

Borjan Brankov

Common Friction

In theory, common areas in multi-family housing from the 20th century were part of the philosophy organizing life in a collective, with the community representing a form of family expansion to a larger number of people who are more socially connected. Benefits of collective living help the family with common facilities, but above all services, to relieve itself of certain obligations, and thus realize the possibility of using free time.

In practice we are witnessing these spaces becoming areas to pass through, to ignore everything else, to complain about them as it is always other people's job to solve the problem, to disregard the value of the space as it is not private, and therefore not valuable for a particular individual, to not comprehend the possible function of the space, and just to practice individual ignorance of living in multifamily buildings. With the most important part being the aggressive appropriation for private purposes.

The text examines the long buildup of chaos in these spaces through 3 distinct reality-inspired situations happening in these spaces, parallel 40 years apart, using New Belgrade's modernist blocks' original architecture and subsequent chaotic situations as an inspiration for the story.

Beta Awards

Introduction

Through the text, *Common Friction* is viewed as a situational description of a shared living space (e.g. common areas) - a zone that is often a part of everyday tensions between users and the struggle to use the shared space.

The problem of common areas is not only a question of designing architecture, but how it later "lives" within different circumstances. That situation is further complicated by the change in the way these spaces are used over time, and by the change in users' lifestyles. In this context, we have two "systems" of ownership and use of space: the system from the time when the building was designed (socialist state of Yugoslavia), with tenants as users of the space in a relatively organized socialist system, and a transition system from the beginning of the 1990s, where the dwelling became the property of the tenants, while the other (common) spaces become somewhat nobody's. Those two systems are separated by a time period of 20-40 years.

The text examines these differences through three personal fictional stories, where the change in the state of multi-family residential buildings from the 1960s and their construction to today is examined. The problems are illustrated through the personal attitudes of the tenants and the emotionally experienced space. The thesis of the paper is that the architecture of residential buildings at that time improved the quality of space, encouraged socialization and the diversity of common areas, striving for the general quality of housing in multi-family buildings, while the change, driven by the transition and a different state system, led to the change of ownership, the emergence of a kind of chaos in the hierarchy of arrangement and maintenance of space, and changed the entire relationship to the collective.

The work in this form does not try to compare two times and situations to explain why something happened and find the culprit, but rather to illustrate the change, examine the nostalgia for some better times and draw attention to the necessity for the common areas to be a part of the lives of all residents, and never exclusively for someone as its private area.

Perec points out that "the space we live in is neither infinite nor homogenous" and draws attention to the fact that the problem is not to design a space, but to explore and read it, noting that the everyday life of such a space is "blurry"¹ (Figure 1). These stories are about that.

¹ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics (1997; Penguin Books, 1997).

