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Pasteloza – refurbishing of the PPR heritage

Sara Nikolić
Research Assistant
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory
University of Belgrade, Serbia
e-mail: sara.nikolic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6478-7680

Abstract

Colourful zigzags, arcade game motifs, geometric figures, pseudo-frames of windows and even infantile drawings of flora and fauna – those are just some of the visible symptoms of the aesthetical and urbanistic chaotic condition also known as Polish pasteloza. One of the most common readings is that the excuse of thermal insulation is being (ab)used in order to radically erase the urbanistic, cultural and political heritage of Polish People's Republic (PPR) from the city landscape. On the other hand, inhabitants of 'pastelized' housing estates claim to be satisfied not only with the insulation but also with their role in decision-making processes. A sense of alienation from one's home seems to have gone away, together with the centralized state administration, and it is being replaced by citizen participation. The possibility of vindication of pasteloza's 'crimes against aesthetics' will be deliberated in this paper – in order to pave a path for more complex understanding of this phenomenon that could offer a solution for achieving a compromise between aesthetics and civic participation in post-transition processes.

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'Aphorism 31. Restoration, so called, is the worst manner of Destruction'
John Ruskin, 1903, 'The Lamp of Memory'

Introduction

Grey is far more than a colour. It is an aesthetic quality that powerfully links material environments with political artefacts. Grey evokes not just a landscape dominated by concrete block housing but a whole array of impressions and sentiments (Fehervary 2013). Over the last 20 years, block housing estates of Polish cities – built during the Polish People's Republic (PPR)[1] – have been taking on a whole spectrum of colours from pastel, to vivid, to almost neon. Formerly grey housing estates on the outskirts of Polish cities today look like dismembered Lego bricks on grass.

However, coming from the region of South East Europe, from a country once known as Yugoslavia, where I grew up surrounded and familiar with socialist-modernist architecture and design, the familiar – yet surprisingly colourful – urban landscapes of Polish cities puzzled me. Multicoloured zigzag patterns, arcade-game motifs, geometric figures, pseudo-window frames and even infantilized flora and fauna representations are just some of the visible symptoms of aesthetic chaos, colloquially associated with the term urban pastelosis, known in Poland as *pasteloza*. With a name that bears an uncanny resemblance to a bacterial infection, *pasteloza* and its manifestations arose from the need for aesthetisation.

Pasteloza, however, is not a scientific term. It is just a pejorative nickname for what is in front of our very eyes in almost every larger Central European city. However, I strongly believe that this witty nickname and the phenomenon it stands for deserve the dedicated attention of a scientific community whose research interests are focused on urban phenomena. In order to avoid both elitist outrage over tacky, bright facades and the overly reductionist interpretations of 'the physical dimension of the transformation' of large housing estates (Szafrańska 2014: 87) in this paper I am offering a balanced combination of ethnographic material focused on a bottom-up perspective of inhabitants of researched housing estates and anthropological interpretations of complex processes that stand behind post-socialist transition.

As an anthropologist and ethnographer, I am very much interested in the exploration and inoculation of phenomenological and critical ethnography methods in the existing knowledge on cities and urban commons. When it comes to the topic of my doctoral research, the (working) title could be translated as 'Towards the anthropology of urban commons: Analysis of self-managed practices of production and appropriation of (social) space in New Belgrade's housings blocks in post-transitional context'. As the title already suggests, the reference frame of the research is the present itself, or more precisely the period after mass-privatization of the publicly owned Yugoslav housing stock that took place at the beginning of the 1990s. The field research is narrowly focused on the utopist, modernist residential district known as New Belgrade, built under the socialist Yugoslav regime of the 1960s and 1970s. As the exploration of the life-worlds and the everydayness of the ever-changing large Yugoslav housing estates are a central part of my scientific research, the opportunity to acquire a comparative perspective and to get an eyeful of the everyday life in housing estates in Poznań during three months of field research under the *Erasmus+* program turned out to be of a great importance for the further course of my doctoral studies.

On that account, the inescapable 'obsessive facadism of the 21st century' (Sinclair 2018) embodied in the phenomenon of *pasteloza* inspired me to puzzle over the reasons for this newly established colourfulness of the well-known, grey, geometrical, modernist estates. The literature review – unfortunately limited only to articles published in English – suggested the importance of the symbolic effect of the changed urban landscapes and the practical necessity for renovation of low-quality mass-produced block housing. However, I have not come across the perspective of the tenants themselves, and their perspective, I argue, could enrich and strengthen scientific understanding of this urban phenomenon characteristic of Central Europe. The possibility of combining the emic perspective (Kottak 2006) of this phenomenon with the already existing scientific explanations in order to pave a path for an alternative, more complex understanding of this phenomenon was the main aim of this study. Comprehending *pasteloza* as erasure of the material cultural heritage of the PPR from the urban landscape is merely a beginning of engaged understanding of compromises made among aesthetics, sustainability, cooperation, and participation in the post-transition processes.

Contextualization of the phenomenon

'The problem is that, most obviously, fragmented knowledge is, by definition, incomplete knowledge, and, less obviously, fragmented knowledge – because it lacks a surrounding context – is difficult to evaluate. Not only is there much that we do not know, then, but it is also hard to judge how important or generalizable what we do know may be' (Lofland 1998: 19).

1 Polish People's Republic, Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa (in Polish), was the official name of the Polish state 1952–1990.

Coming from New Belgrade, a city that seems to be comfortable with its 'brutal' greyness, in order to better understand the phenomenon of *pasteloza*, I reached for a favourite anthropological exercise – contextualization. However, this 'colouristic degeneration' is not by any means an exclusively Polish phenomenon. It appears primarily in residential settlements in large cities both in Poland and other members of the former Eastern bloc, among which the central European countries are predominant. Even public buildings such as hospitals, theatres and state institutions have not been spared. On the contrary, their new, multicoloured façades should serve as an example (Wilanow Palace, Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, etc.).

