

Violeta Bakalchev, Minas Bakalchev, Mitko Hadzi Pulja:  
From Transition to Integration: New Prospects for the European Home

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## **From Transition to Integration: New Prospects for the European Home**

*Violeta Bakalchev, Minas Bakalchev, Mitko Hadzi Pulja*

### **Abstract**

*Changes in society can be reflected in dwellings, as part of the process and physical expression of living. In this sense, the long term transition of the political and economic systems of the former socialist countries has affected the design of apartments quite dramatically. Although, in a greater part, houses remained an unchanged heritage from the past, and certain models continued to be repeated, their perception, use and practice were increasingly changed as a reflection of changed socio-cultural models. Former schemes of social housing that were implemented from top to bottom, meaning spatial functional and social unification around a common ideal, essentially changed due to the pluralist and conflicting interests of their residents. While different values, backgrounds and life styles demonstrated decentralised tendencies, there remained the question of the mode of convergence of a variety of diversities, to enable coherence within a community. How could differences be expressed and how could one find the basis for their integration at the same time? Can a community be composed of an aggregation of individual inputs? Is it possible to create an integrated European city out of disparate housing? These questions are not only a metaphor of the long lasting process of the integration of different European heritages and practices, but are also essential to understanding the fundamental condition of living in residential units where the local and global challenges of European citizens meet. This research will be developed on two levels, first, through the transformation of a residential area taking as an example, the buildings originating from the 1950s in a settlement within the city of Skopje, second, by the description of two conflicting models of integration performed in two contemporary films. Thus the process of transition of the residential area and possible points of integration will be demonstrated. Searching for a shared language for the contemporary apartment, this investigation will summarize the new prospects for the apartment arising from both the contradictory processes within a defined spatial frame and contradictory transformations of the existing spatial frame of the apartment.*

*Keywords: House transition, transformation, integration, process of living, life style.*

## **Introduction, or Background to the Study**

It was decided to consider the issue of European integration and new prospects through housing as an essential element of urban and territorial construction as well as a social and cultural model of those who inhabit them. Housing served as the basis of a social experiment and also as one of the primary expressions of modernity. Hence, this research into housing during the period of transition had three goals: first, to contribute to the understanding of the spatial and social processes of transformation and integration in a residential context; second, to contribute to a definition of the models of transformation on a spatial basis; and third, to provide the specific means for the analysis of spatial and social phenomena in this dramatic period.

The apartment is the paradigm of the social project. It is the main topic in the reformation of space, conceived both as a unit and as a system. Although in the beginning of the period of social residential construction it characterized a model of social homogenization through the assumed elementary household (nuclear family), today, demographic and cultural tendencies have changed the nature of households in residential units. Different compositions of households and their individual projections of spatial configuration have given rise to alternative schemes for housing (Ebner, 2007, pp. 11-23).

For many people, the post-socialist transition that took place in a number of countries meant the end of modernity, or rather the end of a social system based on social solidarity and a transformation to a discourse based on personal and individual rights and liberties (Harvey, 2006, p. 27). The shared language of “top to bottom” housing became the subject of a number of dissolving, disintegrating tendencies at the particular level of the home and its occupants.

These transformations in the physical structure of buildings can be seen as a series of retrograde, dissolving processes to the formerly established order. The images of the residential ambience in post-socialist countries provide examples of the decline of the social model that was based on the principles of modernity in a spatial sense and the projection of solidarity in the social sense. It is exactly in these images of inconsistency, alteration, suppression and displacement that modern stories are intertwined with, and re-utilise the basic structure of the previous period.

Even an initial survey of the former socialist residential structures shows a landscape, a bricolage, in which the initial order displays layers of a number of individual actions. These housing areas seem to be the alternative to the

formerly existing spatial order. Through a number of individual actions, the occupants have transformed these modest buildings into distinctive domestic zones. Extending their presence beyond the given boundaries, they have created a new residential atmosphere from the inside to the outside, flat by flat, building by building. Through personal and social-cultural alterations, the occupants have reacted to the new time. Arousing personal and collective memories, the flats, the balconies and the buildings are places of contrasts, reinstating the complexity and the contradictions of an architecture between memory and innovation, needs and imperatives. These flats are repeatedly used in the practice of transformation and self-expression; but how could a new shared language be created out of the divergent social and spatial tendencies?

