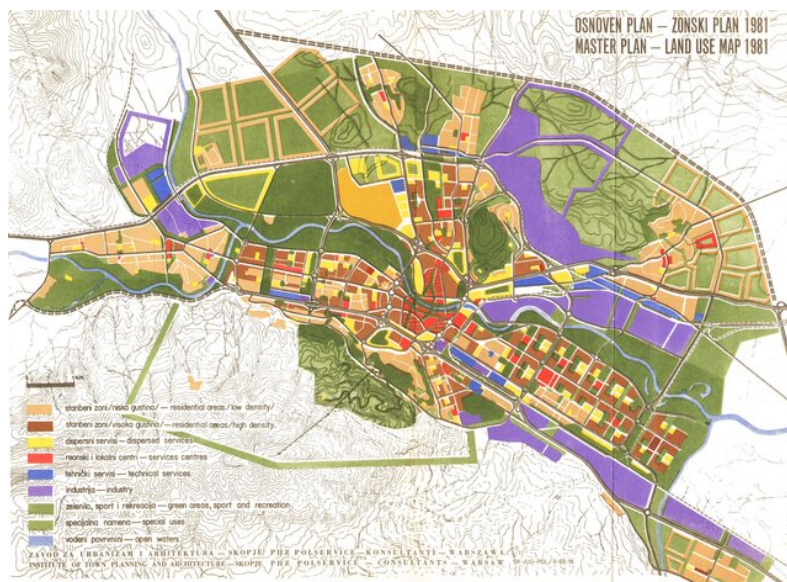


Figure 3. Master land use plan of Skopje, 1981, showing residential zoning, service centers, and large-scale green corridors ("Report on Master Plan for Skopje," 1981).

This spatial model embodied the **ideological tenets of Yugoslav socialism**, which prioritized equitable access to housing, non-hierarchical spatial arrangements, and collective service provision (Petrovski, 2019). Importantly, the design of Aerodrom was not only functional but symbolic. Its uniform building

heights, rhythmic grid, and integration of public amenities sought to **produce a new socialist subject** by structuring everyday life around collective infrastructure and communal rhythms (Hirt, 2012). The state held full ownership over land and building stock, and housing was allocated through a socially managed system based on employment, family size, and political standing. In this context, space was not a commodity but a public good. Maintenance and infrastructure were managed by centralized utilities and housing associations, ensuring a consistent urban standard across the municipality.

4.2 Transition and Fragmentation: Post-1990 Spatial Shifts

The collapse of Yugoslavia and the broader shift toward market liberalization in the early 1990s fundamentally altered the institutional and spatial landscape of Aerodrom. Key among these changes was the **mass privatization of residential housing**, conducted via legislation that allowed tenants to purchase their formerly state-owned flats at heavily subsidized rates. While this transition increased private ownership and created a housing market, it simultaneously dismantled the collective governance structures that had maintained infrastructure and shared amenities (Tsenkova, 2012).

This shift introduced **spatial fragmentation** into the previously cohesive micro district model. Without centralized management, many buildings fell into disrepair. Homeowners' associations, where they existed at all, were underfunded and often ineffective. Communal spaces—such as courtyards, playgrounds, and green corridors—suffered from neglect or became sites of informal appropriation by residents seeking to extend their private domain.