Beta Awards

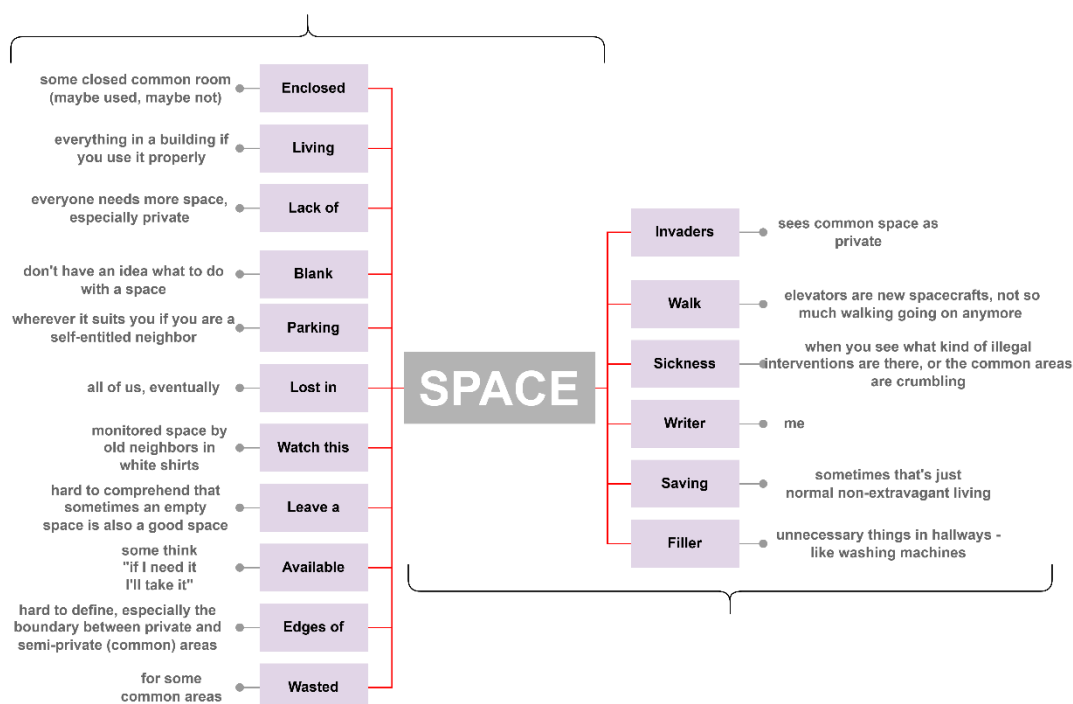


Figure 1 – Building's space interpretation and word association, author: Borjan Brankov, based on Perec's Space wordplay in the book "Species of Spaces and Other Pieces"

Personal and collective

The issue of privacy comes to the fore only with one's own bed, which was a manifested quite late, mostly at the beginning of the 20th century. The individual's room and bed became his personal space. At the same time, more intensive attention was also paid to common areas in collective buildings. This initiated various pioneering examples of architecture, such as the Narkomfin building in Moscow from 1930. With the emergence of privacy and commonality, the traditional family model was reexamined in the service of the collective².

In the time immediately after the world wars, the housing crisis-initiated ideas about the minimal apartment, which not only raised the question of the organization of space, but also the complexity of dealing with it from the perspective of research by sociologists, economists, doctors, and others³. Such researches were necessary at that time, creating a new experiment in architecture and collective life.

In Yugoslavia, this was expressed after the Second World War, where architectural competitions were announced en masse that created space for the new construction of modernist buildings from the 1960s to the late 1980s. Housing was seen as a key part of the city's development and was developed. The state policy of that era dealt with the arrangement of a system through the housing fund, where

² Oliver Heckman et al., *Floor Plan Manual Housing* (Birkhauser Verlag GmbH, 2018).

³ Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling =: L'habitation Minimum = Die Kleinstwohnung: The Housing Crisis, Housing Reform*, trans. Eric Dluhosch (MIT Press ; Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, 2002).

Beta Awards

apartments were distributed according to need⁴ and the creation of a welfare state was sought.

At the end of the 20th century, through the process of crisis and transition, collective housing turned its back on the system that existed until then. Modernist buildings from the second half of the 20th century remained pioneering examples of an era of housing in Yugoslavia. In this era, there was not only the appearance of a different housing stock that is more investor-oriented, but also the constant change of the living spaces of those pioneering modernist multi-family buildings from the 1960s.

Questions are raised whether these facilities are insufficiently flexible to withstand changes in a system and the way housing is used, or whether that housing culture has undergone a turn in a negative direction, in the direction of other values and needs of individuals. The interruption of a clearly hierarchical system of the state, and thus of housing, was transmitted to society as a whole.

Back in the 1970s, Dinko Kovačić and his colleagues were explaining to new tenants how to use residential buildings, what collective life is⁵, while in the same buildings in another part of Yugoslavia, children were playing and running in the corridors of newly built modernist buildings, and Berković documented this⁶. While a couple of decades later, the top-down system of chaos included those individual common areas of residential buildings, where everyone looked at the opportunity to grab or create an individual space in the common part of the buildings, quickly forgetting what that space was originally used for (Figure 2).

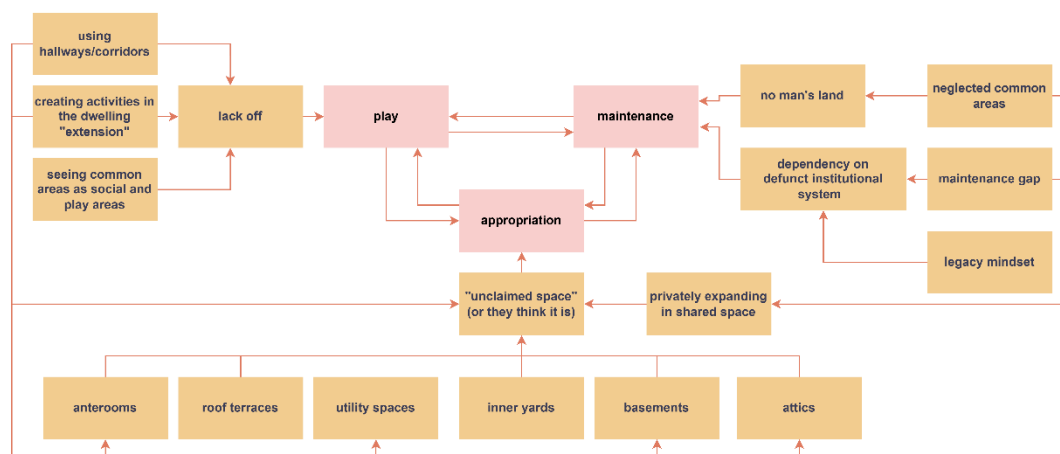


Figure 2 – Transformations in the common domain across three themes, author: Borjan Brankov

⁴ Bengt Turner et al., eds., *The Reform of Housing in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Routledge, 1992).