Through the transformation of buildings from the 1950s in a residential settlement undergoing transition within Skopje, and consequently seen from the aspect of two opposing approaches to integration; this paper will attempt to derive a transition between different cultures and life styles at the level of habitation. Through these investigations, the process of transition of the residential area, the contradictory tendencies and the epilogue of the possible points of integration will be shown. However, given that transformation in the post-socialistic transitional period is evident in a physical and social sense, the paper will also reconstruct the successive processes of transformation in the life of a residential building. In that way, it should be possible to establish a genealogy of transformations within the frames of previous attitudes to living space and those that are part of the divergent themes of the contemporary transition.

### **“Prolet” Settlement: From Unity to Individual “Apartments”**

The “Prolet” settlement in Skopje is one of the first examples of post-World War II residential reconstruction. The architectonic composition consists of an identical volume that is iterated 13 times according to a particular geometric template (Fig. 1). It is for many reasons that the “Prolet” settlement is representative of the principles of modernity, simplicity and also reductionism, the generation of a compositional collective form but also the negation of context, new relationships between built units and open space, as well as the loss of the traditional spatial syntax. From its very beginning modernity has challenged the traditional experience of space and the traditional means of diversity and integration (Castex, Charles Depaule, Panerai, 1989).

In this chapter we will trace the processes of transformation as the dynamics in the period of transition from modernity to postmodernity unfolded, from the perspective of the apartment. The promoted principle of modernity, the existential minimum (*Existenzminimum*) meant a new programme basis, but at the same time, it meant a new spatial and social organization that can enable it. The extensive residential texture that existed until then had to be replaced by a functional residential model in which all the needs of Man in a new modern society would be met. The existential minimum as the biologically determined elemental minimum of space, air, light and heat in a way that each occupant may thoroughly develop his/her "living functions" meant a program and spatial reformation of the home. However, this concept also provided and projected the desired new social structure as the main program prerequisite for the new residential production (Mumford, 2000, p. 37; Bulok, 2005, pp. 382-394).

The main residential type of the "Prolet" settlement is a three floor linear residential block, a multicore system, composed of three subunits, each containing two apartments per floor. The day and night segments of the apartment are alternately distributed around the staircase space. Within each residential unit, the spaces are distributed according to structural modules, in which: one module contains the staircase, entrances, and bathrooms; a second module is occupied by the kitchen, pantry, kitchen balcony, the living room, the balcony; and a third module - the bedrooms.

In the course of time, through a number of individual actions, the occupants have transformed the repetitive layout into individual domestic spaces. Extending their presence beyond the existing parameters, they have constructed a new residential ambience from the inside to the outside, flat by flat, building by building. It is possible to chronologically define the transformations at the apartment level to determine the time phases and types of transformation. The initial residential units dating back to 1949 experienced their first transformation through the widening of the kitchen, which was carried out by the municipality in 1952. In the period that followed, from 1960 to 1990, there were different individual transformations and interior restructuring. (Fig. 2). From 1990, external transformations as enlargements began that occurred spontaneously. This process was almost complete by 2012. Each flat now has its own extension and some interior transformation (Fig. 3). However, behind these spontaneous processes of transformation a number of spatial patterns that connect the spatial transformations to the specific social-cultural models, as a mix of traditional and contemporary forms, can be observed.

**The “Large kitchen“:** The kitchen was the first place where spatial change occurred, ten years after the occupants moved into their flats (1949-1959). In 1960, the changes were planned and performed simultaneously throughout the entire neighbourhood. These were limited to the apartment itself (the kitchen and the pantry). The partition wall between the kitchen and the pantry was torn down and the kitchen was widened over the entire main module of 4.00m. In the external zone of the balcony, a part of the pantry to be entered from the kitchen was preserved (Fig. 4). During the interior transformations (period 1970-1980): the pantry and the balcony were connected with the kitchen. In that way, an integral space – “a large kitchen“ (3.6 x 3.6m) was obtained with the possibility of gaining an additional function as a dining room or living room, thus becoming the centre of the living functions of the household.

**The Large room “free plan“:** This refers to the creation of an integrated multifunctional space. In this procedure, the programme re-definition not only refers to the cooking area, but the entire living area group of spaces - living room, kitchen, and balcony are integrated into a large room or a local “free plan“, which undertakes all the living functions (Fig. 4) The interior changes (period 1980-1990) were pragmatic, acupuncture projects, limited interventions, in which individual projects were conceived as an exchange of information and experience among neighbours so that the transformation did not go beyond the limits of their, often modest resources. The small, interior changes very realistically referred to cost, feasibility and aesthetics.