According to Makary Górzyński, art historian from the University of Warsaw, there are several reasons for this 'aesthetic chaos' that arose during the modernization of Polish settlements. These reasons include the abandoning of state/central planning policies; a lack of communication among tenants' cooperatives and local administration, architects, and artists; and the concepts of legal freedom and inalienability (*Natemat*). He attributes part of the guilt and responsibility to local authorities and other officials, since urban planning and care for aesthetics were discarded.

However, M. Górzyński fails to explain the cause of it. It is true that long-term neglect of urban planning in favour of the investor urbanism, as well as the increasing atomization of society that have resulted in a lack of communication among relevant stakeholders, is one of the prerequisites for the condition of *pasteloza*. What M. Górzyński does not take into account in his explanation is the political and socioeconomic context in which this whole process is taking place, which is, I believe, of the utmost importance for understanding the phenomenon under consideration. Namely, one should not lose sight of the fact that the Polish cities are being affected with pastel colours during the post-socialist transformative period.

After the end of World War II, state-socialism was established in Poland and it was initially, as in many other countries in Europe at that historic point, implemented through authoritarian Stalinism. The destalinization of Poland began with the workers' protests in Poznań in June 1956, and it ended in October of the same year. However, it seems that the welfare state did not manage to provide stability and well-being for its citizens. On the other hand, large housing estates undeniably represented instruments of social and infrastructural improvement in living conditions, especially for the working class, after World War II. The years that followed were marked by economic stagnation, political turbulence, a stereotypical Cold War paranoid atmosphere, workers' strikes, and the growing crisis. Until the 1980s, Poland was a member of the Eastern bloc, then with the increasing influence of the Catholic Church and the Solidarity movement (*Solidarność*, in Polish.) it started the transition to a capitalist system and a multiparty parliamentary system, although the market existed to a very limited extent and during the period of PPR, capitalism in its present form can be discussed only in the period after the dissolution of the People's Republic as at that time the Western influence both in terms of culture and the economy has increased. In this sense, when I speak about the period of Polish post-socialist transformation and its consequent cultural space, I precisely think of the period after December 29, 1989, when the parliament voted in an amendment that abolished the People's Republic of Poland and introduced a multiparty system.[2]

After 1989, Poland went through a period of economic (and ideological) transformation from socialism to capitalism. Multiple and pervasive consequences of this transformation are most noticeable in the period after 2004, when Poland joined the European Union (EU). In this regard, immediately after the establishment of the new system, it was important to draw a clear difference from the old one. This battle had to be conducted at every possible level. It is precisely some of these consequences, which entail radical cuts with the past and interventions over material cultural heritage or are related to the changing relationship between private and public ownership, planned and investor's urbanism, which are important for understanding the phenomenon of *pasteloza*.

If we date the emergence of this phenomenon, the importance of the context of post-socialist transformation for its development potential and the symbolic content of the colourful facades becomes even more obvious. 'Years of unified planning and ascetic design had a significant impact on Poles' material and aesthetic choices' (Koźmińska 2015: 39). Although his works and interviews primarily focus on the aesthetic aspects of this phenomenon, Filip Springer, a Polish journalist, argues that the trend of *pasteloza* was inspired by the Solpol department store, built in 1993 in Wrocław.

Until the beginning of the 1990s, there were several smaller catering and retail facilities at the corner of Franciszkańska and Świdnicka Streets. Zygmunt Solorz, Solpol's owner, an importer and distributor of electronic

2 Even though grey housing estates were also built in the early 1990s, most probably based on urbanistic plans and decisions made during the old regime, December 29, 1989 is chosen to symbolically and temporally fixate the beginning of the transformation. The date itself might seem arbitrary, but time positioning is important in order to avoid the relativization of ideological and economic transformation.

equipment from Germany, purchased this parcel from previous owners with the intention of building a shopping centre. This splashy, pastel 'postmodern horror'[3] was built right after the fall of the Iron Curtain, at a time of economic turmoil and political changes in Poland, when the city streets were still dominated by a palette of fifty shades of grey. Promoted as one of the best examples of postmodern architecture in Poland, Solpol – its colours and the structure of its forms – depicts the Polish excessive optimism of that time and represents a symbol of transformation, which is why the Transformation Foundation (*Fundacja Transformator*, in Polish) and the Society for the Beautification of the City of Wroclaw (*Towarzystwo Upiększania Miasta Wrocławia*, in Polish) are advocating for its classification as a protected monument (*Archinect*).

Theoretical framework

In addition to historical, political and socioeconomic contextualization, theoretical concepts are of great value for the analysis of *pasteloza*. In this sense, the concepts of territorial capital and symbolic violence are used to deepen the understanding of this phenomenon, since Bourdieu's theoretical system allows an analysis of the power relations, and thus provides a fruitful basis for understanding the consequences of the post-socialist transformation of Polish culture and society. Although theoreticians such as Lisa Adkins criticize Bourdieu for being unable to explain social changes within his theoretical system (Adkins & Skeggs 2005: 196 according to Petrović 2013: 178), I believe that this theoretical system has noteworthy heuristic significance.

Developed in the wake of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, 'territorial capital' is a set of factors from a given area, from geostrategic position, dimension, traffic and other infrastructure to cultural heritage. This set of characteristics can be divided into 'hard' and 'soft' territorial capital (Devetaković 2012: 32). 'Hard' territorial capital in the context of this work refers to the housing estates built during the period of PPR, pejoratively referred to as 'dormitories' or 'bedrooms', as well as the supporting infrastructure. Consequently, 'soft' territorial capital represents the 'cultural heritage' of Polish socialism. Material cultural heritage – embodied and spatialized in architecture, industrial design, monuments and the prevailing aesthetics of socialist modernism – as well as the immaterial, consisted of the idea that the right to housing is an inalienable human right.