⁵ *Split 3: Dinko Kovacic*, 2017, 8:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVdZhKwTk_k.

⁶ *Moj stan*, directed by Zvonimir Berković (Zagreb film, 1962), Kratki igrani film, 12'42", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCHhDgAa480>.

Beta Awards

Story of play or pass

Little Sava recently moved into a new apartment with his parents in a block of newly built buildings. They were in big apartment blocks with new families and a new life. It wasn't downtown, at least not yet.

They got the apartment from the state company where his father worked. The space was intended for the number of members of his family in terms of square footage and equipment, and the quality followed the type of company in which his father worked. It was nothing fancy, but the building had various additional spaces such as laundry rooms, a drying room, a large basement, as well as a store on the ground floor of the building. The school was relatively close, but it was still in the construction plan, which eventually happened, but 20 years later.

It was Sava's first time living in a building and not a house. It was strange to him that the apartment door was locked, because he saw the whole building as his space for adventures. In the corridors he saw familiar neighbors and children who often called him to play by shouting towards his window from the yard. That apartment was small for his adventures. When there was no rain or snow, they played around the building. When the weather was bad, they explored corridors and other hidden parts of the building. They liked to explore the basement in the early evening to see who had something interesting behind the wooden slats of the basement fence. They had always wanted to sneak in and enter those spaces, because it was the perfect place for adventures and no one would touch them. It was difficult to enter that space, but that's why the corridors and stairs were their realm. Sometimes they even played ball in the hallway or raced in small groups. They also used fire escapes and sat in the area between the floors. Not every building had the same stairs and it seemed, at least to them, like luxury, that's why their block was special. When they were sitting on the stairs, an elderly neighbor always gave them sweets.

When the smell of the lunch was in the corridor, it was a sign that it would soon be time for a break.

More than 35 years have passed since then and Sava left for Germany. After the 1990s, he left in search of a better life. The question is whether he found it, but he still missed the same adventures as a child.

His parents stayed in the building where he lived. It was the same apartment, just decorated a little differently. The building still had the same basements and corridors. The surroundings became more urban and filled with buildings. Sava came to visit them for the holidays and was always disappointed that he had no place to put his bike in the basement or to use the spaces outside the apartment itself. All the space was somehow a cluttered space, half-decorated or half-flooded. The building began to falter. The corridors were quiet with a washing machine or a closet, which were temporarily placed there, because they became redundant in the apartment. That temporary, as with other things in life, was sometimes longer than predicted.

Beta Awards

The tenants' meeting rooms were neglected and the windows were covered with old newspapers - the space looked like it had been renovated for the last 20 years. Researchers dealing with that period of architecture were more interested in the premises than the tenants themselves. Simply, everyone had their own life. Sava's parents retreated to the comfort of their apartment and rarely went outside.

There were still children's activities and adventures, but they were no longer in those corridors.

Story of system or chaos

Olivera still cooks lunch herself. She is over 80 years old and likes to be independent. She has been living alone for about 15 years and somehow got used to it. She had her routines and she didn't deviate from them even now. For example, she always loved to read and it kept not only her spirit alive but also her brain. She thought that she didn't want to be one of those elderly people who forget when they get old. She also liked to dress up, but she didn't go out as much anymore. What she had to do was go to the store. She was not passive, only the time changed, and the activities happened less and less. She had a couple of friends nearby and they hung out every other month.

Lunch was almost ready, but it was inconvenient to wash the dishes, the water heater by the sink was acting up again. She called her son several times to fix it, but he was in another city and it wouldn't make sense to expect him to come quickly, and the holiday wasn't close. It was still something she couldn't fix on her own. Even if she wanted to go and get some part, she would encounter an unreliable light bulb in the hallway of the building that turned on at its own will.

She asked the president of the housing association about those repairs outside the apartment, he helped until he moved out and now, they had a professional building manager. He had several buildings that he manages, and the hope of fixing the light bulb by him was there, but it was always far away. The building somehow held up, but it slowly failed in waves and there was always something that had to be fixed urgently. But there was only real panic and urgency if the elevator was not working.

Olivera followed the life of that building for almost 35 years. Everything worked then, or maybe the memory was such that she herself idealized everything in her youth.

