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## TO THE PROBLEMS OF REVITALIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACES IN EASTERN BLOC HOUSING ESTATES

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**Abstract.** The article is a contribution to the discussion about the revitalizations of over-dimensioned and characterless public spaces in housing estates areas in the Eastern Bloc. The Central Park in Southern Town I – the largest housing estate in Prague – is a significant example of such public space.

The article presents the main results of two different but complementary analysis of the Central Park. Analysis “from below” (the user’s perspective) is based on the results of anthropological research in the area. Analysis “from above” is based on personal experience of an urban planner.

According to the authors only the triangulation of anthropological and architectural/urban planning methods of reading place allows to come near to complex understanding of place, its character and identity.

The authors point out the importance of participation of the users in the revitalizations, which is an important condition of the broad acceptance of the result. Most of the Czech municipalities are still mistrustful of participatory processes. That brings many unnecessary problems.

**Keywords:** housing estates, public space, revitalization, park, Eastern Bloc, Prague.

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### Introduction

The research presented in this article aims at identifying specific character and identity of “Central Park”. The Central Park is the largest public space in the area of *Southern Town I* [Jižní Město I], the older and with over 50 000 inhabitants more populated part of complex of housing estates built up in the 1970<sup>th</sup> and 1980<sup>th</sup> in the south-eastern suburb of Prague. The Central Park spreads itself in the length over 800 metres and an average width 140 metres between the underground stations *Opatov* and *Háje*. It was planned as an ambitious project of a respected Czech land artist *Magdalena Jetelová*, but it was never fully realized as it was not realized the original town plans of Southern

Town in general (see Lasovský 1984). Southern Town is not and (as the last multicriterial analysis shows) will be probably not a deprived, socially isolated area in the foreseeable future (see Maier 2003), which is an important fact for the further discussion about the possible ways of the revitalization of its Central Park.

The Central Park is a 11 hectares large narrow green space surrounded by a dense housing zones (see Fig. 1). The urban conception of Southern Town I is based on a modernist division of functions. The functional plan has placed the main commercial facilities and parking places along two parallel main roads (*Hviezdoslavova* and *Opatovská*) distanced ca. 700 metres. The public



Fig. 1. Orthophotomap of the area

facilities (day-cares, schools, high schools, policlinics etc.) are situated in the “backyard” of the town – on the boarder of the Central Park (see Fig. 2).

The main roads are conceived as access roads with no correlation to the pedestrian paths and the general city composition. The car roads consequently create a typical tree-structural environment with missing connections within the quarter. The city structure is missing a real street network and has very low potential for inner connectivity. Besides the two main roads there are no other access roads in both directions of the whole Southern Town I. The two parts of the town are connected only through the Central Park for pedestrians. The main axis of the urban composition is the Central Park, build on the top of the metro line between two main the stations Háje and Opatov.

The city facilities are centralized in four main attraction points forming a cross (two points in the middle of car roads Hvězdoslavova and Opatovická and the two metro stations Háje and Opatov). Unfortunately the intention to create a mixed function area along the road Chilská was not realised and the metro station Opatov is a disconnected and distanced point in the middle of an undefined area. The station Háje is also distanced and cannot be considered a centre of the Southern Town I. This situation weakens the importance and functionality of the Central Park as a key public space.

The functional division, reinforced by the road structure, makes the Central Park peripheral space rather than central public space. This unintentional effect of the town planning solution is reinforced by the large closed school areas that create a barrier between the housing estates and the park.