The concept of symbolic violence was introduced in social theory by Pierre Bourdieau's book 'Masculine Domination' (Burdije 2001). Such violence puts the dominant group over the dominated, often with the tacit or unconscious complicity of the latter. This perfidious violence rests on trust and loyalty, and it is manifested through communication. For the analysis of interpersonal relations, especially regarding class and gender, this concept, although challenged, proved to be theoretically very fruitful. However, can symbolic violence be performed against a city?

'Architecture has always served to embody a specific political ideology, will or simply power' (*Vreme*). Instrumentalization of architecture for political and demagogic purposes is as old as architecture itself. Its creators, and through them architecture itself, depend on the centres of financial and political power, on the taste of investors, and on the needs of users and the general cultural context at a certain point. In addition, on a more concrete level, architecture represents the material cultural heritage of a time and, in the most obvious way, encompasses its dominant ideology. Does this mean that by these jazzy practices of renovation symbolic violence has been committed against the heritage, and therefore against the memory of a whole generation? Why? And if so, who is the bully and who is the victim? In order to understand the answer to these questions, we have to understand how *pasteloza* (Fig. 1.) works in practice.

Methodology

This paper is a 'by-product' of an ethnographic mapping project that took place in Poznań in 2018, from April 29 to July 30. Even though some other Polish cities could have been more suitable for researching the phenomenon of *pasteloza*, Poznań was imposed since University of Belgrade, where I am a doctoral student in the department of ethnology and anthropology at Faculty of Philosophy, and Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań have established an *Erasmus+* partnership.

During the field research in Poznań, inspired by the works of T. Ingold (2008, 2015) and sensory ethnography methods, I went for long walks with my informants. We did not, however, choose random paths but exactly the ones they – as inhabitants of socialist-modernist housing estates on the right bank of the Warta River – take every day. Even though it may sound trivial, walks are a very convenient way to 'enter' the field, to obtain information that would remain unrevealed during formal interviews. Walks are also excellent for the exploratory

3 The exact phrase 'postmodern horror' (užasi postmoderne, in Serbian) was used by my colleague to describe the phenomenon of pasteloza. This way she was at the same time referring to the Facebook page 'Užasi postmoderne' where members ironically post on outcomes of the late capitalism and the post-modern state.

Figure 1.
Thermo-modernization, July 9 2018, Osiedle Rusa, Poznań
Source: photo by Sara Nikolić, 2018.

part of ethnographic research, owing to the more informal approach. They are also very suitable for informants to get used the researcher's presence, to get to know each other and to spend some time in a joint activity before they let a complete and extremely curious stranger into their home and share with him/her their everyday life and intimate thoughts. The phenomenon of *pasteloza* turned out to be a central part of those walks. Whether they love it or loathe it, all of the informants kept talking about it, recognizing its significance and impact on the urban landscape of Poznań.

One of the main systematic research tools of urban anthropology, as well as human geography and urbanism, is ethnography, since it promises a holistic approach towards the understanding of social, spatial, and cultural context. Particularly suitable for the analysis of spatial practices, ethnography offers a collection of various qualitative research tools and procedures such as fieldnotes, in-depth interviews, mapping, and participant-observations. The multi-method ethnological research implemented during the fieldwork in Poznań includes, aside from detailed fieldnotes (Ingold 2011), several concrete methodological procedures: mapping, walk-along interviews and photo-elicitation.

Mapping

The exploratory phase of the research consisted of participative creation of ethnographic maps, or 'narrative atlases' (Wood 1987: 24–46) of the researched housing estates (*osiedla mieszkaniowe,* in Polish). This is a suitable research tool, as its application makes social and spatial practices, interactions and interventions, memories and senses both visible and tangible. Visualization of spatial practices and social relations intrinsic to them, as well as interpretation of a layered, systematized and yet rugged data collected via such mapping – although challenging – contributes to a deeper understanding of socio-spatial relationships. Cartographer D. Wood (1992, 2010) points out that mapping can be understood as an act of creating and conceiving space, thus representing a powerful tool in the production of space According to this author, the maps are multi-layered stories of one neighbourhood. The maps tell us how we understand, use and define places we call home (*Journal Urban Transcripts*).

It is also worth mentioning that we are witnessing a paradigmatic shift towards critical mapping and mapping 'from below' (e.g., Hyler 2013) in contemporary architectural and urbanistic theory and practice. This shift broadens the understanding of the use and

everyday life of the built environment and the imposed morphology of space pre-defined 'from above'. In this sense, detailed ethnographic maps have enabled the visualization of possible discrepancies in the purpose of the dominated and the life of the appropriated space (Lefebvre 1991). An added value of this participative methodological procedure is that it represents a suitable means for 'entering the field' and creating initial contacts and a sense of familiarity and trust between informants and researchers.

During the mapping process, I endeavoured to include and even provoke the different senses built in the layered mental images of the housing estates of my informants. Therefore, the sensory component became a major and important part of the neighbourhood maps, and I believe it should not be considered negligible since 'multisensory experience of any physical and material environment is inseparable from the cultural knowledge and everyday practices through which the city is built and experienced' (Pink 2008: 96).

Finally, the core results of the mapping process will not be deliberated here, since the layered structure of the collected data goes beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, important to stress that the photos created during the process of mapping have been used as visual material for photo elicitation that occurred at the last stage of research. Although the analysis of the mapping process will not be presented in this paper, it may be valuable to understand the stream of research, and that such a participative mapping process preceded the in-depth interviews.

Walk-along interviews

The go-along model of interviews, with its walk-along and drive-along subtypes, is a variation on the standard, sit-down interviewing techniques (Kusenbach 2003). This methodological apparatus derives from interactional and phenomenological orientations towards studying direct and indirect social experiences, as well as the creation and maintenance of intersubjectivity. This model of in-depth, semi-structured interview is, according to some authors (Lynch 1960; Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2008), especially suitable for researching and deepening the understanding of people's experiences in a local and residential context. More precisely, this method of interviewing implies a joint walk of researchers and each individual informant through an environment known to them, such as a neighbourhood, or in the context of this research, a large housing estate. However, this methodological procedure is not a mere tour of the attractions of the area, nor are the informants expected to take on the role of a tourist guide. By setting up both pre-determined and ad-hoc questions, the researcher examines the experiences, interpretations and spatial practices of the informants (Carpiano 2008: 264), as well as their relationships with other members of the community. R. M. Carpiano (2008) argues that this method reflects Simmel's idea of the influence of spatial characteristics on individual and group action, as well as on the creation of social relations and forms of socialization (Carpiano 2008).