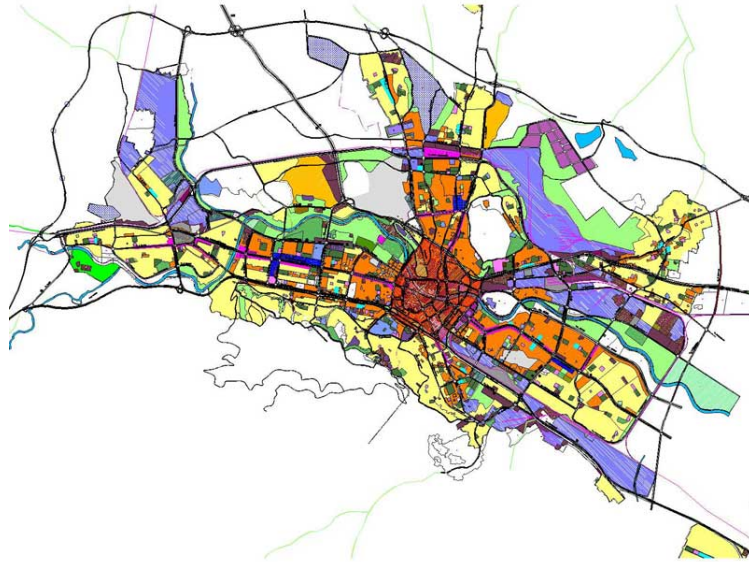


Figure 4. General Urban Plan (GUP) of Skopje in 2002, showing functional diversification and infrastructure expansion during the post-socialist transition. (Urban Planning Institute of Skopje, GUP 2002).

Additionally, the decentralization of planning authority led to significant **governance gaps**. Responsibility for zoning and building permits was transferred to municipal governments, such as Aerodrom Municipality, which often lacked the resources or institutional capacity to guide long-term development (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006). This opened the door to **investor-led redevelopment**, particularly along arterial roads and previously vacant or underused plots within the micro district fabric.

Infill development during this period was often **incongruent with the socialist-era morphology**. New structures violated established building heights, disrupted visual rhythms, and encroached upon open spaces originally intended for collective use. In many cases, developers used legal ambiguities and informal agreements to bypass zoning restrictions, resulting in buildings that were physically and functionally disconnected from their surroundings.

This period also witnessed the **emergence of informal spatial practices** among residents. Unauthorized extensions, parking lot conversions, and fence installations around green spaces reflected local adaptation to market conditions and the absence of strong regulatory enforcement. While these practices offered practical solutions to everyday problems—such as overcrowding or insufficient amenities—they contributed to the deterioration of the spatial coherence that had defined the socialist design.

4.3 Recent Developments and the Logic of "Cosmetic" Modernization

In the 2010s, Aerodrom experienced a second wave of transformation, prompted by **municipal initiatives to modernize the district's appearance** and attract private investment. Central to these efforts were **façade renovation programs** supported by the national and municipal governments. These programs aimed to improve the visual quality of prefabricated housing blocks through the application of coloured cladding, energy-efficient panels, and aesthetic elements such as balconies and awnings.

While these interventions were popular with residents and improved insulation and resale value, they neglected **underlying infrastructural issues**. Plumbing, wiring, stairwells, and shared entryways were often left untouched, and no provisions were made for renewing communal services such as terrible collection points or heating systems. This phenomenon aligns with Murawski's (2019) critique of **"aestheticization without transformation,"** in which superficial visual upgrades mask persistent structural deficiencies.

In parallel, Aerodrom's General Urban Plans (GUPs) from 2002 and 2012 attempted to formalize and guide future growth. These plans introduced zoning categories for **mixed-use and high-density development**, particularly near transportation corridors. However, implementation has been inconsistent. While some areas have been transformed into modern commercial corridors, others remain underdeveloped or subjected to irregular infill construction.

Empirical observation reveals that many recent buildings in Aerodrom are **architecturally incongruent** with their surroundings. High-rise residential towers now stand adjacent to 5-storey slab blocks, overshadowing older structures and placing new demands on existing infrastructure.

Parking shortages, stormwater drainage problems, and traffic congestion have become more acute, as new construction is rarely accompanied by proportional investment in public facilities.

Moreover, the **commercialization of public space** has accelerated. Ground-floor units in formerly residential buildings are now occupied by cafes, salons, pharmacies, and minimarkets. While this reflects economic diversification, it also raises questions about **spatial justice and accessibility**, especially as commercial activities encroach upon walkways, green zones, and play areas.

