

Hirt, Sonja, A.: Iron curtains: gates, suburbs and privatization of space in the post-socialist city

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The difference between ‘space’ and ‘place’ is that the latter is chosen and accustomed, like the planet of ‘Little prince’ by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Human clusters within a so-called socialist city, whether the latter really existed or not, had come up more or less inadvertently, at least in Europe. The place of residence of the population was in many cases more a consequence of assignation than a choice. The resident population was rather a human collective than a community; the respective areas within the city were ignorant spaces, not places created by the communities. All these had evolved beyond the Western-specific division into public and private. Private possession was limited in its stock and usage; the ‘public’ had meant state—*no man’s* and rather *hostile*. These phenomena, it seems, were the most evident common features of cities, the development of which had gone through the rise of state socialism—the most common, since this category was strongly diversified. In that sense, the book by Sonia A. Hirt is really and specifically a presentation of the Bulgarian—or East Balkan—example, rather than an all-Central-East European story. At the same time, it reflects processes which are universal—the aware social and functional ‘closing in’ within walls in the name of security, welfare and homogeneity. Yet, *Iron Curtains* is specifically a story about the creation of closed and inaccessible space in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, one of Europe’s oldest cities, culturally and politically marked by Ottoman, Eastern and Western European influences, so evident in the city’s spatial structure and its built environment. The book by Sonia Hirt seeks explanation of the rise of *privatism* in post-socialist Sofia within place-specific culture and sociology. In its *privatism* [understood as ‘(...) disbelief in a benevolent public realm and the widespread sense that to appropriate the public may be the best way to thrive in private’, p. 4], post-socialist Sofia is an example of the post-modern extreme. Sonia Hirt analyses the phenomenon of the rise of *privatism*, which at the same time is the fall of the civil society—if it ever had a chance to develop in Sofia. The book presents the phenomenon of so-called *spatial secessions*—new, post-2000 suburbanization, the development of gated residential and business complexes in Sofia city and their internal functional,

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spatial and social structure. At the same time, it focuses on the striking reduction and destruction of public space—a procedure often not classified by the law. However, not the phenomena themselves but their scale draws attention. In confrontation with many post-socialist cities, the Sofia example seems to be outstanding. This is where the cultural approach applied in the book seems especially appropriate—it unveils the specific social relation to space and possession, local identity, local community development and the need for ‘places’. Therefore, what seems especially valuable about *Iron Curtains* is that it discusses the cultural background of developments within the built environment and the role they play in the spatial and social fragmentation and destruction of public space and public life. The numerous opinions of residents of the city quoted in the book present a lively discussion between different worlds. It is nevertheless evident that despite differences in educational background and social status, the need for security and identity and the need for community-feeling development are expressed by all groups. Therefore, *Iron Curtains* is not a story entirely deprived of hope. The ugly face of *privatism* might once give way to its gentler successor which ‘does not seek to devour the public but rather sees it as (...) part of itself’ (p. 197).

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