The stigmatization of the user in architecture. Decomposing social housing in Romania

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to explore how decisions surrounding the social housing in Romania contribute to the stigmatization of its users, thereby hindering their ability to overcome their economic condition. By deconstructing the characteristics and policies of social housing in Romania, the study highlights the impact of location, poor-quality construction, and inadequate urban integration on the residents, in relation to the difficulties in which the vast majority of the Romanian population is living. It argues that these decisions, rather than fostering social inclusion, perpetuate a cycle of poverty, reinforcing the social exclusion of low-income individuals. Through an analysis of architectural and urban planning choices, the paper seeks to demonstrate how these factors contribute to the marginalization of users and prevent their upward mobility, ultimately reinforcing the stigma associated with social housing and its residents.

Keywords: social housing, rental market, low-income individuals, social segregation, economic stigma

1 INTRODUCTION

Peter Malpass describes, in an article for the book Social Housing in Europe, two perspectives for explaining social housing throughout history, arguing that the relevance of categorizing social housing lies in the fact that it offers us a vision of where this program is heading in different European countries.[1] According to Malpass, we can analyze what social housing represents in different countries from the perspective of similarities, thus a convergent approach, or from the perspective of differences, thus a divergent approach. These two approaches represent the extremes of a spectrum in which an analysis of social housing can be placed. The two poles are determined by the consideration that architecture and the policies governing it respond under the influence of a predominant factor. The first pole, the convergent approach, asserts that this factor is the local impact of global capitalism—different countries will find increasingly similar policies to address a common problem.[1] The second pole, the divergent approach, argues that architecture and governance policies respond to cultural structures and are based on the belief that the world is divided into zones where capitalism operates differently; thus, capitalism could not be considered a universal determining factor of the same response.[1]

Michael Harloe, in the book “The People's Home?”, divides the history of social housing into three phases, directly corresponding to the phases of capitalism. The first stage, liberal capitalism, covers the period between the beginnings of industrialization and the 1930s, during which interest in the well-being of the middle class was very little discussed.[1] The second phase, the period of Fordism, saw an increased interest in the development of public services and social protection, more dominant after 1945, and it ended during the global economic crisis of the 1970s.[1] In architecture, this period represents a time of research and experimentation with forms of collective and social living, followed by the regulation of housing standards. During the last stage, Post-Fordism, after 1970, the states felt less confident in their ability to manage the economy in the face of globalization, leading to a decline in investments in social housing.[1] Other authors argue that for Central and Eastern European states, 1989 represents rather a turning point,[1] coinciding with the fall of the Communist Bloc. Since each period of capitalism defined the user of social housing differently, Harloe identifies two models of social housing: the residual model and the mass model.

The residual model, which emerged at the beginning of industrialization, was dedicated to the most economically vulnerable group and presented only the minimum necessary qualities. In the early interwar period, the mass model emerged, which was no longer dedicated solely to the poor but also to the middle class, offering more qualities than the previous model. Between 1920 and 1938, the residual model predominated; however, after World War II, social housing became the most developed program among architects of the time, aiming to eradicate slums.[1] After 1970, the mass model was gradually replaced by the residual model. Harloe asserts that the residual model continues to be predominant, while the mass model appears only in special circumstances.[1]

This classification of social housing is criticized by other authors as being applicable only to the United Kingdom, as the mass model is almost non-existent in the United States.[1] However, the conclusions regarding the next 30 years of development—i.e., contemporary times—are shared by several authors, namely that social housing is predominantly residual and intended for the poor. Harloe argued in his 1995 book that governments would reduce their financial responsibility in this process by privatizing the housing stock and narrowing the economic profile of the user.[1] Moreover, Harloe anticipates a shift toward homeownership at the expense of renting, an aspect that today competes with the growing demand for social housing.