**Room+:** An additional room was generated by external transformations, involving additional construction. Depending on the orientation of either the kitchen (northwest) or the living room (southeast), two versions of an additional room were possible. First, if the additionally built module was on the side of the living room, then part of the new spatial module, the balcony and part of the living room were partitioned as an additional bedroom. The remaining space of the living room and the kitchen constituted the new integral space with a series of possible interior transformations of the kitchen and the living room. Second, if the additionally built module was on the side of the kitchen, then the additional bedroom occupied the position of the former balcony and the additional module, while the existing space remained as the kitchen and the living room (Fig. 4).

In the alterations undertaken around 2001, the addition to the side of the kitchen was divided, for the first time, across its width, between the balcony or the kitchen and the additional single bedroom. On the side of the living room,

the space was partitioned to obtain another single bedroom. In both cases, the central living area (living room, dining room and kitchen) was reduced and remained insufficiently illuminated by natural light.

**Vertical installation:** In the “Prolet” settlement, a specific model of enlargement was promoted (Fig. 5). This model was spontaneous in terms of time, but determined from the spatial aspect, with defined geometrical characteristics. The addition forms an extension of the module with the living room, kitchen and balcony. The dimensions follow the width of the main module of the residential building by 4.0m; the depth was the available green area in front of the building (1.8m). Depending on the households participating in the extension, the height was: 2 storeys, 3 storeys or most frequently all 4 storeys.

As to the particular building investigated in detail, the only vertical slot without an extension is at the first entrance. The occupants of these apartments and those in the other blocks where there are no such extensions indicate that they were unable to reach a consensus.

From a structural perspective, two types can be differentiated: additions with two external reinforced-concrete columns on the outer side with a reinforced concrete slab connected to the existing structure of the building on the inner side; and extensions with four reinforced-concrete columns as an independent structural module adjacent to the external wall of the existing building. In this way, a prototype for vertical installation can be established that can be open or closed in different proportions, depending on the needs and the wishes of the individual users.

**Local material prototypes.** Behind the diversity and spontaneity of the interventions, several models of infilling can be distinguished:

**Mimicry enlargements:** In this model, the masonry infilling and the reinforced-concrete structure are covered with a uniform external plaster and paint identical to the existing finishing of the buildings. In this model, the enlargements are part of the existing structures and are assimilated into an integral configuration.

**Brutalistic enlargements:** In this model, two versions are differentiated. The first, where the infilling and the structure are additionally externally finished, but with different treatment. The masonry infilling is plastered, while the reinforced concrete structure, the columns and the beams are painted, most frequently with white paint, different from the colour of the main infilling. Secondly, where the reinforced concrete structure is visible, the infilling consists of bricks. After the casting of the reinforced concrete frame, building is carried out from the inside and no additional external finish or scaffolding is necessary.

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This model for extensions is the most common thanks to the low cost of construction processes and materials. In this model the additions exemplify autonomous units from a spatial and artistic viewpoint and are independent of the main body of the existing structures.

**Pluralistic enlargements:** The main construction of the addition, (the structure and infilling) are designed in different stylistic images, both traditional and modern. In this model, the extensions embody tools for transformation, and the suppression of the existing spatial and formal expression of the structures.

The materials used, and the mode of enclosing the structure can be differentiated into three types:

*1) The Open Balcony Type*

It refers to the open balconies. The enlarged space is not closed, but represents an external part of the individual apartments (Fig. 6).

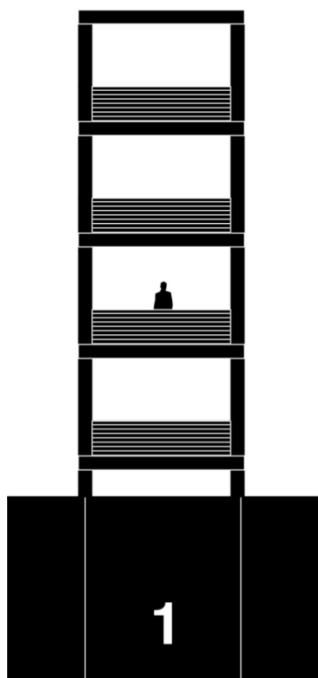


Fig. 6. The Open Balcony Type.