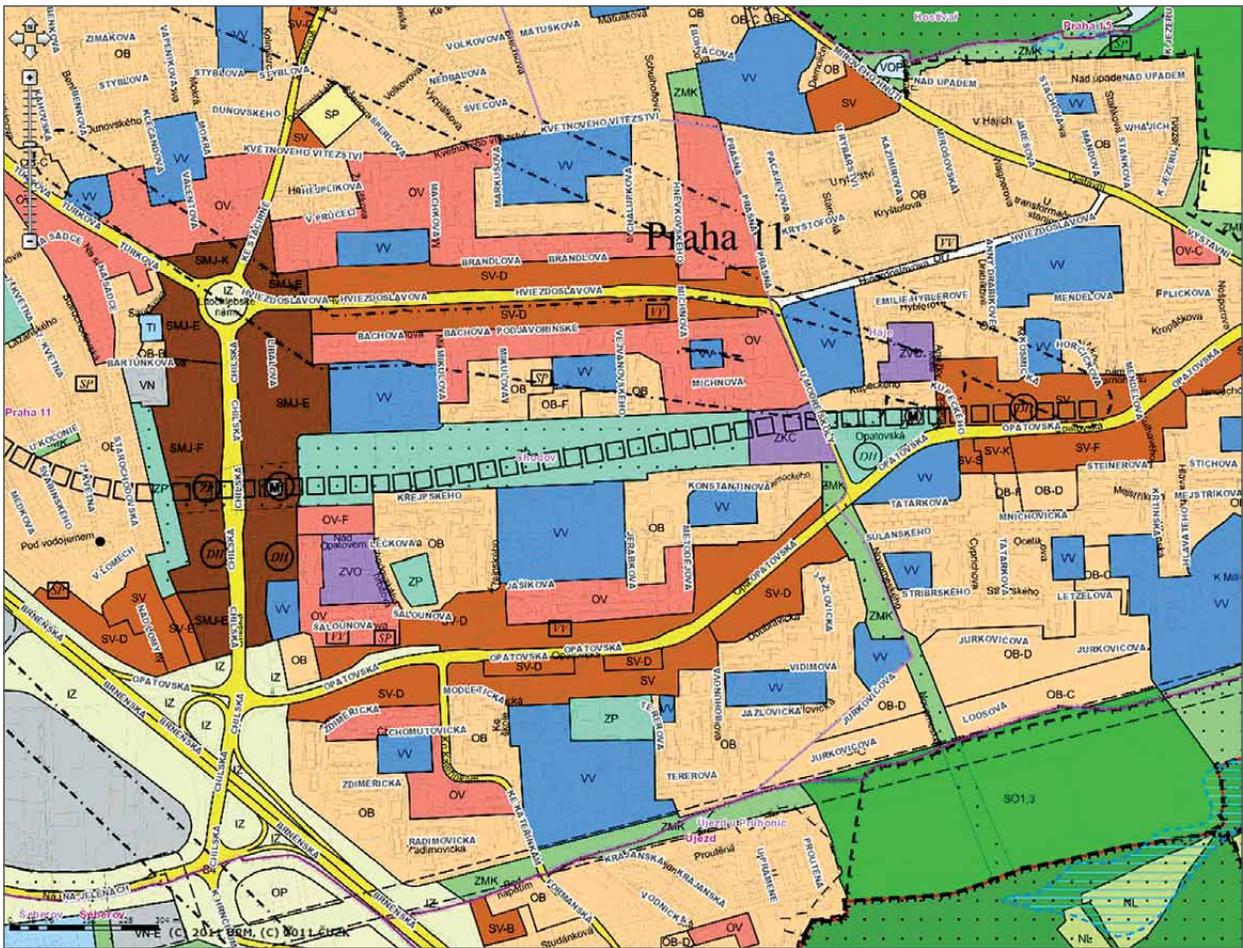
For the authors of this case study is the Central an example of over-dimensioned and undefined public spaces typical for Eastern Bloc housing estates which is a result of the confrontation of the modernist idea of a city in a park with the limited economic and technological possibilities of the state.

### Methodology

The problems of the identity of urban spaces are possible to see from two different views. The first view may be called ontological-historic and the second one anthropological. The authors believe that only the triangulation of those different but complementary approaches leads to a colourful image of a place and to deeper understanding to the place identity.

*Ontological-historic* perspective covers a wide range of interpretative techniques coming from the knowledge of theory, history and phenomenology of architecture. It is an ethic view, following the changes of a place in a long period. It is a tool useful to uncover changes of a place occurring in different time layers of the development of place and to identify its causes and consequences. It allows to answer the question *what is a place* and *what does it mean* to experience a place as meaningful. But it is not sufficient to describe the social dynamic of place. In this article is the ontological-historic view of place based on observation in the area and the interpretation of relevant town planning documents.