Jim Kemeny, unlike the authors of the convergent approach, who argue that economic forces are impossible to control, considers that the economic market is a social construct, subject to political influence; thus, countries will choose different strategies.[1] At the core of his study is the distinction between the dual rental market and the unitary rental market. Most European countries have a unitary rental market, meaning they have adopted policies to minimize as much as possible the differences in quality, price, and social appeal between private and public housing supply.[1] A dual rental market means that the

private and public sectors have different regulatory policies. Countries with such markets opt for policies that reduce the attractiveness—and therefore the competition—of the social sector, pushing rhetoric about the advantages of homeownership, which leads to a residual model and narrows the social mix within renting as a whole.[1]

Kemeny argues in his 1995 publication that the gap between the two market models will continue to widen. However, in many countries, even in those with a unitary market, an increase in homeownership is observed, along with trends toward a concentration of low-income individuals and social assistance beneficiaries.[1] Thus, socio-economic segregation, which perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty,[2] is determined by the relationship between the public and private markets. The more unequal this ratio, the greater the segregation, and the architectural response offered to the less profitable sector will be of increasingly lower quality.

Both Harloe and Kemeny emphasize the increase in homeownership at the expense of renting—not necessarily because people can increasingly afford to buy, but because the quality-price ratio of renting is becoming more and more disadvantageous. The effect of this trend will be a reduction in social diversity in the rental sector,[1] and an increase in the stigmatization of social housing, with the goal of minimizing competition in the market. If the social housing model were to surpass the residual model, one could assume that it would bring changes to the way we currently perceive the "need" to own a home. Thus, from the narrow perspective that analyzes only real estate market data, it seems that the population is divided into two major financial groups: those who purchase a home and those who either cannot afford it at all or can only access the market with great financial sacrifices.

Throughout history, the architecture of social housing has been determined by the response to the question: who is it dedicated to? The more the user has been stigmatized, the lower the quality of the response.

Today, countries such as Germany, Austria, and France have developed functional systems for providing social housing and social policies based on support from the private sector. In late capitalism, social assistance can represent a sector within the economic market, not only by supporting the construction industry but also by the fact that landlords are encouraged by the state, through various benefits, to offer their properties as social housing. The involvement of the private sector in the provision of social housing results in the mass model. In Romania, this dimension of the real estate market, where public and private investments coexist is not present—the social housing model remains residual.

2 THE USER OF SOCIAL HOUSING

The target group for social housing, according to most literature, is generally defined as a household in a state of "need," vulnerable to poverty, and lacking access to decent housing.[3] Each state and local administration defines what this state of need entails. In many European countries, social housing users are generally from the middle class, making this target group a fluid one, depending on the context.[3]

The criteria for accessing social housing in Romania, according to the Housing Law, are as follows: having an income below the national average income; not currently owning a home, nor having owned and sold a home after 1990; not having benefited from state support in loans and execution for the construction of a home; and not being a tenant of another state-owned housing unit.[4]

The Municipality of Timișoara includes among its selection criteria for social housing beneficiaries: "not occupying and not having previously occupied abusively a property owned by the Romanian State/in the ownership of the Municipality of Timișoara."[5] In addition, besides the aforementioned criterion, the Cluj-Napoca Municipality required proof of a monthly income sufficient to cover rent and expenses.[6] The non-profit association “Căsi Sociale Acum!” challenged such criteria in court, with the only resolution being that social assistance benefits are also considered eligible income for social housing.[6]

3 TYPES OF PUBLIC HOUSING IN ROMANIA

Affordable housing in Romania has three legally recognized forms: social housing, ANL (National Housing Agency) housing, and Housing provided for work. Additionally, there are Necessity Housing and Support Housing, which follow the same regulatory requirements as social housing but are offered in cases where a home has become uninhabitable or in the event of a forced eviction.