Throughout this recent phase, the governance challenges identified in earlier periods remain unresolved. **Enforcement of building codes and zoning restrictions is weak**, and development decisions are often reactive rather than strategic. Despite the formal presence of planning documents, spatial transformation in Aerodrom continues to be **driven by ad hoc interventions, private capital, and resident improvisation**.

4.4 Aerodrom as a Hybrid Urban Condition

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Aerodrom has evolved into a **hybrid urban condition** characterized by the **coexistence of socialist legacies and post-socialist logics**. Its micro district structure, collective housing forms, and infrastructural rationality remain intact in many areas, offering a measure of spatial coherence and legibility. At the same time, new infill developments, informal modifications, and cosmetic upgrades have introduced layers of spatial contradiction.

This hybrid condition supports the application of the **urban mosaic** framework, which conceptualizes urban space not as a unified entity but as a **composite of overlapping and often conflicting spatial regimes** (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006). In Aerodrom, these regimes include:

The socialist logic of collective life and standardized provision.

The neoliberal logic of market competition, individualization, and privatization.

The informal logic of localized adaptation in the absence of effective governance.

Rather than collapsing under the weight of these contradictions, Aerodrom continues to **function as a lived, dynamic urban environment**. Residents navigate the tensions between past and present through daily routines that blend inherited spatial practices with emergent adaptations. The district's evolution is not one of simple replacement but one of **negotiated transformation**, in which new and old are interwoven to produce a distinct urban mosaic.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings from Aerodrom Municipality offer significant insights into the ongoing transformation of urban form and governance in post-socialist cities. Rather than portraying a linear transition from centralized socialism to liberalized urbanism, the case reveals a **negotiated spatial process**, marked by continuity, contradiction, and hybridity. These dynamics reflect the layered complexity of **post-socialist urban space**, and they are best understood through the conceptual lens of the **urban mosaic** framework (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006). This discussion connects the Aerodrom case to broader theoretical debates on post-socialist urbanism, emphasizing four key themes: (1) the persistence of socialist spatial codes; (2) the limitations of post-socialist governance; (3) the ambiguity of modernization efforts; and (4) the necessity of historically reflective planning paradigms.

5.1 Persistent Socialist Spatial Codes

One of the most salient findings is the continued influence of **socialist spatial codes**, even decades after the collapse of the system that produced them. The physical layout of Aerodrom—its micro district logic, typological consistency, and infrastructural organization—remains intact. These spatial arrangements, once designed to facilitate collective living and egalitarian access to services, now frame the development of privatized, market-driven interventions.

This persistence aligns with the notion of **path dependency** as described by Golubchikov (2010) and Tosics (2005), wherein historical urban forms constrain and shape contemporary practices. In Aerodrom, despite efforts to densify and commercialize the built environment, new developments are still inserted into an inherited spatial logic. Infill projects, for instance, often adhere to the original grid pattern, even if they subvert its scale or function. Façade renovations apply modern veneers to typologies that remain rooted in mid-20th-century prefabrication models.

However, this continuity is not purely material—it is also **symbolic and procedural**. Residents, planners, and developers continue to negotiate the built environment with reference to inherited norms, even when these norms are contested or degraded. For example, communal green spaces, while partially privatized or neglected, still retain symbolic value and are referenced in planning documents and public discourse as essential features of Aerodrom's identity.

5.2 Governance Fragmentation and the Limits of Strategic Planning

A second core theme is the fragmentation of urban governance in the post-socialist period. The transition from centralized state planning to **multi-level, decentralized governance** introduced ambiguity and weakened strategic control over spatial development (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012). In Aerodrom, the findings show that planning authority is often **circumvented or undermined** by informal practices, short-term political interests, or unregulated investment flows.

Despite the presence of General Urban Plans (GUPs) in 2002 and 2012, the **implementation of these frameworks has been inconsistent**. Development decisions are frequently reactive rather than anticipatory, and municipal authorities struggle to enforce zoning regulations or secure the infrastructural investments needed to support new growth. This is compounded by a lack of coordination between municipal and metropolitan scales, resulting in a policy environment where spatial coherence is subordinated to fragmented action.