### *2) The Closed Balcony Type*

This type follows the minimal construction intervention up to the parapet level and most frequently refers to glazed areas, from column to column, with different types of divisions (Fig. 7).

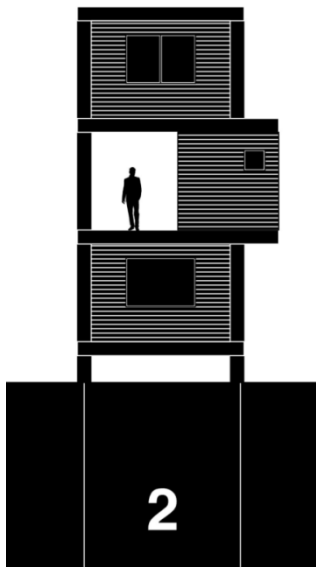


Fig. 7. The Closed Balcony Type.

### *3) The Apartment Type*

This refers to perforating different types of openings in the closed wall mass of the extensions. The openings result from the utilitarian character of the infillings of the vertical structures and also the stylistic preferences of the occupants (Fig. 8).



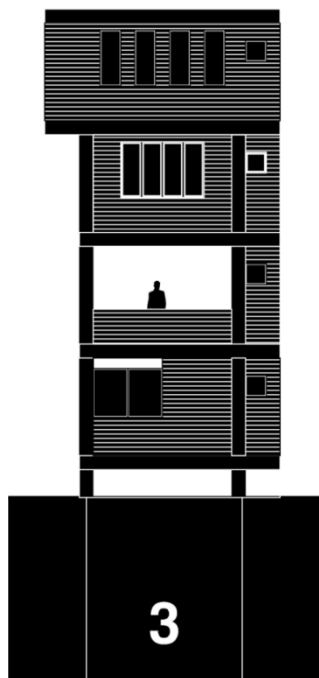


Fig. 8. Apartment type.

The additional construction epitomises a kind of open vertical form, almost like a tower, waiting for individual contributions. At the level of accommodation, the extensions are additions to the overall area and enable the redistribution of spaces.

**DOM-INO/2 (1914-2015):**

Summing up the processes of transformation that chronologically ranged from interior transformations, or “corrections” of the principal system to external extensions, or enlargements, the process goes from being a single building to being multiple additionally built “apartments” along its margins. In that way, the physical reality illustrates the transition from social homogeneity to economic-social diversification. However, if this process is the proof of the

rejection of the common project of the modernity, it seems that the way in which it is conducted is bringing back the essential prototype of modernity.

The enlargements that assume an open structure and a number of individual interpretations are informal copies of the Dom-INO model of 1914 from many aspects. Le Corbusier proposed this model as a prototype for the post-World War I reconstruction of the devastated areas through which the main principles of modern architecture were anticipated (Le Corbusier, 1978, pp. 211-247). Dom-INO consists of a principal reinforced concrete structure (six columns and two floor slabs) as a structural frame completely independent of the functional basis and the internal configuration. A structural frame independent of the flat structure allows mass production on the one hand and great diversity of interior distribution on the other (Fig. 9).

The informal extensions consisting of a principal structure with two or four columns and horizontal slabs depending on the need for intervention, metaphorically and concretely represent copies of the Dom-INO prototype in quite a different local and socio-cultural context. If this proposal anticipated the main assumptions of modernity, its use in the period of postmodernity or postsocialist transition as a crisis and prevalence of the modern legacy, is an interesting turning point in the frames of the conceptual and material basis of modernity. It is in many aspects that modernity was rejected and forgotten in the contemporary post-socialist context, but it is exactly its generative mechanism, pluralistically disseminated, that provides a powerful tool for considering and talking again about the main contributions of the modern architecture (Fig. 10).

#### **Integration Models: Piano Room versus Soul Kitchen**

The changed paradigm of society, the pluralism of lifestyles and their expression in physical space is most suggestively expressed in a number of works of popular culture and in various artistic formats, especially the film, which became a place of anticipation and documentation of the changed ways of life. Two films in particular present new patterns of social behavior most intensively (Bakalchev, Hadzi Pulja, 1997). It is in two auteur movies, "The Piano Room" (Igor Ivanov Izi, 2013) and "Soul Kitchen" (Fatih Akin, 2009), that we find models of integration as extreme scenarios through which the European reality of exclusivity and inclusiveness can be expressed. The post-socialist transformation of housing necessarily leads to questions about the ways and possibilities of new forms of integration.