Housing provided by the National Housing Agency (ANL) falls under various programs, such as the "Housing Program for Young People Aged 18-35," which is often confused with social housing. Unlike social housing, ANL housing can be sold to tenants after one year of renting. This means that ANL housing does not become part of the public housing stock, thus ensuring its long-term stability. Another program is the "Housing Program through Mortgage Credit," which helps Romanian citizens gain access to private property housing with state support. According to Government Emergency Ordinance 55/2021, education and healthcare professionals are eligible for ANL housing within the administrative-territorial unit where they are employed, regardless of age, provided they do not own private property within that area. Once construction is completed, the responsibility for distributing the housing falls on the local administration.[4]

The key difference between ANL housing and social housing lies in the eligibility threshold, as ANL programs serve a more limited category of beneficiaries. According to the Housing Law, Article 2, letter c: "Social housing is housing allocated with subsidized rent to individuals or families whose economic situation does not allow them to purchase a home or rent one under market conditions." Social housing belongs to the public domain, cannot be sold, and is rented by municipalities at a cost that does not exceed 10% of the net monthly income of the household, calculated over the past 12 months.

According to Article 44 of the Housing Law, rental contracts for social housing are granted for a period of five years, with the possibility of renewal based on eligibility documents. Each administrative-territorial unit manages the eligibility conditions, required documentation, and the allocation process.

Housing provided for work can be rented to employees in the public sector. These units may be existing homes, newly built homes financed by the state on state-owned land, or financed by economic agents and located on their land. According to the Housing Law, it can be sold if the activity that justified its creation has ceased.[4]

In addition to these two well-known forms of public housing, there are also dwellings with a social purpose, a term that does not exist in the Housing Law but is a tactic used by most municipalities to meet the demand for social housing. "Spaces designated as housing belonging to the public or private domain of the state or its administrative-territorial units, as well as service housing, intervention housing, and dormitories for employees of commercial companies, national companies, and autonomous administrations," operate based on a rate established by Decision No. 310 of March 28, 2007.[7] In other words, the state owns spaces designated as housing, which local authorities allocate to individuals applying for social housing in exchange for a rent calculated according to the aforementioned Decision.(table 3.1) The disadvantage of this type of housing is that the term "social" is used to justify the poor architectural quality of the dwellings provided, thus contributing to the stigmatization of the word.

Types of surfaces	Rates(RON/mp)
Livable area / Usable area	0.84
The area of the entrance hall, corridor, kitchen, veranda, pantry, bathroom.	0.34
The area of terraces, loggias, cellars, storage rooms, laundries, drying rooms	0.19
The area of garages	1.27
The area of special facilities: swimming pool, wine cellar, sauna, etc.	1.27
The area of household annexes, rural environment	0.02

Table 3.1 Rent calculation rates

4 CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL HOUSING

Social housing is intended for low-income individuals, subsidized by the state, offered and regulated by local public administration at a price that does not exceed 10% of the tenant's income. Social housing will be located only on land belonging to public administration. They are rented for a period of 5 years, with the possibility of extending the contract, it cannot be sold, and must meet the minimum requirements imposed by housing law.[4]

Firstly, social housing is intended for low-income individuals, more precisely, "families or individuals with a net monthly average income per person, earned in the last 12 months, below the level of the average net monthly salary for the entire economy, communicated by the National Institute of Statistics in the latest Statistical Bulletin prior to the month in which the demand is analyzed, as well as the month before the allocation of the housing." The rent price is influenced by the usable area of the housing and is regulated by the local councils to which the housing belongs, but it should not exceed 10% of the family's income. The maintenance of the space and maintenance costs are the responsibility of the local administration, while utility costs are borne by the tenant.

Secondly, social housing will only be located on land belonging to public administration. In general, this type of housing is placed on the outskirts of cities, but social segregation has negative effects on both the individual and the urban fabric. The lack of social infrastructure leads to a decrease in the quality of life in a neighborhood and increases crime, alongside the stigma on social housing users, which leads to segregation.[8] An individual growing up in a poor neighborhood has fewer chances of receiving adequate education, and therefore, later, a stable job that could help them overcome their economic condition.[2] Thus, social segregation is a condemnation to a vicious cycle of poverty. Social housing should be viewed as a safety net for citizens and should encourage them to use it only temporarily, providing the opportunity to overcome their economic condition. Therefore, proper placement reduces the risk of slums development, with the social mix being an important factor.

