

Call for Proposals

“The social experiences of urban space in socialist cities of Eastern Europe”

Workshop in Ghent, Belgium

30–31 January 2025

Organisers: Brigitte Le Normand (Maastricht University) & Pieter Troch (Ghent University)

State socialist modernisation left a strong mark on the urban landscape of Eastern Europe. For a long time, scholars from various disciplines have been preoccupied with the distinguishing features of ‘the socialist city’. Urban historians have highlighted the gap between ideological projections of cities as sites of socialist transformation and the realities of socialist urban planning and governance. Urban geographers have analysed the particular spatial features of the socialist city. They have identified intra-urban patterns of socio-spatial differentiation, which were conditioned by the economy of shortage and the centrally-planned economy. Finally, urban historians, geographers and anthropologists alike have demonstrated the legacy elements at work in the socio-spatial organisation and everyday engagements with the urban in post-socialist cities.

This workshop aims to go beyond what Jennifer Robinson has termed the ‘categorization imperative’ in urban studies and highlights the diversified experiences of socialist urbanity. Some of the inequalities in socialist societies literally took place in the city. The primacy of economic actors in allocating urban resources that were in chronic short supply led to unequal access to housing and urban facilities depending on employment sector and skills. The priority gap between the city and the village became an urban concern, as large groups of ‘peasant urbanites’ settled in urban peripheries and brought in rural practices perceived as anachronistic. Because the planned economy unevenly distributed priority economic activities, a sharp urban hierarchy emerged depending on the economic and political functions ascribed to particular cities and regions. These regional divergences intersected with the strong historical variation in the urban landscape of Eastern Europe, from the Ottoman cities of Southeast Europe to the Hanseatic trade cities of the Baltic region and the Islamic and Russian settler cities of Central Asia. Finally, regardless of the status of cities or regions in the urban landscape, the prospects of relative urban prosperity were limited in time and by the 1980s, the socialist city had lost much of its appeal.

This workshop brings together urban historians and scholars of cognate disciplines with a historical perspective for a discussion of the variegated social experiences of the socialist city in Eastern Europe. The workshop invites case studies focussing on singular cities, multiple sites or regions from across the Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia. It particularly welcomes studies of second-tier or unexemplary socialist cities or regions. Possible topics for contributions include (but are not restricted to):

- Socio-spatial differentiation within urban environments and across regions.
- Rural-to-urban migration and rurbanisation.
- Social practices, including segregation and conviviality.
- Discourses of urbanity.
- Legacies of imperial and socialist urbanisation.

In addition to recognising the sheer diversity in the socialist urban landscape of Eastern Europe, the workshop engages conceptually with social relations to urban space. The urban geographer Doreen Massey speaks of ‘social spatiality’ to convey that spatial and various social identities are constructed together. Social groups have identifiable relations to space and these are constitutive of social identities. By bringing together historical case-studies scrutinising the social relations to socialist urban spaces, we can better account for the social impact of socialist urban transformation.

The workshop will feature a keynote by Heather D. DeHaan, Associate Professor of History and Director of Russian and East European Studies at Binghamton University, where she teaches a range of graduate and undergraduate courses in Soviet, urban, and Eurasian history. Her first monograph, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), grappled with regional planning politics in the early Stalin period. Aiming for a more bottom-up perspective on city-making, her current research examines intra- and inter-ethnic relations in Soviet Baku, the multi-ethnic capital of Azerbaijan, in the late Soviet period. Her research has received support from the US

Fulbright Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Kennan Institute.

Guidelines: Please send a title and abstract (300 words) as well as a short biographical statement (100 words) by 30 September 2024 to pieter.troch@ugent.be and b.lenormand@maastrichtuniversity.nl. Accommodation and subsistence will be provided. Travel grants are available upon request and subject to budget availability.