Through these two films different methods of the connection of different social practices in the framework of contemporary forms of housing

will be explored. The reality of the divergent life styles and the different social/cultural backgrounds gives rise to different connections.

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### **The Piano Room**

The film “The Piano Room” (Igor Ivanov Izi, 2013), is set in a single space, through different time sequences, showing episodes with different hotel guests. The room is a spatial fragment in which the entire film action takes place. A series of idiosyncratic stories develop in this room (Fig. 11).

Victor is a gentleman of a good social standing who secretly meets his mistress Eva in the hotel room. Nina and Goga come to the hotel for the first time during the school excursion. During their stay in this room, they reveal their mutual attraction. Nina is shy, while Goga is forward and precocious. They fall in love. During their first meeting, the bed is the place for their love games. Many years later, they meet in the same room where the bathtub is the place for their dramatic dialogue. A gentleman in a costume, a businessman judging from his appearance, often comes to this room and wears women’s clothes. Yilmaz and Azis, father and son, are truck drivers that often come for an overnight stay in this hotel and always in the same piano room. Yilmaz has the ambition for his son Aziz to become a musician. Aziz shows extraordinary feeling and talent through his short piano performances, but he always resists his father’s ambitions for him. Their dialogues take place between the piano and the bed. Lying on the bed, Aziz repeatedly turns on and off the light by the bed in an interrupted rhythm. Petar and Marta, a young couple, bikers, with a Yamaha motorcycle parked in front of the hotel, with two wedding rings, celebrate their wild love. On the tenth anniversary of their marriage, they are again in the same room depressed by an everyday life, which lacks the passion of the past. Dize, a former pianist and an old vagrant, comes to the hotel room to pick up money that has been hidden in the secret compartment of the piano.

The different stories exemplify fragments of the lives of the different people that intermingle within the frame of a single space, the piano room. The main character, who is in the background of the individual actions, is the maid. She tidies up the room between the different scenes. According to the letters sent to her mother in which she idealizes her everyday life, she is a Ukrainian emigrant. In the end, in a contradictory way, she succeeds in getting the money kept as a secret by Dize. In the last scene, she exits the room and leaves the

hotel and it is for the first time that the audience sees the exterior as the maid is walking with her daughter along the street, among people, in a realistic everyday situation.

### **Soul Kitchen**

In Fatih Akin's films, the life of Turkish immigrants in Germany is a frequent theme. The conflict and the confusion between the two cultures is shown in a dramatic and comic way. In the film "Soul Kitchen" (Fatih Akin, 2009), this theme is presented through the life of two brothers, the German Greeks Zinos and Illias.

Zinos Kazantsakis is the owner of a shabby, run-down restaurant, in a former storehouse in the industrial quarter of Hamburg where he prepares fish and chips for the local customers. His business is in a critical financial condition and tax inspectors ask Zinos for payments, which he cannot realize with his income. Occasionally, a punk rock band uses the restaurant as a space for practice, but never pays any rent. An old sailor, Sokrates, continuously works on his boat at the warehouse, but he is also never able to pay rent. Zinos' brother Illias described as the "king of the thieves" is in prison. He is a gambler and a hustler. He is allowed occasional leave from the prison, but must do community work as part of the terms. Therefore, Zinos agrees to hire Illias. Nadine is Zinos' girlfriend, who abandons him and goes to work in Shanghai. There she meets a Chinese man, Mr. Han, who becomes her friend and accompanies her during her temporary return to Hamburg. Anna is a physiotherapist and helps Zinos to recover from the injury to his back after his attempt to move a dishwasher. She advises him to "dance and alleviate his pain". Thomas is his former school mate and a new entrepreneur, who wants to purchase the restaurant from Zinos. Shayn is the fanatical cook who leaves a high class restaurant to work in the Zinos' soul kitchen. The different characters create a dramatic flow of events through a number of twists aimed at the protection of the authenticity of the place.

The film ends with the restaurant closed for a "private party", with only two people present, Zinos and Anna, who is visiting the place for the first time. In that way, through a gallery of diverse characters of different cultural backgrounds and life styles, a common identity of mutual interaction is created. Through their joint actions, the marginal place of a former warehouse is articulated. Their integration of diversity and idiosyncrasy is created by their shared experience and intermingling of their personal weak and strong points (Fig. 13).