The governance gaps identified here mirror findings from other post-socialist cities, such as Bucharest, Belgrade, and Sofia, where liberalization introduced formal planning flexibility without corresponding institutional capacity (Stanilov, 2007; Hirt, 2012). In Aerodrom, this has produced a paradoxical condition: while formal plans exist, actual urban development is often guided by **informal agreements, investor influence, and resident improvisation**.

5.3 Cosmetic Modernization and Spatial Contradiction

A third finding concerns the **cosmetic nature of many recent interventions**, especially those targeting housing stock through façade renovation programs. These upgrades, while improving energy performance and visual aesthetics, leave deeper structural problems unaddressed. The term “aestheticization without transformation,” popularized by Murawski (2019), is particularly apt here.

Façade renovations offer a symbolic alignment with European modernization, signalling integration and progress. However, this **symbolism conceals material inequality**: failing infrastructure, degraded service corps, and inequitable access to public amenities persist beneath upgraded exteriors. The same is true for commercial retrofitting, which introduces economic activity at the ground level but often violates accessibility norms, encroaches on pedestrian zones, and undermines the public character of shared spaces.

These interventions reflect a broader **ambivalence in post-socialist planning**: an embrace of market logic and privatization alongside a tacit reliance on inherited public infrastructure. The result is an **urban surface that projects modernity but lacks the institutional and infrastructural depth** to support it sustainably.

Moreover, this aestheticization process is spatially uneven. Well-positioned blocks and transit-accessible corridors receive attention, while peripheral micro districts experience neglect. This introduces a new layer of **spatial stratification**, whereby visibility and value guide investment more than need or infrastructural logic. In Aerodrom, this has led to intra-district disparities that replicate the very social inequalities socialist planning sought to eliminate.

5.4 The Urban Mosaic as Analytical and Planning Tool

The findings affirm the utility of the **urban mosaic** as both an analytical framework and a potential tool for future planning practice. Aerodrom is not a failed socialist district nor a neoliberal success story—it is a **hybrid space**, where multiple planning ideologies, governance logics, and spatial practices coexist and interact. The urban mosaic captures this hybridity by emphasizing **layering, contradiction, and negotiated adaptation** (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006).

In Aerodrom, we observe:

Layered spatial systems: socialist-era grids and services operating alongside market-driven infill and informal upgrades.

Contradictory planning logics: formal zoning policies undermined by informal governance and resident-led spatial reconfigurations.

Temporal overlaps: legacy infrastructure overlaid with modern design, often without functional integration.

This mosaic perspective also reveals that **planning should not aim to erase the past**, but rather to **work with its structures**, transforming inherited forms through adaptive and inclusive strategies. Rather than treating socialist legacies as obsolete or dysfunctional, planners could reinterpret these spatial assets—

e.g., walkable micro districts, integrated service nodes, and green corridors—as foundations for a sustainable urban future.

In this sense, the urban mosaic is not merely descriptive but **prescriptive**: it calls for a form of urbanism that acknowledges the **irreducibility of history** and the **complexity of transformation**. It invites planners to adopt a **reflective, historically situated lens**, capable of recognizing both the constraints and the capacities embedded in post-socialist urban morphologies.

5.4.1 Everyday Spatial Practices and Memory: Toward an Demographic Perspective

While the preceding analysis focuses on the morphological and institutional transformations of Aerodrom, an demographically oriented perspective reveals how these changes are mediated through everyday spatial practices and symbolic memory. In the absence of collective maintenance structures, residents increasingly engage in informal modifications—such as enclosing green spaces, personalizing communal corridors, or adding makeshift structures—to adapt inherited environments to new social and economic realities. These micro-interventions not only reshape the physical fabric but also reconfigure the meanings and memories attached to socialist-era spaces (Hirt, 2012; Stanilov, 2007).

