Panelka Beyond Ideology:
In between a remnant of Soviet reality and a catalyst for individuality

Aleksandra I. Shopova | City of the Future | PS
“I remember, I wanted to change the original wallpaper because I saw how beautiful my neighbours’ apartment was. Their wallpaper was beautifully embossed, but it was a bathroom one. They had painted it over with latex paint, so the whole wall looked embossed... very beautiful. Ever since I saw it, I went crazy for it. I drove all over town but there was none to buy. Wherever I went, I would search for it. Finally, I went to Assenovgrad and found it in a shop. When I said “I want 11 rolls!” the woman squinted her eyes and asked “Excuse me?! How big is your bathroom?!” So I answered “As big as a living room and a kitchen!”. She said “But the wallpaper is for a bathroom! How are you going to install it in a living room and kitchen?!” I said “Just like that!” (Laughs)

“In a nutshell, it was all do-it-yourself and it was a great pleasure.”
Panelka (Панелка) is a Bulgarian term, which refers to prefabricated panel apartment buildings, constructed during the Soviet period (1950-1989)
The conundrum of Panelka

- short-term housing solution
- designed to correspond with the needs of communist society
- perceived as outdated
- long outlived the life span of 20 years
- host of democratic society
- continues developing today through residents interventions
Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space

Perceived space:
Any neutral physical environment

Conceived space:
The political and social lens through which the environment is viewed

Lived space:
The way one interacts with their environment

Social space:
The perceived, conceived, and lived space produce the social space
The social space of Panelka during the Soviet period

**Perceived space:**
Panelka neighbourhoods were often created from scratch and are easily replicated

**Conceived space:**
Soviet ideology was the dominant political and social lens. Panelka’s were part of “building communism”. It was seen as the ideal living space for the ‘soviet citizen’

**Lived space:**
Social surveillance limited self expression to the private realm
The social space of Panelka during the Transition

Conceived space during the Soviet period:
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Conceived space during the Transition:
Due to the change in the political climate, the political and social lens of Soviet ideology was removed, resulting in uncontrolled freedom
The social space of Panelka during the Transition
Plovdiv as the research site
Original concept of Trakiya
From concept to execution
"Weren’t they going to build an opera house there?! And a park... and an opera..."
Panelka types and configurations

the 5 types

the 92 type configurations
“We’ve did the parking lot ourselves, the landscaping outside as well. We built the gazebo by the entrance. G.(her husband) planted all the trees in front. The ones on the other side of the block, as well as on the street side... he planted them, even the walnut trees. He wanted a walnut tree garden. Nobody told us what to do in front of our block entrance beforehand.”
Residents’ public interventions

Gazebo

Rancho

Shops

Gardens

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The balcony as a means to Panelka’s identity

“The authors of the Plovdiv nomenclature (...) set themselves the task of breaking the boredom and greyness of large-panel residential construction”

- the journal “Architektura”, 1979
“Were we allowed to enclose the balcony?”
“Well, it was ambiguous” (Laughs)
“We weren’t allowed to, but we enclosed it.”

- Panelka resident, 2022

The balcony as a means to residents’ identity
We were allowed to apply for an apartment. Then the commander called me in: “Do you agree to this apartment?” “I agree!” “Have you asked the wife?” “Ah, there’s nothing to ask; she knows I’ll take her to a better place!”
“Here everyone became very creative when it came to enclosing rooms.”

Apartment transformations

functionalist layout  traditional BG layout
Panelka in flux

diversity unleashed during the Transition period

established “order” for oneself, results in multiplicity of order in the public

vertical plane: individual
horizontal plane: collective

everved vernacular character
Sennett’s borders and boundaries

Trakiya’s spatial boundaries:

- Car stops
- Disconnection
- Blind facades
- Grass deserts

Trakiya’s interventions:

- Orientation
- Places for encounter
- Individuality in the public realm
- Individuality in the private realm
The “re-production” of space

1. social space: soviet period
2. social space: post-soviet period
3. social space: design proposal
Type: BS-V-VII-223-223
The Panelka strategy

existing attachment method of prefabricated panels
The Panelka strategy
The extension
Connection between the extension and Panelka
Diversification of the apartment layouts

existing Panelka

the Panelka strategy
Ensuring the structural integrity

the Panelka strategy

existing Panelka

the Panelka strategy
Variation in living space

existing Panelka

the Panelka strategy
Variation in living space

BS-V-VIII-223-223

BS-V-VIII-424

BS-V-VIII-223

BS-V-VIII-333

BS-V-VIII-234
Variation in living space
Iva and Vasil have been living in apartment #21 since they first got married in 1976...
... when Block 168 got renovated apartment #21 got extended and became too big for the elderly couple...
... so they rearranged and subletted apartment #21 to the three students - Kristian, Denislav and Elena...
.. a couple of years later apartment #21 was the home of the elderly's couple daughter, Silvana, and her partner Stefan, when they first moved back from Berlin to Plovdiv...
... in apartment #21 they had their first child, Petar...
...as Stefan was offered a new position in Sofia, apartment #21 was sold to Gabi and Presi, two sisters, which created the studios #21a and #21b.
The floor construction

modular underfloor heating and cooling system

cardboard honeycomb panel with perlite infill
element A: blind facades

element B: openings

element C: balconies

element D: loggias

Panelka’s facade upclose
Panelka’s rhythm
Panelka’s rhythm

BS-V-VIII-223-223

BS-V-VIII-333

BS-V-VIII-234
Panelkas’ rhythm
Facade elements
Crown
Vertical zoning
Vertical zoning
Vertical zoning
“Two-sided” character

layering of public and private
“Two-sided” character
"Two-sided" character
“Public” geometry
Current urban situation
Current urban situation
The Panelka strategy
Existing methodology
Existing methodology
Degrees of participation
Degrees of participation
Degrees of participation
Degrees of participation
UPCYCLING:
of the old materials and structures: the concrete of the demolished walls/balconies is going to be used in the process of creating the facade elements.

LOCAL MATERIALS:
in the region the production of the following materials is supported: wood fibre boards, perlite, CLT, LVL, recycled honeycomb cardboard.

EASY DIS-ASSEMBLAGE:
the construction method allows for easy dis-assemble, even by unskilled people: this ensures flexibility of the apartments, as well as afterlife of the used materials.

PROGRAMME FLEXIBILITY:
the change of programme (private and public) allows for multiple life cycles of the Panelka buildings.

Pilars of circularity
Conceptual masterplan

- City exit
- Plovdiv center
- Built edu. facilities
- Unbuilt edu. facilities
- Arterial road
- Main road
- Public backbone

- Park
- Cultural facility
- New public zone
- Existing public zone
- New activity core
Resident interventions as inspiration to turn boundaries into borders