These films symbolize opposing approaches to diversity. In the “Piano Room” it is shown through a series of episodes that are time segregated in a single spatial frame, the diversity in the “Soul Kitchen” produces a creative mixture of different characters and life stories. In these films, the opposing models of “Room” versus “Kitchen” represent separation versus merging.

### **Critical Integration - New Prospects for the European Home**

The entire life of an apartment is seen as a dialogue between its physical characteristics and the activities taking place within it. So, in the case of the residential buildings in the settlement of postwar reconstruction “Prolet” (1948), through its entire history, the transformation and reconstruction of the interior of the physical structure within the frames of a single residential unit may be traced. However, the transition period indicates a wave of divergent social and spatial tendencies referring to both the interior and exterior of the main residential frame. Through the interventions of users, the initial identical design is transformed and extended with alterations that are as much pragmatic as they are symbolic with respect to the new social heterogeneity of society. Taking the “Prolet” settlement as an example, the projection of social dispersion is evident in the physical structure.

As to the issue of positioning different life styles and social-cultural backgrounds, these are dramatically expressed in the two contemporary films. In the “Piano Room” (2013), there are different stories as fragments of life in the same spatial fragment, the hotel room, but they are never connected. These are separate episodes in the same space. Describing the work, director Igor Ivanov says: “This is a film free of the traditional film narration and it doesn’t need to carry an integral story within. Instead, it is simply a presentation of different intertwined life stories brought to this single location, from the foreshortening of which the most essential aspects of our existence are seen.” (Ivanov Izi). In the “Soul Kitchen” (2009), the different figures and their stories are mixed in a permanent dynamic setting. Or, as Fatih Akin says: “It was more than just a restaurant ... It was like a home base for the whole neighborhood, so artists were hanging around there — but, artists who never really created something you know”. Experience with that nightly routine inspired Akin to work on a story about the imaginary homes created for young people — homes that are less about geography and more about friends, strong drinks and, of course, the right mix of music (Quersh, 2010). The model that the film proposes is a kind of ‘extension of personality’ in the common project of a soul kitchen. According to

Akin: "When you're a really good DJ, you see he's able to mix the tracks. You don't realize it as an audience. He's really surfing on the beat, and I was wondering if this is possible with a picture." (Quershi, 2010).

In all three examples, the transformation of unity in the case of the "Prolet" settlement, with the layering of different episodes in the same spatial fragment as in the case of the "Piano Room" and the mixing of different personalities in the creation of something new in the case of the "Soul Kitchen", there is a mapping of different possibilities, models of integration of contemporary homes and questions. Is integration to be understood as an isolated spatial unit, a "room", in order to express different particular idiosyncrasies as captivated individual freedoms? Could integration as a way of extending personality in the mix of the "kitchen" as a joint performance indicate a way forward? Is integration to be understood as a marginal decentering, an enlargement of available space?

Pluralism and social heterogeneity cannot suppress reality, but while the cases of "Piano Room" and "Soul Kitchen" show two opposing models of reality, the "Prolet" case provides a view of realism as the integration of space and social need. Realism as a critical view or critical integration is somewhere in-between. It ranges between the common basis and the particular pragmatic and symbolic steps, between the postmodern iconography and the modern dom-ino prototype. To that effect, it is perceived as a decline in the historic, social, spatial, and aesthetically dominant models of a socialist past and the emergence of a heterogeneous practice that can lead to New Prospects of European House practice.

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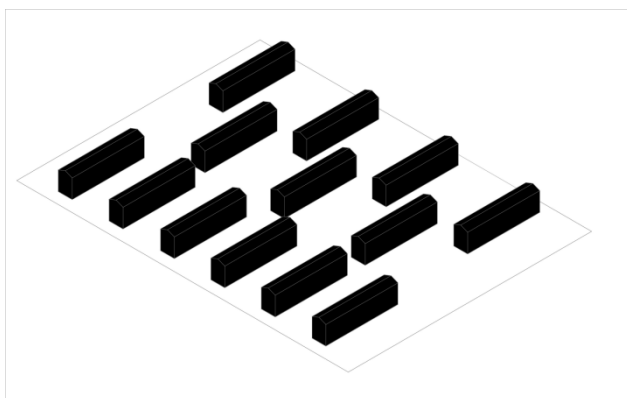
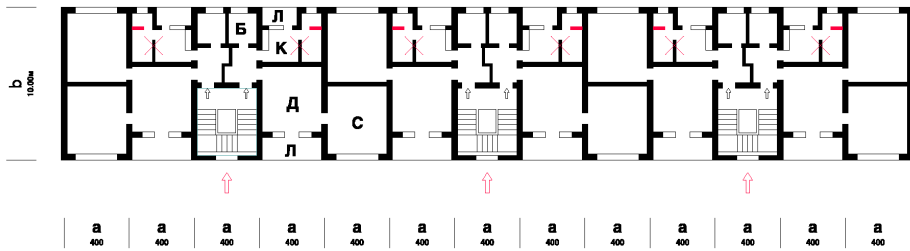


Fig. 1. "Prolet" settlement, Skopje (1948).