This deficiency is compensated with the *anthropological perspective*, which evidently comes out from the linguistic paradigm. It does not ask, what is the world which is given to us, but *what can we understand*, how can we ravel out the web of meanings which we spin ourselves. Anthropological approach is an emic ap-



MIXED USE ZONES RESIDENTIAL

- OB Purely residential use
- OV General residential use

MIXED USE

- SV General mixed use
- SMJ Mixed use of urban

PRODUCTION AND SERVICES

- VN Not disturbing production and services
- VS Production, services and logistics

SPORT AND RECREATION

- SP Sports
- SO1-SO7 Relaxation

SPECIAL AREAS

- ZOB Commercial
- ZVS Universities
- ZKC Cultural and religious
- ZVO Other

MONOFUNCTIONAL ZONES PUBLIC FACILITIES

- W Public facilities
- WA Army and security

TRAFIC

- SD, S1, S2, S4 Important road network
- (M) □ Metro

LANDSCAPE AND GREENERY

- LR Forests
- ZP Parks
- ZMK General greenery
- NL Grassland
- IZ Isolation greenery

Fig. 2. Spatial plan of the area

proach describing a place in a certain historical moment from the agents' point of view (see Geertz 1979). It allows to answer the question *how* do the people orient themselves in a *certain* place and *how* do they identify with the place. It is also able to find meanings in environments, which does not have a character of "strong" place in the terminology of Norberg-Schulz (1980). Thus it does not lead to the tendency to create "escaping" concepts such as non-places of Marc Augé (1995) and placelessness of Edward Relph (1976). In this article is the anthropological analysis of place based on the interpretation of subjective perception of the Central Park by the participants of a qualitative questionnaire survey realized during the local festival *Street for art 2011* and on participant observation in the area.

### Is the Central Park a park?

This question is not a pure irony. As the authors of a town planning study of the central part of Southern Town I wrote, "*in the middle of Southern Town I is nowadays situated a generously founded large space initially from optimism and today from inertia called 'The Central Park'. But it is far from a park. Finished and approbated as a park was only its eastern part. We can only guess, if that is an abortive reminiscence on the České Středohoří [volcanic mountain range in northern Bohemia] or the largest burying ground of the bulldozer culture in Central Europe. In any case a huge misunderstanding lasting up to today.*" (Plicka et al. 1997: 21) (See Fig. 3).

Many things have changed in the Central Park since 1997. More trees were planted. Modern children playground was built up, cycleway opened and along

the reinforced pavement were installed new benchers. But this partial revitalization steps were not able to solve the crucial problem of the Central park – that it is an insufficiently socially (who is it for) and functionally (what is it for) defined public space (Musil 1971: 284).

So what is a city park – an archetype to which embarrassedly leads the revitalization steps described above? Jane Jacobs (1961: 111–112) came up with surprisingly short list of four essential attributes of a successful city park. Following attributes are intricacy, centring, sun and enclosure.

- "Intricacy is related to the variety of reasons for which people come to the neighbourhood parks. [...] Intricacy that counts is mainly at eye level, change in the rise of ground, groupings of trees, opening leading to various focal points – in short, subtle expressions of difference".
- "Probably the most important element of intricacy is centring. Good small parks typically have a place somewhere within them commonly understood to be the centre – at the very least a main crossroads and pausing point, a climax".
- "Sun is part of park's setting for people, shaded, to be sure, in summer. A high building effectively cutting the sun angle across the south side of park can kill of a lot of it". In the context of straggling housing estates has the level of windiness the same importance.
- Enclosure means that a park should be a clearly bounded place. In uncertainly bounded parks feel people usually unpleasantly and insecurely.

How successful were the revitalization steps in the Central Park according to these attributes of good (i.e. living) park and why?