Finally, the greatest value of this methodological process, which is distinguished by a free-form and dialectical character, is the

Table 1.
Information about survey respondents
Source: own study

Name	Age	Gender	Housing Estate (HE)	Time spent in the HE	Occupation	Members of household
L.	44	Male	Osiedle Czecha	1976–1999	University professor	5 (mother, father, 3 sons – he is one of them)
M.	21	Male	Osiedle Czecha	October 2017 – present	Student (Law)	4 (girlfriend and 2 flat mates)
E.	20	Female	Osiedle Czecha	October 2017 – present	Student (Economics)	4 (boyfriend and 2 flat mates)
M.	26	Female	Osiedle Orła Białego	1994 – present	Civil servant	3 (mother, father and daughter – herself)
E.	50	Female	Osiedle Orła Białego	1994 – present	University professor	3 (husband, daughter and herself)
O.	25	Male	Osiedle Rusa	2013 – present	Economist	1
P.	20	Male	Osiedle Lecha	2016 – present	Student (Neuroscience)	3 (friends, flat mates)

inclusiveness of the process itself. In this kind of in-depth interview, the informant becomes an active participant and overcomes the role of the passive subject of the research, which, apart from the ethical level, can positively reflect on the richness and credibility of the obtained material. With this model of interviewing, M. Kusenbach argues, during the research, we (researchers) are referred to the informants with more consideration and respect, positioning us in a relationship based on egalitarianism (Kusenbach 2003), opening a space and a 'natural forum' for exchanging ideas, perceiving and thinking about local communities (Carpiano 2008). On the other hand, a possible drawback of such a methodological approach is that the impressions and observations of researchers and informants might become entangled and difficult to differentiate.

Both the ethnographic map and this essay are a collage of information derived from different sources such as scientific and journalistic articles, artistic projects, new media, my own impressions during the fieldwork and most importantly – walk-along semi-structured interviews conducted with seven informants, inhabitants of five different housing estates in Nowe Miasto, Poznań. The following Table 1 contains basic information about the survey respondents:

All the interviews were recorded with a Sony ICD PX333 digital voice recorder and transcribed afterwards. The interviews were conducted in English. The fact that the researcher herself, despite preparations for the fieldwork, was not fluent enough in Polish affected the sample of informants. Since fluency in English predetermined possible interviewees, as Table 1 demonstrates, the sample was diminished to middle-class, white collar workers and the (prospective) 'intellectual elite' of the city. The fact that such a sample is not representative of large housing estates in Poland might be a quite strong basis for critique of this research. However, in the anthropological tradition, especially when it comes to the biographical approach that was carried out through this research, a 'relevant sample' derived from the national census or similar statistical, quantitative data was never particularly desirable nor common. On the other hand, one possible advantage of conducting interviews without mediation of a translator is a newly established sense of familiarity, trust and most importantly – equality – between the informants and the researcher.

Photo-elicitation

This method, originating from the subdiscipline of visual anthropology, involves the joint viewing of photographs by researchers and informants. The images, personalities and events recorded on photos by informants evoke experiences, memories and reflections (Harper 2002; Epstein et al. 2006), while the researcher moderates and directs the course of conversations in accordance with the subject of the research.

This segment of research was carried out after in-depth 'walk-along' interviews, as a kind of supplement, based on material collected during interviews and mappings. Following the example of a method developed by C. C. Wang et al. (1998), the selected corpus of visual materials was analysed with each informant individually.

This method is considered appropriate because of the possibilities of visual material to evoke memories of earlier periods and ways of life in the apartment blocks, but also to encourage reflection on interventions in the common space and ways of its maintenance, as well as the renovation practices that transform the spatial structure and morphology of housing units and blocks in aesthetic and functional senses.

Spatial manifestations of the changed conception of home, such as renovations, adaptations, upgrades, glazing and commercialization of housing units have become massively accessible and even desirable in a post-transitional context through Eastern and Central Europe. However, in the scientific interest in those changes the perspectives of users, or the carriers of these changes, are mostly absent.

Analysis

Although I believed that the symbolism behind the 'pastelization' process was obvious to me, I had been struck by extremely practical questions about this phenomenon for a long time. In trying to answer them, I constantly made parallels with the Yugoslav cultural space well-known to me. Did the tenants themselves pay for these new facades, Styrofoam insulation, aluminium linings, PVC windows, cameras, gates and other transitional status symbols? If so, was it on their own initiative, or was the obligation to renovate imposed 'from above'? If it was imposed from above, who is the top actor: the municipality, the city, the voivodship, the state, the EU, or something else? Do city authorities and utility companies bear part of their costs? Does the EU provide funds under the umbrella of energy efficiency?

Without answering these questions, every conclusion seemed to be hasty and incomplete. However, in those questions I missed one important player. In the case of Poznań it is the 'Youth Settlement' Housing Cooperative (*Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa „Osiedle Młodych,* in Polish).[4] When the Queen Jadviga Bridge was built over the Warta River in Poznań in 1956, the village of Rataje

4 Hereinafter referred to as Cooperative.

became permanently connected to the city. Two years later, the idea to build a new residential district in the territory of the former village of Rataje was born, and this was later extended to the nearby villages of Żegrze and Chartowo. The aforementioned housing cooperative was established more than sixty years ago, on October 7, 1958. It was originally called the Youth Housing Cooperative (*Młodzieżowa Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa*, in Polish) and it is currently the largest institution of this type in the Greater Poland (*Wielkopolska*, in Polish) Voivodship.[5] Post-war expansion to the east of Poznań led to mass housing production on the right bank of the Warta so that in 1965, the Cooperative was entrusted with the establishment of new settlements in the territory of New City (*Nowe Miasto*, in Polish), formerly known as Rataje.