Initial conditions (1949): a characteristic storey



Interior changes /enlargement of a kitchen (1959).



Interior changes (1960 – 1990)

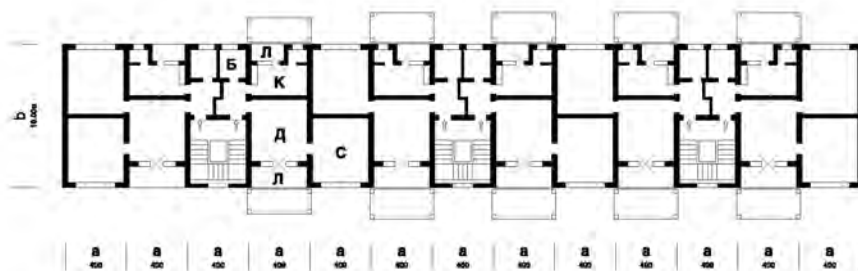
Fig. 2. Interior transformations.



Initial phase of enlargement /enlargement+ground floor (1995-1998)

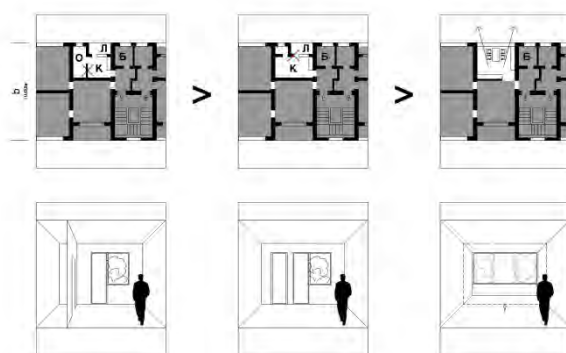


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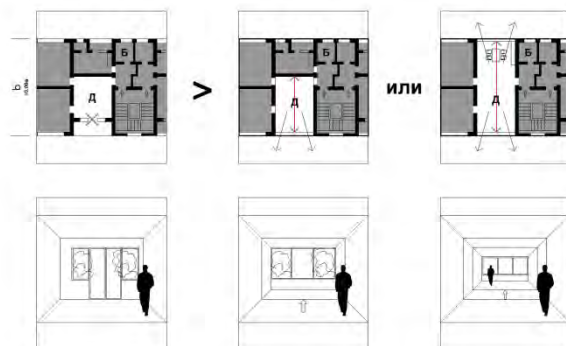


Final phase of enlargement / enlargement + ground floor (2011)

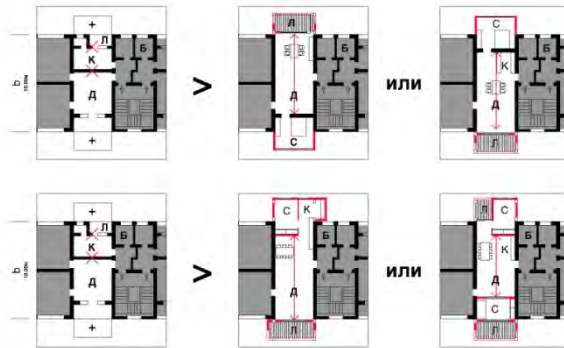
Fig. 3. External transformations.



Model of a large kitchen: evolution phases.



Model of a large room: development of a local free plan".



Model of a room +: gradual occupation of the external front and suppression of the living zone.

Fig. 4. Model of transformation.



Fig. 5. Building + enlargement, "Prolet" settlement, 2013.