As observed in similar post-socialist contexts, residents' engagement with space often reflects ambivalent attachments: older generations may regard slab blocks and green corridors as symbols of equality and stability, while younger residents view them as outdated or dysfunctional (Gentile & Sjöberg, 2013; Murawski, 2019). These divergent readings create a layered terrain of spatial memory, wherein the same environment may be seen as both nostalgic and obsolete, inclusive, and exclusionary.

Integrating such demographic insights—through interviews, participant observation, or memory mapping—would deepen our understanding of how socialist urban legacies are sustained or subverted in daily life. Although not conducted within the scope of this study, this dimension offers a promising direction for future research aimed at bridging spatial analysis with lived experience in transitional urban settings.

5.5 Toward Historically Reflective Planning

The final theme emerging from the findings is the necessity of **historically reflective planning**. Too often, post-socialist planning practice has defaulted to either blanket modernization or laissez-faire deregulation. Both approaches risk ignoring the embedded spatial cultures, infrastructural systems, and socio-spatial contracts that shape everyday urban life.

As the Aerodrom case shows, these inherited systems do not disappear—they persist, adapt, and shape new spatial formations. Effective planning in this context must grapple with **ambivalence and contradiction**, not bypass it. A historically reflective approach would include:

Mapping spatial legacy not as pathology, but as opportunity.

Integrating old and new logics through adaptive reuse, service layering, and spatial continuity.

Involving residents in decisions about upgrading and redevelopment, particularly in historically planned spaces where collective memory is embedded.

Building institutional continuity, where planning departments document and reflect on past practices rather than discarding them entirely in the face of new paradigms.

In short, the transformation of Aerodrom—and of many post-socialist cities—will not be achieved through rupture, but through **critical continuity**: a mode of spatial governance that combines memory with innovation, and past resilience with future adaptability.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the spatial and institutional transformation of **Aerodrom Municipality in Eastern Skopje**, offering new insights into the enduring legacies of socialist urban planning in the post-socialist city. Through a combination of archival analysis, morphological interpretation, and theoretical reflection, the research has shown that Aerodrom is neither a relic of a bygone planning regime nor a blank slate for neoliberal urbanism. Rather, it is a **hybrid urban formation**, shaped by overlapping spatial logics, fragmented governance structures, and contradictory planning practices.

The findings suggest that socialist legacies in Aerodrom are not merely historical artifacts—they are active forces in the production of contemporary urban space. The **spatial codes of the socialist micro district**, with its standardized housing blocks, integrated amenities, and clear zoning logic, remain embedded in the built fabric. These forms continue to shape movement patterns, service distribution, and residents' spatial imaginaries. At the same time, post-socialist forces—privatization, speculative development, informal adaptations—have restructured the district in ways that introduce **tensions, fragmentation, and aesthetic inconsistency**.

This condition of **layered transformation** is well captured by the **urban mosaic framework** (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006). As applied to Aerodrom, the mosaic metaphor illuminates the coexistence of diverse spatial regimes and institutional histories within a single urban landscape. Socialist planning logics persist alongside market dynamics; public infrastructure supports private expansion; and informal practices fill the gaps left by weak governance. Rather than simplistically viewing Aerodrom as transitioning from one urban model to another, the urban mosaic allows us to see transformation as a **negotiated and recursive process**, shaped by historical contingency and contemporary improvisation.

A key contribution of this research lies in its **historically reflective perspective**. By tracing Aerodrom's planning evolution from the 1965 Basic Urban Plan through post-1990 decentralization and up to present-day design interventions, the study resists ahistorical or teleological readings of urban change. It demonstrates that effective planning in post-socialist contexts requires more than importing design standards or incentivizing development—it requires a deep engagement with inherited urban forms, institutional cultures, and social expectations.

This engagement is particularly urgent considering the **“cosmetic modernization”** strategies increasingly employed across the region. As seen in Aerodrom's façade renovation programs and uncoordinated infill development, visual upgrades often mask deeper infrastructural decay, unregulated spatial appropriation, and the erosion of collective space. Such interventions may produce a veneer of modernity,

but they fail to address the **underlying conditions of spatial and institutional fragmentation** that characterize much of the post-socialist urban landscape (Murawski, 2019; Hirt, 2012).