After 1989, under new economic and financial conditions, housing construction dropped significantly. However, the Cooperative has not lost its function since, although the construction of new facilities almost no longer exists, it manages all of the existing buildings (287) including 30,976 apartments and 77 commercial units. About 65,000 people live on this territory of 293 hectares, of which more than 30,000 are members[6] of the Cooperative (*Osiedlemlodych*).

The process of facade renovation in the territory administered by this Cooperative began for the first time in 1992, and within this project residential buildings built before 1981 had top priority. A new law on housing cooperatives was adopted in 1995. In the same year austerity measures were introduced in order to continue the ongoing renovations, which was followed by measuring the size of apartments and compiling a list of heaters. The next year, the responsibilities of the National Housing Directorate (*Kierownictwo Osiedli,* in Polish) were further reduced in order to decentralize and to increase the competences of this kind of housing cooperative. In that sense, the members of the Cooperative became more involved in its work and a higher level of participation was achieved in smaller administrative/territorial units. In the same year (1996), an amendment to the Regulation on the Central Renovation Fund was adopted, which resulted in an increase in financial resources for the renovation and modernization of the housing estates. All these data are contained in a brochure published on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Cooperative, given to me during a visit to their administrative premises by Julia Tritt, the PR manager of the Cooperative. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find data on the financing of the Cooperative after Poland joined the EU, since the brochure summarizes the work of the Cooperative only from 1958 to 2003. However, already on the basis of this data, it is evident that the beginning of pastelization – or thermo-modernization work (*prace termomodernizacyjne*, in Polish), as they call it – occurred in the mid-nineties (which corresponds with the symbolic beginning – the construction of the department store Solpol – identified by F. Springer) followed by a series of amendments to legal documents and the financial legislations that enabled it. Already the term 'thermo-modernization works' contains one very important aspect that aesthetic critics of this phenomenon have often ignored: *thermo*.[7]

During the existence of Polish People's Republic, between 1952 and 1990, according to the data 7,000,000 apartments were built (*Swaid*). On the other hand, despite the unquestionable significance of the scope of housing construction of the PPR, which resulted in the fact that the right to housing was considered an inalienable human right, the standards and quality of construction declined every decade as a result of economic stagnation. Already in the 1980s, not only a complete distortion of the modernist idea occurred, but housing estates began to lack even the basic infrastructure. Quantity over quality, the maxim followed in the PPR in the transition years has (deservedly) been targeted by the general public and experts.

Therefore, retroactive thermal insulation became necessary due to the poor quality of housing construction. *Pasteloza,* as a form of symbolical violence against urban landscape as aspatial commons was not necessary – but they came together in a transitional package. The needed thermal insulation could have been carried out so that the restored façades retained the reduced palette, that the selected colouration would preserve the stylistic unity with the reduced geometric forms that distinguish socialist modernism, the architectural style in which these residential settlements are built. However, this has not been done. The cooperative chose the colour. In contrast to grey, colour often denotes the satisfaction and capabilities of capitalist consumption, the freedom of the individual to express himself/herself through style (Fehervary 2013: 1).

The regime changes in Poland, as well as in many other countries, catalysed swift, ideologically motivated

5 Greater Poland Voivodeship is one of the 16 Polish voivodeships. This geographical, historical and administrative region is located in the western part of Poland. It is the second largest in area and third largest in population among Polish voivodeships. The capital of the Greater Poland is Poznań, where I performed a three-month long field study, and this essay is one of its results.

6 The tenants do not have the right to membership, but only the owners of the apartments and their relatives who become members by declaring and providing the necessary documentation.

7 According to Merriam Webster dictionary, thermo is a combining form, usually a prefix derived from Greek thermē (heat), thermos (hot).

transformations to the built environment, most of them carried out by the first democratically elected national(ist) governments. New regimes 'focused on eliminating all symbolic references to the socialist state, communist ideology, and Soviet occupation of public space' (Fehervary 2013: 29). Red stars, old street names, sculptures of political and ideological leaders and many other 'socialist relics' disappeared overnight. By removing those relics, the city landscape was 'decontaminated'. Or, standing on the opposite side of the political spectrum one could as well formulate it as: symbolic violence was committed against the city and cultural heritage. However, no matter how it is called, it was still not enough.

Even when the remaining green and public areas in the housing estates were converted into building or commercial lots, and then sold to investors or corporations, 'the spectre of communism' persistently smiled from the tight balconies of solid, concrete multi-storey buildings. Due to their megalomaniacal scale and monotony, apartment blocks came to be mentioned in a pejorative sense, and 'evolutionary achievements' of socialist modernization have been forgotten almost overnight. Necessary repairs to old buildings and the installation of thermal insulation served as an excellent excuse in the final fight in the war for the symbolic dominance of the exterior. Let there be *pasteloza*.

'The metaphor of the Iron Curtain dividing East from the West, or dark, colourless and opressive communism from bright, colourful, and democratic capitalism, has obscured the actual porousness of this boundary to the flow of commodities, images and aspirations – not to mention economic exchanges in the forms of loans (from West to East) and labour (from East to West, especially in the 1980s)' (Fehervary 2013: 20).

While the 'chronotopia'[8] once known as East was becoming West, places underwent significant transformation that influenced alternations of the inherited infrastructure and hard territorial capital (Backović 2010), soft territorial capital (Petrović & Toković 2017), and social dynamics in general. Although I agree with the findings of researchers such as G. Enyedi (1998), T. Boren & M. Genetile (2007), E. Szafrańska (2014) and many others, I strongly argue that we should be much more careful when it comes to a construction of narratives about post-socialist transformation of urban space. In her article 'Transformations of Large Housing Estates in Post-Socialist City: The Case of Łódź, Poland', E. Szafrańska (2014) makes a division between functional and physical transformations of large housing estates. When it comes to functional transformations, 'one of the most important changes in the functional structure is the gradually increasing share of commercial areas at the expense of other non-commercial functions and functions with a lower level of financial profit' (Matlovič et al. 2001 in Szafrańska 2014: 87), also known as commercialization. On the other hand, this author has listed six types of 'physiognomic' (Szafrańska 2014: 89) transformation of housing estates, directly referring to the phenomenon of *pasteloza* as the first among them:

'Makeovers of housing building facades (richer colours help overcome the drabness of concrete deserts), predominantly following thermo-insulation investment projects; improvement in the technical condition of buildings (window replacements, refurbishment of stairwell entrances)' (Szafrańska 2014: 89).