Fig. 3. Landscaping of the Central Park

### Town planning and architectural analysis

Although the Central Park is a large public space in the middle of the quarter/town with the highest concentration of inhabitants, it is still missing a main function of integrated central urban place. As first we should recognize how strongly would be the planning decision conditioned by technical and economical dependency on construction technologies and processes at the time. One of the forming factors to the Central Park was a fact that it is situated on the roof of metro line C and the selected construction did not allow building on the top. It remains a question if this was not considered more important factor than the urban need of a central space for the town. The result is a place which is not easy to define and much more difficult to recognize its identity. Thus the Central Park has many attributes of non-places as described by Marc Augé. A non-place is “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé 1995: 78). “What we call non-places, in opposition to the sociological notion of place, associated by Mauss and a whole ethnological tradition with the idea of a culture localized in time and space” (Augé 1995: 34).

The complex mistake of inappropriate urbanism of the Central Park consists of four main aspects:

1. Questionable planning decision was to form an unspecified large linear green area free of urban services and character. The missing identity did not create a space that would integrate the town as do central squares or boulevards and the urban effect is a direct opposite: the Central Park is a dividing factor in the urban structure and the housing estate is strongly divided into two separated parts.

2. The most doubtful outcome of the Central Park is the missing power of integration to surrounding urban structure and connectivity. For a place in the middle of living town it misses social and economic reason. Passing the real social needs of the town the same place is meaningless. From the analysis of the use of the place results very low potential of sharing which is contradictory to the fundamentals of urban space (Vesely 2004).

3. The ambiguous intention of the planners for the space is until now visible. It is reflected in the undefined form of the place when the illegible borders of the “park” result in difficulties in architectural form and finally in its elusive identity.

There are also other notwithstanding consequences of unintentionally created place: notwithstanding questionable intention to make a linear park instead of real town centre it does not really seem and work as a real park. It has no real centre, periphery, end and landscape dramaturgy and necessary social and commercial infrastructure.

4. As we touched the problem of boundlessness, there is also a role of the form of the place. In contradiction to proclaimed intention of forming a central park the final solution radiates an isolated artificial landscaping. It highlights its separateness and in contact with the surrounding city results doubtful and hazy.

The complex of lapses in creating the public space leads to the embarrassments with the recognition of meaning and character of the place and to a weak identification with the place by residents.

### Anthropological analysis

The aim of this chapter is to show the problems of the Central Park from resident’s and occasional visitor’s point of view. The analysis is based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews with participants and a qualitative questionnaire survey realized during a local festival *Street for art 2011* organized in the western part of the Central Park.

Let’s start with the interpretation of results of questionnaire survey. The participants were asked to choose one or more words giving a true picture of the Central Park. The list of all answers is shown in the chart below (Fig. 4).

What does the chart say? Firstly it indicates the Central Park as a public place important for Southern Town (answers “needful” and “useful”); and as a place evaluated relatively positively from the aesthetic point of view and relatively safety. Do the architects and city planners exaggerate the problems of Central Park then? No. It only underlines the importance of city greenery, which is usual not only for Czechs, but for most of the western urban people (see Kaplan *et al.* 1998). According to this discourse is the greenery perceived as something universally positive, something which is never enough.

How one of the participants of an excursion of the urbanism of Southern Town said: “I can imagine that the local residents enjoy it there or at least enjoy walking through it. As a promenade is it good. It is good that there is something green”. Another participant of this excursion went in the glorifying of city greenery further: “My heart jumped a little there. It is not a goodness know how beautiful piece of garden architecture, but a greenery has almost always a soothing impact on myself. I don’t know, if the hills were planned or naturally overgrown mounds of soil dug out during the building, but they affect reassuringly on myself. If it was more green spaces in the housing estates, they wouldn’t eventually be so terrible”. More green spaces... despite buildings fill up only 16 to 18 per cent of the area of the housing estate Southern Town I and the majority of the rest space is a sort of city greenery.