Then, from time to time, something also needed to be fixed, but it seemed to her like an integrated system where the state enterprise, through which people got apartments, maintained the building. The system worked not only in the building but also beyond. It was easy for a person to get used to the fact that the common space was not a common concern.

She knew that she was different now, slower, maybe even noticing things more, but she also knew that today she had no one to rely on in the building. It was a just a gathering of people, and only sometimes a community. She, like a couple of

Beta Awards

older neighbors, still hoped that somewhere deep down there was still a system that would fix everything - she was mistaken, but she didn't want to admit it to herself. She waited for that moment patiently washing the dishes in cold water.

Story of common or mine

The day went normally for Petar. During the day, he was at work and in the afternoon, despite the classic traffic jam, he managed to find a place in the parking lot relatively close to the building. He went up to the apartment to eat lunch with his family. Quite an ordinary day.

However, the weather was nicer than the previous days and Petar knew how to appreciate the clear and pleasant weather. Usually then he and his wife would sit on the small terrace of the apartment and drink coffee. As that terrace was now crammed with children's things, he often thought about the large roof terrace.

When he was little, he and his parents sometimes went to the roof terrace. It was not luxuriously arranged and then there were only chairs of different colors or shapes. The roof overlooked other buildings. No special view, but there was enough free space and silence. Next to the terrace was a part for the drying room. Petar does not remember what the space looked like, because it was always full of laundry. The image of that space was an image of different laundry and the smell of laundry detergent.

The terrace area had tiles and colorful chairs. From time to time, birthdays were celebrated there, groups gathered and it was loud, to the dismay of the elderly neighbors. He remembers that they didn't have anyone on duty to clean, but whoever arrived cleaned. It was the duty of all tenants, but somehow it was always Mr. Ilija's voluntary duty. He dedicatedly cleaned the terrace and the snow on the street voluntarily and often without a word or regret. It was his territory in a way. He was standing in a white tank top watching people and clearing snow. Everyone had the certainty that every exposed part of the building's facilities or surroundings was always maintained, observed and safe for the neighbors because of him. Today he was something the building lacked, as part of the order, peace and security of an older, wise member of the community.

Petar thought that the roof terrace would be good again. He closed the apartment door and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, where a small metal door led to the terrace. They were stuck and somehow, he opened them and got out. In front of him was a small area of a couple of square meters and a small view of the surroundings. Where there used to be a terrace, and in the distance a drying room, was now a wall, an unpainted wall. Peter suppressed it, but it had long been a private space. Several years ago, a neighbor upgraded part of the apartment towards the terrace. No one is sure how it all happened, but that was the factual state of this common area. The air may have been beautiful, but there was no space to experience it.

At that moment, the small terrace of Petar's apartment with homemade coffee seemed great. Maybe it wasn't big or common, but no one has enclosed that

Beta Awards

terrace for now. The roof was no longer ours but someone else's, making it impossible to celebrate new birthdays, get together or do laundry.

Petar thought about whether it is simply enough to start building something in common area and if they protest you whine or rudely continue and it suddenly becomes yours. He asked himself: "Is it sometimes enough for such a man to defeat a normal person?"

Conclusion

Housing has always been a dynamic category, capable of dealing with adversity after the world wars. Although the focus was more on where to live, how to live was not forgotten then either. Architects tried to get out of conventional frameworks and enable a new type of living in multi-family buildings. It was a constant experiment after the Second World War. The area of Yugoslavia had a housing boom at the time, through architectural competitions, design teams tried to create something innovative and different, and many succeeded. MOMA included that important Yugoslav housing period in its exhibition "Concrete Utopia"⁷⁸.

Whether today such multi-family building with its inflexibility contributed to being changed or it is simply in the nature of some people to grab space due to the insecurity of everything else is still a question. As Perec points out "we have difficulty changing, even if it's only the position of our furniture"⁹. Something very serious needs to happen in order for us to change something, the question is what is serious enough in the residential area for the change or reaction of the tenants.

The system of people's roles in the space, the functions of the specific areas and the community system has changed over time. It seems that since the system in the building fell on the tenants themselves, they carefully define what they do, what they can do or what they don't care about. The only thing is that sometimes it is difficult to determine where the border is, and where it is simply negligence, exclusion or arrogance. That is why today there are drastic examples of appropriation of space, which draw our attention to how we really should not live.

As much as we think we have learned to live in buildings, it remains an unfinished process even today.

⁷ "Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980 | MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed September 3, 2026, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3931>.

⁸ Martino Stierli and Vladimir Kulić, eds., *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*. (The Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

⁹ Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*.