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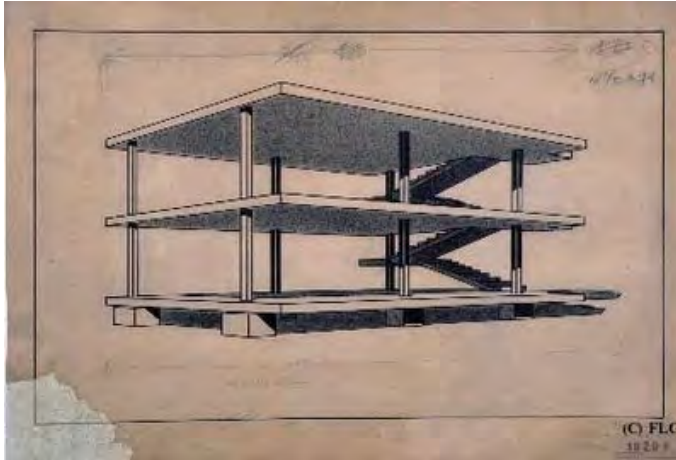
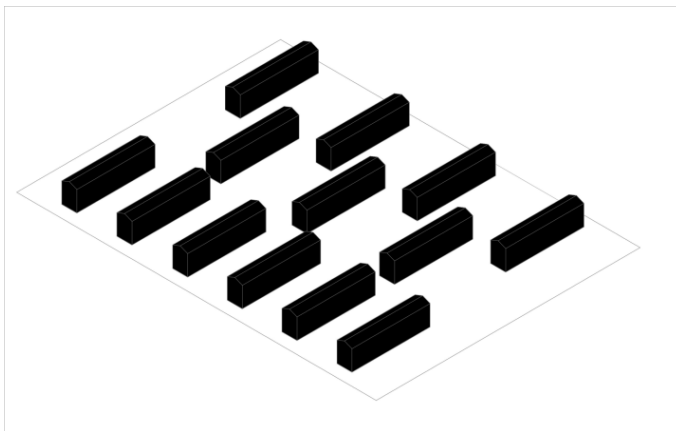
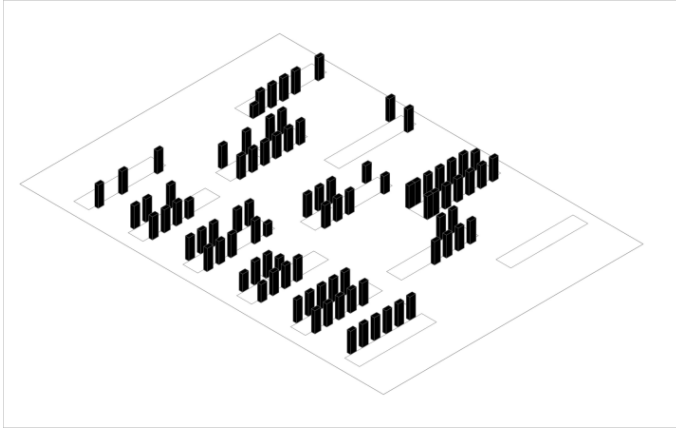


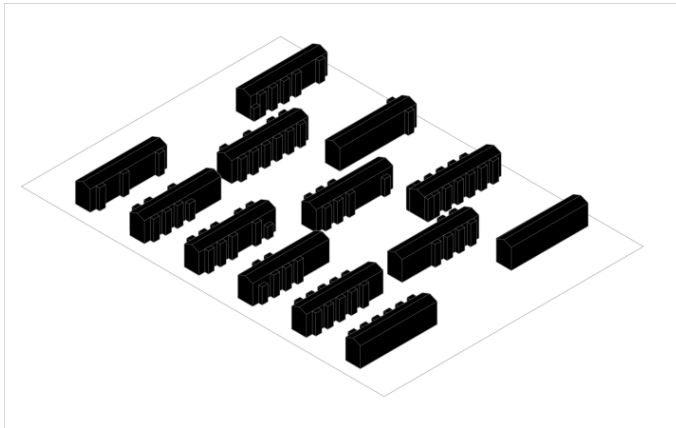
Fig. 9. Le Corbusier, Dom-ino concrete residential system 1914 (Le Corbusier, 1978).



"Prolet" settlement, Skopje (1948): basic conditions.



Model of enlargements.



“Prolet” settlement, Skopje (2011): basic conditions + enlargements.  
Fig. 10. “Prolet” settlement, Skopje: proces of transformation.

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Fig. 11. Piano Room: film scenography.



Fig. 12. The storehouse in the industrial quarter of Hamburg in which a multicultural “soul kitchen” is re-utilized.



Fig. 13. Soul kitchen: joint dinner (Quershi, 2010).