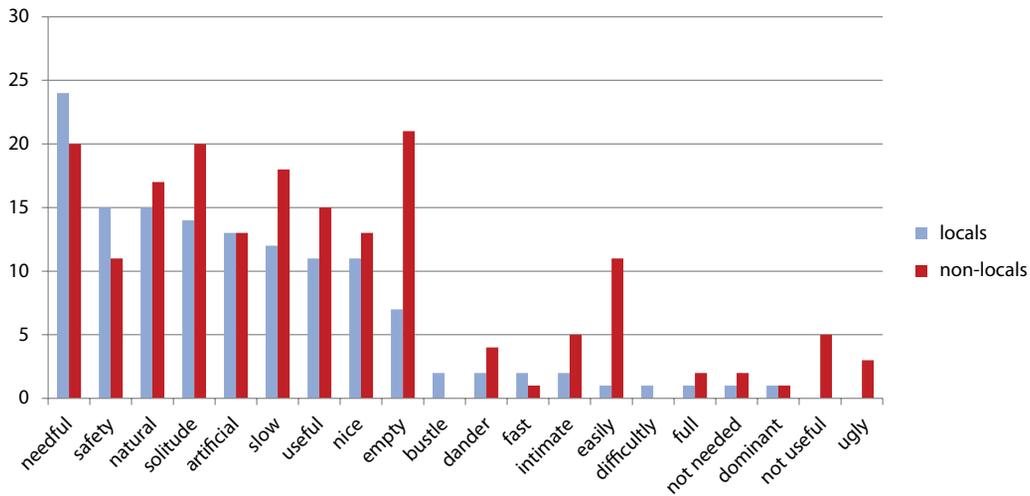


Fig. 4. Attributes of the Central Park according to its users

But it does not mean that participants were blind to the problems of the Central Park. They obviously realized the main problem of the park. That it is a “desolate” and “empty” place. I.e. place attracting insufficient amount of activities according to its size. A young woman attending the excursion mentioned above needed only three words to express her feelings from the Central Park: “Greenery, space, emptiness”. A man approximately in her age described his negative feeling more vividly: “It is a would-be nature in the middle of a total tastelessness. This sort of greenery doesn’t affect positively on myself, because a vast space surrounded by prefabs affects very emptily and raw”.

During my participant observation in the Central Park, realized in nice spring and autumn afternoons, I have counted between 50 and 90 people using the park in each 30 minutes interval. That is a very low number if we talk about an open public space almost three times larger than the Wenceslas square and twelve times larger than the Old Town square in the centre of Prague. As Jan Gehl remarked, there are many activities taking place between the buildings of the housing estates, but they are so spread out in time and space, that they does not have a chance to grown into a bigger, more inspiring sequence of events (Gehl 1987: 74). Thus is Gehl allowed to say: “If a team of planners was asked to radically reduce life between buildings, they could not find a more effective method than using modernistic planning principles” (Gehl 2010: 4).

But for the completeness is necessary to say that some resident (and occasional visitors) are not unsatisfied with the “emptiness” of the public spaces in Southern Town and thus are not unsatisfied with the lack of people and activities in the Central Park. “It suits me that I can walk here through the greenery

and meet almost anyone during the entire stroll. If I lived in the city centre, I would have to go to a crowded park”, mentioned an inhabitant of Háje.

Also the participants of the questionnaire survey evaluated the Central Park very variously. The result of the request to give the most suitable title to the photograph of the Central Park (Fig. 5) was a wide range of answers from really positive to markedly negative. The titles may be divided into four categories (see Table 1).

Another serious problem of the Central park is not possible to indicate from the list of its attributes, but it is obvious from semi-structures interviews with the residents of Southern Town. A list of places, feelings and experiences, which has connected with the Central park a circa thirty years old female visitor living in Southern Town II, tellingly illustrates the ambiguity of enclosure and functions of that public space. “Rather hostile park between the underground station Opatov and the church in Háje; unpleasant waiting for a bus; strange name of that place; jumping castle; pizza by the underground station Opatov; vomiting; good shop with music instruments; strange surface of the park; beautiful church”.