5 VICIOUS CIRCLE OF STIGMATIZATION

The issue of access to decent housing in Romania is a consequence of the political regime change, in addition to other factors contributing to the global housing crisis. The transition of the housing stock from public to private ownership resulted in a reduced government involvement in the construction of new housing, shifting the responsibility onto individuals to meet this need. However, investors tend to focus only on a few key cities for real estate developments, while those with populations under 50,000 are generally avoided.[9]

The issue of access to decent housing takes on a more serious connotation when we analyze some data about Romania's population. According to Eurostat data, in 2020, the poverty and social exclusion rate in Romania was 14.2% higher than the European Union average, and 10.5% higher than the EU average for the percentage of the population suffering from severe housing deprivation.[6] "Severe housing deprivation includes cases where overcrowding is combined with at least one of the following housing deprivations: poor condition of the roof, walls, foundation, doors, windows, limited access to light, lack of toilet or bathroom inside the house."[6] Additionally, the percentage of the population with an income below 60% of the median income, considered to be poor, is 34.8% in Romania, compared to the EU average of 8.7%.

We define overcrowding when the living space is significantly reduced in relation to the household occupying the space. Overcrowding, also considered housing deprivation, is at 45.1% in Romania, according to Eurostat data from 2019, compared to the EU average of 17.1%. The parliamentary resolution on access to decent housing mentions Romania as one of the five countries in the EU where citizens are deprived of essential health facilities, such as a bathroom, shower, or toilet inside, with 27.7% of the population affected.[10]

In Romania, access to urban housing is 98% through the private sector,[11] where rental and

sale prices are constantly increasing. According to the platform Imobiliare.ro, the national average sale price of an apartment has increased by 13.2% (193€/sqm) compared to last year. In August 2024, the average price per square meter in Romania was 1,656€/sqm, with monthly increases of 1–2%. The average salary in Romania, according to INS, for September 2024, is approximately 1,250€. These continuous price increases are not directly proportional to income increases; they are speculative.

Considering all these issues, it must be noted that the stock of social housing is very limited. As mentioned earlier, starting from the 1990s, the public housing stock has gradually decreased, and according to INS, in 2019, the Romanian state owned only 1.23% of the housing stock, down from 32.6% in 1990.[9] In 2011, only a quarter of the public housing stock was used as social housing.[9] In 2020, it was recorded that only 2% of the total housing stock was allocated to social housing. The presence of adequate social housing might mitigate speculations in Romania's private rental sector.[6]

6 CONCLUSIONS

Housing is the architectural program with the greatest impact on the user; the right to housing is a fundamental right and a core factor for the right to education and the right to health. Social housing emerges to support the equal presence of all participants in the urban environment. However, contrary to its purpose, the decisions surrounding this program contribute to the stigmatization of the user, making it difficult for them to escape their economic condition. Decisions such as the location outside the city, the use of cheap materials, and the use of low-quality public housing stock as a social offering. Thus, a toxic codependency arises between architecture and the user: the user receives something of poor quality, it degrades over time, the user is blamed, and the cycle continues, reinforcing the idea that people with low incomes do not deserve quality architecture.

Urban segregation has its roots in economic stigma, the association we make between the user and architecture, almost like a mirror, is both the result and the determinant of the vicious cycle of poverty. The misfortune of living in a neighborhood that does not offer educational prosperity, job opportunities, green spaces, and safety represents a generational condemnation to poverty. The role of architecture in this scenario is to combat the stigma associated with the word "social." Connecting poor-quality architecture with low-income people contributes to their stigmatization and their exclusion from the social framework. More than just a type of architectural program or a sector on the market, housing is "a primary architectural act," "it begins where a line drawn separates the interior from the exterior, and then, one house from another. Under the rules of urban development, this relationship is structurally unequal."[12]

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