These 'makeovers' are followed by 'diversification of the monotonous landscape'; 'improvement in the technical condition of buildings'; 'improvement in maintenance of local greenery, but also concurrent reductions in area in favour of parking lots'; 'introduction of elements that facilitate better spatial orientation' and 'improvement in the state of maintenance of recreational areas' (Szafrańska 2014: 89). In the conclusion, E. Szafrańska (2014) explains that both spatial and functional changes and changes in physiognomy are caused by market processes and planned activities. She also notes the developers and entrepreneurs as one of the key actors in those processes, but putting emphasis on the processes and the invisible, almost naturalized abstraction known as the market deprives both tenants and the local authorities and investors of agency and, more importantly, responsibility. By euphemistically referring to the phenomenon that divided public opinion and emphasized class division as 'makeovers', the author manages to stick to the ideal of scientific objectivity. However, public spaces did not commercialize themselves nor did *pasteloza* just happen overnight, even though it might seem so. I believe that as social scientists we have the responsibility and the obligation to be blunt, or more precisely to be engaged through candour.

Huge constructions of prefabricated concrete blocks were painted over in hope that Styrofoam layers and bright colours would manage to conceal their 'communist nature'. The result, however, was far worse than expected. Always oversized, these structures have now become gigantic, colourful eyesores. Polish *pasteloza* has become the subject of mockery of domestic experts, progressive individuals and members of the middle class who grabbed the first opportunity to escape to the newly built houses in the suburbs, and to make fun of the bad

8 A play on words referring to the concept of chronotope (time-space) developed by the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin in 1937, and the concept of utopia used to describe idealized notions of both socialism and capitalism.

taste and the 'vulgar enthusiasm' of their former neighbours – from a safe distance.

According to E. Szafrańska (2014), Poland is suffering from 'the strong structural deficit on the housing market, the progressive degradation of pre-war housing resources, limitations put on private construction… (and) low incomes' (Szafrańska 2014: 78). Those factors have created 'a reality in which living in a block of flats was a dream for the majority of Poles, regardless of their social status' (Lewicka 2004 in Szafrańska 2014), and narratives of the informants confirm these claims.

'Before she got this apartment where I live now, my grandmother used to live in a village. They had no sewage, no central heating but I honestly think she exaggerated about no electricity. Moving to the new apartment with the balcony and central heating system, for her, was a paradise. My grandpa, however, never liked it and I think that was because he was afraid of heights.' (M, 26, Osiedle Orła Białego).

However, the narratives of my informants also bear witness to changes in the aspirations of the upper classes, thus the *bloki* have lost their dream-like image:

'Sometimes I joke with my neighbours that I wish I was their former friend, like all the doctors, lawyers and dentists that moved from our osiedle in the last couple of years.' (E, 50, Osiedle Orła Białego).

'I don't really have many friends here, most of my friends live on the other side of the river in the hipsterish, gentrified districts like Jeżyce. Ok, ok I know, this Chartowo tower, the one that looks like an egg is ugly and is said to be a brothel, and there are some burnt cars in the parking lot but it is not that bad. I mean it's really green and the people are nice.' (O. 25, Osiedle Rusa).

Of course, that phenomenon has already been noted by Polish scholars:

'As a result of the emergence of new forms of housing, and an increase in socioeconomic disparities, as well as changes in the housing aspirations of many inhabitants and growth in their purchasing power, in many post-socialist cities the residential prestige of such estates rapidly decreased.' (Szafrańska 2014: 78).

During most of the interviews conducted in blocks on the territory of the Youth Settlement, my informants talked about their former neighbours who have long since fled from the *bloki*,[9] dreaming of a Polish version of the American dream. They spoke with an ambivalent combination of anger and envy. And now, when pastelized blocks shine in new splendour, former friends, during random encounters complain that life in the suburbs is not what they imagined, that they lack greenery, infrastructure, parking lots, school, shops... Similarly, the combination of envy, disappointment and resignation finds its place in informants' responses on question about practical aspects of the makeovers known as *pasteloza:*

'This window here, it was my room when I was a teenager. Later my brother inherited the apartment, removed the walls and made it look fashionable before he decided to sell it. Like this polished new facade, for him it was only important for it to look nice, not to remind him of what it used to be. That room was the only property I ever had. Solidarity is an unknown concept in my family.' (L, 44, Osiedle Czecha).

'Well, to be honest I would really prefer to live in a house with a big garden and a patio and that rocking chair that looks like an egg, you know (laughter). But since there is no chance I'm getting there, having my bloki look nice and clean, especially on a sunny day in spring when everything is blooming… that's good enough.' (M, 26, Osiedle Orła Białego).

'I don't know, for me, this is like a typical, normal standard way of housing. I grew up in a similar settlement in Ukraine, but it was even more… ruined? Is that the right word? It was in worse condition, so this here is really nice. Maybe if it wasn't really pink it would be better, but I guess someone likes it the way it is.' (O, 25, Osiedle Rusa).

'I don't mind this baby blue. The only problem is that they probably used some low-quality paint so it gets dirty really quick from the rain, pollution or whatever.' (M, 20, Osiedle Czecha).

The fact is that the renovation of the façade is a superficial, relatively inexpensive intervention which in the short term changes the city landscape and the dominant aesthetics that demonstrate a desirable ideology, but it is also a cheap trick that in the long term intervenes over collective memory. Some of the responses, more or less explicitly, reflect on those processes:

9 *Blok mieszkalny* in Polish, multifamily residential unit made of refabricated concrete blocks, very common in Central, East and South East Europe.