The Aerodrom case also underscores the **limits of current governance capacity**. Despite the presence of General Urban Plans and zoning legislation, spatial change in the district continues to be driven by informal adaptation, investor discretion, and reactive planning. These conditions highlight the need for a more **resilient and coordinated planning apparatus**, one capable of navigating the contradictions inherent in inherited spatial systems while responding to contemporary urban pressures.

In practical terms, this study suggests several pathways for improving urban planning in post-socialist contexts:

Revalorizing socialist legacies: Rather than seeing socialist-era infrastructure and design as obsolete, planners should identify aspects that remain functionally or socially relevant—such as walkability, service integration, and spatial equality—and build upon them.

Fostering participatory planning: Given the decline of collective governance structures, new forms of citizen engagement are needed to ensure that spatial interventions are equitable, inclusive, and grounded in local knowledge.

Strengthening institutional memory: Urban planning departments must invest in historical documentation and reflective practice to avoid repeating past mistakes and to adapt inherited frameworks thoughtfully rather than erasing them indiscriminately.

Linking aesthetics to infrastructure: Upgrading visual identity should go hand in hand with improving core infrastructure and public services. True modernization must address not only appearance but also functionality and access.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces the value of **interdisciplinary, spatial-historical approaches** to urban research. The urban mosaic framework proves especially effective in capturing the multiplicity of forces shaping post-socialist cities, offering a flexible yet rigorous structure for analyzing how different layers of planning logic and built form interact.

More broadly, this research contributes to the evolving field of **post-socialist urban studies** by challenging the binary narratives that often dominate the literature. Rather than viewing socialist legacies as barriers to development or assuming an inevitable convergence toward Western urban models, this study positions post-socialist cities as **spaces of unique complexity**, shaped by their own histories, contradictions, and capacities for innovation.

Aerodrom's transformation exemplifies the contradictions and possibilities of post-socialist urbanism. It is a space where past and present do not neatly align, where official planning collides with everyday improvisation, and where material legacy becomes both an asset and a burden. Yet within this complexity lies an opportunity: by acknowledging the persistence of history in space, planners and policymakers can

move beyond short-term fixes and work toward more strategic, inclusive, and historically informed urban futures.

6.1 Policy and Planning Implications for Post-Socialist Urban Transformation

This study suggests that addressing the challenges of post-socialist urban transformation requires an approach that bridges inherited spatial structures with contemporary governance tools. Based on the case of Aerodrom, several planning implications can be proposed:

- **Developing Micro-Scale Design Guidelines:** The aesthetic fragmentation and ad-hoc modifications of façades and open spaces highlight the need for micro-level regulatory frameworks. Context-sensitive design guidelines should be introduced to guide the rehabilitation of housing blocks and communal courtyards, promoting visual coherence while respecting individual needs.
- **Establishing Participatory Planning Platforms:** The disintegration of collective decision-making processes has led to privatized and uncoordinated spatial interventions. Municipalities should create participatory mechanisms that involve residents in decisions concerning block-level upgrades, open space reconfiguration, and infrastructure investments. Such platforms can reintroduce a sense of spatial citizenship and social cohesion.
- **Recognizing and Managing Hybrid Heritage:** Rather than dismissing socialist-era built environments as obsolete, planners should recognize them as hybrid forms of urban heritage—simultaneously physical, symbolic, and functional. Urban policies should aim at adaptive reuse strategies that preserve spatial legibility while accommodating new uses and meanings.
- **Integrating Informality into Formal Planning Systems:** The proliferation of informal modifications reflects unmet needs and governance gaps. Instead of merely penalizing these practices, urban planning systems should explore how to absorb and regulate them through flexible zoning tools and incremental planning models.

By aligning morphological continuity with participatory governance, post-socialist cities can shift from reactive interventions to strategic, inclusive, and historically attuned forms of urban transformation.

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