It is obvious that with a park having for its occasional user one end in the vestibule of the underground station Opatov and the other in an indeterminate area between the bus stop, church and bus terminal and underground station Háje on the opposite side of the street is something wrong. So we can agree with the authors of the town planning study quoted in the beginning of the article that such public space is far from being a good park as defined above with the help of Jane Jacob’s terminology. But we have to disagree with their opinion that the socially and functionally undefined public spaces such as the Central Park are a result of



Fig. 5. The main “promenade” of the Central Park

Table 1. Titles given to the picture of the Central Park by the visitors of the local festival

<i>Positive</i>	<i>Looking optimistically to the future</i>
OK	the revitalisation of the Central park has started
satisfying	a park will not grow up in a few years
green oasis between the panels better than concrete	It has improved a lot since 1989. More use
a piece of nature in all the concrete	adorning of the park continues, but it is still
strange, but I enjoy it	something wrong with it
Nice walk. I miss to sit for a while with a cup of coffee and a goody	
<i>Generally negative</i>	<i>Criticising the result of the revitalization</i>
about nothing	Pleasant place to sit for a while?
new material, the same form	a lost chance to create a pleasant public space
With no idea. Maybe economical, stupid solution	they will stamp out all the mounds soon
a view of panels	
the space of the Central Park affects emptily	

our disability to live in a city and distinguish fine urban characters. If it was true, it would have meant that the local residents and other visitors were not able to term the problems of the Central Park as a park. And they obviously are. Some of them are able to name these problems minutely and come up with certain solutions: “*The Central Park has a desolate, unpleasant impression on me. It is probably because of its noodle shape and furthermore is hemmed in by the panel blocks. His uncosiness is moreover highlighted with the absence of the groups of trees and bushes, which would divide the huge area in smaller, more intimate parts. Steps realized in the last years did not have a positive effect neither on its beauty nor its functionality. To begin with the so called gazebo, devastation of the greenery because of the construction*

*of flagged and asphalt ways, children playground and to end with the last blow, the construction of so called runway close to the Community centre. A complex solution (resulting from a competition) and not permanent ad hoc adaptations would be beneficial for the Central Park. I personally would make separate pavement for pedestrians and cycleway along the park. It is the only trouble-free possibility how to bike through a large part of the Southern Town. And I would divide the rest of the area with trees and bushes planting into many sectors for relaxation, children playgrounds, run for dogs...*” (Circa fifty years old man, living near the park).

So what to do with this? How to find a way from the burying ground of a bulldozer culture to a living city park? That is the aim of the last chapter.

## Conclusions: how to revitalize the Central Park?

After we have identified the main problems of the Central park, we stand upon the question how to revitalize such public space. Our suggestions do not have an ambition to go into the detail and become an alternative town planning study. The Central Park is for us an example of elongated large park typical for the housing estates. Our aim is to create a package of possible solutions useful for municipalities facing limited financial resources.

It is necessary to moderate the ambiguity of the place. It is not only a task of architectonic design; it is a complex task of integration and definition of place within the urban structure and life.

Despite the challenges in the design of a large-scale place the complexity lies in urban needs of its surrounding. The solution cannot be limited only to finding a form of a non-built area on the Central Park. The surrounding town has already reached stability and after large privatization it is very difficult to propose and realize fundamental changes. On the other hand it is almost impossible to create a living central place without changes in its neighbourhood.

The solution should provide a real central space with the capacity of integration of the divided town. The place must provide a sufficient attractiveness and added value for the town corresponding to its unique position and urban scale.

The most complicated task is to define a clear character of the place so that it communicates better with surrounding context. It is not easy to create a new central place in such a large area and the solution will likely finish with new division of the park in different places with new specific characters increasing offer of activities and proposal of new urban amenities.

Effective revitalization of the Central Park must be according to the authors realized from below, with the use of participatory methods. Most of the Czech municipalities are still mistrustful of the participatory processes as they are afraid of civic protests. But this protests do not results from prompt and sufficient informing and involvement of the residents but from the opposite (Klápště 2010). Involvement of the users of the Central Park is important to the enhancement of the identification of the locals with the public space. A long-term result of the process of identification will be a newly invented and broadly shared identity of the place.

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