'You may think this pink is ugly and kitsch, but I like it, because when it's coloured it doesn't remind me of my childhood.' (O, 25, Osiedle Rusa).

'I don't know, it's like IKEA. For example, I think that young people here like IKEA because they want to make new homes for themselves. It's not just the price, it's the simple design, white shelves, minimalism. You don't see that at your grandparents' house, your uncle's house, your parents' house. You go to university, move to a new city, change your home and you want everything to be different. So for me, I really like that this Osiedle is painted green, because the shape is almost the same as in Zielona Gora where I grew up, but at least it's different colour! I don't know if this makes any sense (laughter).' (P, 20, Osiedle Lecha).

'Of course they had to put on the makeup, to sell it better.' (M, 21, Osiedle Czecha).

'People say communism was bad and I don't think it was that bad. People say our bloki is ugly and I think it's not. Maybe I would just put new paint on the balcony and that's it, I like the way it is.' (M, 50, Osiedle Orła Białego).

However, by focusing on the higher, more abstract level of analysis we often overlook the common man and the importance that these little things have for him. In order to offer another angle of understanding pasteloza and make a step beyond the elitist outrage over the lack of taste, I will briefly, by reading from a 'bottom-up', try to argue why I believe that this practice of renovations, although undeniably (mis)used in order to gain hegemony over the dominant urban aesthetics and symbols, is not only understandable but potentially useful for the community.

One of the first impressions gained during the fieldwork was the incredible silence that constantly pressured me to revise my behaviour, expressiveness and manner of speech. Realizing that, I began to notice one other thing that is in direct conjunction with such 'aggressive silence'. Despite unusually warm and sunny weather and the large number of parks, lakes, squares and public spaces, citizens of Poznań do not seem to spend a lot of time outdoors (except for recreation and exercise). There were almost no dog-walkers, parents with strollers, no teenagers and students hanging out in parks (alcohol consumption in public spaces was recently prohibited), and no street musicians nor beggars. The only ones who were spending time outdoors aimlessly were we, the foreigners – tourists and international students.

Spending more and more time in the public realms (Lofland 1998) of housing estates and parks between buildings managed by the Cooperative, I learned that affirmative relation towards public spaces in Poland is in its formative stage. As one of my informants stated: "For Poles public spaces do not mean common[10] but equally nobody's. According to the 'simple geography of socialism'" (Lampland 1995: 273), the authors, like M. Lampland and K. Fehervary, argue that the division used to be clear: public spaces belonged to the state, private spaces of family homes belonged to the people. [11]

'The public spaces of the state, from bureaucratic office buildings and empty town squares to the stairwells and hallways of high-rise apartment buildings, were supposed to be collective spaces but in practice were spaces no one claimed. The unifying aesthetic of Socialist Modernism across residential and institutional buildings contributed to the perception that these public spaces, even in apartment buildings, belonged to the impersonal, unitary state' (Fehervary 2013: 16).

Unlike the yugo-nostalgic narratives that have been present (and fashionable) in our region for over a decade now, narratives about the PPR are still being whispered. The political and economic transformation of Poland has been fast, (in neoliberal terms) fairly successful and without drastic consequences. Seduced by the present, Poles of different generations did not feel the need to tell me myths about the 'golden past'. Childhood and youth in that country, according to my interviewees, were not to be desired. Decentralization laws passed in the mid-1990s, in the opinion of some of the informants increased citizen participation at the local level through active participation in housing cooperatives. Such insights might be taken as inspiration for designing a methodological apparatus for further research to delve into how different forms of civic engagement contribute to community building processes among the tenants of 'communist'[12] housing estates.

One of my informants was a middle-aged woman, a university professor who has been living in the White Eagle housing estate (Osiedle Orła Białego) since 1992. With incredible passion, she told me that they (inhabitants of the housing estate) were deciding about everything together at the meetings of their local community held in an elementary school. Speaking of *pasteloza*, tenants themselves decided on everything from the choice of

10 As in: shared, collective.

11 See also a series of photographs by Filip Springer (*Uncubemagazine*).

12 Communist as an adjective is often used by the informants to refer to objects and concepts from the period of state-socialism in Poland, thus the quotation marks.

colour palette, to the design solutions, to the contractor, and not only that. As the high-rise building (*blok,* in Polish) in which she lives with her family was built just before the fall of the PPR, and still does not need renovation, the tenants decided not to 'pastelize it', but to use money from the Cooperative fund for renovation to repair the elevator and to place solar panels on the roof, with which in the long term they saved electricity and money for the lighting and ventilation of the cellar and vertical and horizontal communication (elevator, staircase, corridors) inside the building. The revenues that the Cooperative acquires by renting business premises in the basements and ground floors of the buildings also go into a joint fund and it is usually used to finance daycare and excursions for preschool children, the work of the cultural centre, pensioners', sports and hobbyists' associations in the housing estates.

> 'I think that it is beautiful now, it is very bright and green! I must say that there are some Celtic crosses over there, close to the path I use to go to the market. It's just graffiti but you know, it's not nice. And I had that silly idea to offer to the local government to paint it for free. Just to make it nice and clean again. It was so good to do it and I am very proud (laughter). My friends first laughed at me but later they offered to help! I can show you where it was.' (P, 20, Osiedle Lecha).

It could, however, be discussed how much the middle-class background and social capital (Putnam 2000) of these informants contributes to their community building tendencies, sensibilization towards citizen participation and right to the city. Some of the other informants, immigrants and students who identify as anarchists and have moved into the observed housing estates recently think of this Housing Cooperative as a corrupted private business.

> 'It's just called a cooperative but it's not really a cooperative. It's a greedy private company just like any other in this country. They decide to renovate so they could make some jobs for their friends and share it, you know. Even if it would belong to the state it would be the same, it's just state-capitalism, it was never really socialism here. Anyway, I don't like that they call themselves a cooperative. (researcher: Have you ever attended a meeting of the Cooperative?) No… But I'm not even sure if they have meetings and can we as tenants attend them, it's not very transparent.' (E, 20, Osiedle Czecha).

> 'I have lived here for 5 years and I have no intention of moving soon, but I don't get the impression this is my home. Why? Because there is not many things I can choose here, maybe to buy new bedsheets or something smaller… Ok, maybe I am not fair, I work a lot and I don't know if I would be in a mood to sit in some room with my neighbours to talk about some broken elevator in the other building, but I guess it would be nice to know that I can if I want.' (O, 25, Osiedle Rusa).

The idea behind contrasting these opposing narratives was not to grasp the only objective truth about Housing Cooperatives in Poland, to claim that these 'makeovers' (Szafrańska 2014) possess intrinsic capacity for community building and development of citizen participation and social trust in Poland, nor to, in the manner of investigative journalism, reveal any shady business behind the colourful facades. Its modest goal was to introduce the emic perspective (Kottak 2006) into the scholarly discussion on this ubiquitous phenomenon and combine it with already existing, scientific knowledge of the phenomenon.

Having said all of the above, I do not want to deny that the phenomenon of *pasteloza* is an inseparable part of the post-socialist transformation, and that it is one of the most obvious results of the symbolic struggle for the city. However, if we leave aside aesthetic and symbolic codes for a moment, and try to understand the ways in which the *pasteloza* is realized, we can consider it a result of the possibility for tenants to use the mechanisms called civic participation in the neoliberal vocabulary, while they are known as urban self-management in the neo-marxist social theory (Lefebvre 2003). By those mechanisms, tenants gained freedom of choice and the right to decide on the appearance of their apartments, buildings, communities and settlements, as well as on the flow of money, but also to recognize the responsibility that came with decision making. According to my respondents, this new model of functioning of housing cooperatives not only contributed to the integration of neighbours and the development of solidarity and sense of community, but to a large extent enabled 'the right to the city' (Lefebvre 2008: 28) to tenants, as members of a cooperative. However, we could at the same time use those mechanisms to reassess the role of housing cooperatives in exclusion of certain groups of the population (subtenants, immigrants) from decision-making processes in the private rental sector.

Concluding remarks

The research has provided a basis for the vindication of crimes against the aesthetics embodied in the phenomenon of *pasteloza*. The aim of this paper was to offer a layout for a more detailed understanding of this 'colouristic

disease'. In the case of Poznań, at least judging by the narratives of my informants, during the transitional and post-transitional processes a compromise with aesthetics was made in favour of civic participation. By offering a combination of contextual understanding, theoretical analysis and the emic perspective this paper argues for an engaged approach to an urban phenomenon that is critical and analytical as well as sensible for the mundane.

The built environment of the city, or 'hard territorial capital ' (Petrović 2014: 371), is in direct interaction with our world; more precisely, it is our world. Understanding the different housing estates and their inhabitants requires the social scientist to descend to the ground, to understand that the life-worlds focus on the everyday life in the material environment (Hyler 2013: 372).

On the other hand, in the sociology of the city and related disciplines, cities are often interpreted as 'entities independent of their inhabitants' (Magnani 2005: 11–29). They are conceived as completely determined by the transitional economy, local elites, political lobbies, demographic variables and other macro factors. L. Lofland (1990) claims that the tendency for sociologists to denigrate the study of certain areas of social life that they define as not 'big' enough, not 'important' enough, and not sufficiently amenable to 'hard' techniques is a part of a syndrome she labelled as 'exaggerated manliness'.

On this occasion, I do not want to challenge the influence of these macro factors on the appearance and future of our cities, but to offer an additional perspective in which the city is not just a set design deprived of everyday life, activities, actions, meeting places, and social relations – a city whose citizens are not passive recipients (Barthes 1991), where people are not added to the rendered images of the city just for the sake of scale. Analysing the phenomenon of *pasteloza* in such a manner was my way to intertwine macro- and micro-level analysis in order to offer a non-binary approach that would clasp historical, political and economic contextualization, the stakeholder's perspectives and those of the tenants.

Surprisingly or not – narratives of the denizens of large housing estates in Poznań mainly do not recognize *pasteloza* as an aesthetically disturbing, grotesque ideological intervention in the urban landscape, but focus mainly on the functional and financial aspects of the makeover, and more importantly on the very mechanisms that run the process of 'pastelization'. Those mechanisms and decision-making practices established by the Housing Cooperative create the sense of belonging and call to participation for some, while simultaneously excluding and renouncing the others. The visual, material manifestation of those processes, the *pasteloza* itself, is in the background.

Without further research a conclusion cannot be offered. However, the question arises as to whether this phenomenon is coming to an end?

'Poland proved to be the most suitable for transformation from all the countries of the European continent: it once was the widest kingdom in Europe, and only two centuries later it completely disappeared, before it returned to its former frame, and then moved about a hundred miles west. With each of these stages, the border of the Western world was also moving (...) but history also shows that arbitrary borders, albeit the most unstable, on the other hand, survive the most persistently in human consciousness precisely because of the representations they carry' (Gerva & Rose 2010: 188).

The greatest wave of pastelization has passed. With economic stabilization, the need for proving one's progressive, full European identity to the West is slowly disappearing. As the necessity of the overstatement of consumerist identity begins to fade, this dark communist past is approached more and more objectively.

In this sense, critics of communist architecture are beginning to realize that although the freedom, creativity and innovativeness of architects were once restricted by rigid norms and central planning, the creativity of their successors is equally strictly organized by the credit ratings of citizens and the will of investors. On the other hand, housing co-operatives, having realized the 'aesthetic crimes' committed over their facades, are deciding to (re-) renovate. This time they are consulting experts and opting for a more modest palette. Will there, when the experts express their opinions, leave some room for the voices and opinions of the 'invisible' denizens of the housing estates?

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