PRELUDE TO IMPROVING LIVING CONDITIONS OF ROMA IN SERBIA: CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONTEXTUALIZATION AND ADAPTATION OF CULTURAL POLICY PARADIGMS

UDC 728(=214.58)(497.11)

Milena Grbić

Faculty of Architecture, Department of Architecture, University of Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract. *This paper presents a confrontation between the institutional sphere of the dominant social ethics with the subjective sphere of the particular beneficiary involved in the study and understanding of the socially vulnerable Roma situation. At the level of institutional efforts, the thesis presents general theoretic recommendations on housing the de-privileged social groups aiming to materialize the social and system integrations. At the level of strategic planning, by studying the life experience of the Roma in Belgrade, the thesis describes the life of the Roma population within the community through the aspects that the Republic strategy framework refers to, like preservation of the cultural characteristic, housing, education and employment,. The intertwined results of research at both levels show that life within the Roma community is an objective resource for profiling the model of Roma housing as type of a support to general integration in the society.*

Key words: *Roma, informal settlements, housing, education, employment, preservation of the cultural characteristic*

1. INTRODUCTION

The housing of the Roma is a phenomenon covering several fields such as political, cultural, architectural and personal. All in all, those are several systems of signs and meanings at several different levels that need to be synchronized. This is the reality evolving from a constant interaction between the theory and practice which is the most vivid at two key levels: the institutional efforts and the architectural (design) decisions within the planning strategy.

The level of institutional efforts is the level of institutional sphere of the dominant social ethics. General theories are created here in relation to the deprived social groups in order to facilitate the social and systematic integration. The level of planning strategy is

the level of a tangible social context and represents the first level of conflict between institutionally imposed lifestyle and real life. The obvious effects and the life experience, without any doubt, show that the general strategic recommendations have to be open for reconsideration within a specific social context. This is the level of a new battle which is a battle between the institutionally imposed housing style and the factual space utilized by the consumers, personal and spontaneously developed. This level is an actual fight for the individual right to have a living space within one's own identity and lifestyle roots, which explicitly shows the prospective of the real needs for housing of the Roma.

According to strategic urban plans, the future holds a gradual transformation of informal settlements into other forms of housing and their complete disappearance in Belgrade and Serbia. The quality of life in Roma settlements was described as substandard. Even though the living conditions could be described in the same way, the genesis, size, quality, position, legal status make up the differences between the settlements, making each of them a distinct micro-ambiance. Pursuant to the aforementioned, there are two methodological approaches to settlements: legalization, if possible, and repositioning, if legalizing the settlement is impossible. In the case of repositioning, the Roma community will be fragmented or completely broken into separate households.[1]

The offered options predominantly exclude big, planned settlements in order to avoid creation of ghettoes. The objective of this thesis is to investigate whether the Roma informal settlement is exclusively a space of a social disaster and a sign of restrictions and segregation, or subtitled as life within a community, it could have a positive feature, which is an enormous resource in searching for a profiled conclusion on correctness of the new widened model of Roma housing as means of general social integration. Belgrade is not a unique example. Informal Roma settlements are becoming a big social problem in Balkan where a solution has not been found yet. Belgrade is only a ground suitable for visualization of this assumption, but also a metaphor for other societies.

2. INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS

Henry Lefebvre stressed that a big city is always a political city (Lefevr [Lefebvre], 1974: 106). It is the most fertile environment for establishing power and as such, the space becomes rarity, an expensive commodity, extravagance and privilege, kept and sustained through practice and strategy, and as per David Harvey, the definition of an efficient spatial organization represents one of the fundamental norms for measuring the strive for profits (Harvey, 1990: 299).

In cities, thus, each space is a commodity and is a result of economic relations grasped by certain ruling entities at their own risk. The space is manipulated like a political category and urbanism and architecture execute the demands of those entities.

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[1] For example *Let's build Belgrade together* is a contemporary Belgrade project funded by the European Union, planning to construct 202 homes for the Roma families. It is a project focused on Roma families that used to reside in informal, unhygienic settlements so-called cardboard city located under the bridge Gazela and near Bellville that were demolished. According to the Belgrade newspapers *Politika*, those families should by November inform the city authorities what type of offered residence is acceptable to them, houses built by the city and the EU in villages all over Serbia or, if they already have a house or an apartment, to remain in them and the donors to help renovate and equip them (Perović, 2013: http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Beograd/271370.lt.html).

The standard definition of the term social housing found in literature means housing by certain standards to be supported by the state and NGOs for those groups and categories of population that, due to economic, social and other constraints cannot resolve their housing problems through the market and by means of the market rules. Social housing is socially and economically sustainable concept based on partnership among the public, the private and the nonprofit (NGO) sectors.

In this general definition, the urban planners are obliged to abide by industrialized circumstances, and architects, willingly or not, depend on finances, norms and values at disposal, i.e. according to criteria of the class leading to segregation even when there is a good will to provide interconnection and assimilation. The strategies of big cities create inequality and urban estrangement, encompasses all other estrangements and segregation which becomes general, from class, through neighborhood, vocation, ethnic affiliation etc.

In urban sociology, the mostly accepted attitude is that for each minority group, consequently the Roma as well, the group is important because of the national identity issues, ethnicity, migration and racism. It is often localized at a certain place in the community where a universal construction is created, understood as an element of the cultural identity representing an "identity point created in the discourse of history and culture in a way that it is not only the essence but positioning (attitude)" (Hickman, 2004: 186). In the contemporary understanding, the cultural identity is nothing else but subject of a continuous game of power and culture. Each ruling structure is actually another demonstration of power, more specifically, power of looking at minorities by treating them like something else. In that case, the matter of influence of context on the attitude and the behavior of people exposed to this context is becoming one of the key issues when talking about deprived social groups.

From the urban sociology point of view, interpretations based on William Wilson's hypothesis are that local forms and norms of behavior seen in neighborhoods with high level of poverty are in disparity with the socially dominant one and it is the model copied by such groups. Thus, the deviant norms and deviant behavior is spread among the population and becomes a way of behavior of the majority in the neighborhood (as cited in Fridrih, 2005: 265).

There is yet another point of view expressed by Saskia Sassen who thinks that in the case of a ghetto, the space for operation of the inhabitants is limited to the local neighborhood and the variety of the social attributes is thus insignificant, while in the city neighborhoods composed of mixed social status households, the variety is bigger and the poor households can benefit from it (Sassen, 2005: 207).

Mary J. Hickman also approves of this point of view having in mind that cultural diversity is the mark of the postmodern period and is a symbol of differences and borders that constitute a certain minority group in the country with a majority population. The biggest threat is the group that explicitly divides the world to us and them because it is established by the whole system of symbolic border keepers although much contemporary is the attitude that supports pluralism at every aspect (Hickman, 2004: 186).

Sociologists in Serbia have in the last few years promoted intercultural attitude as a theoretic and practical model and have tried to foster its implementation, although, as the sociologist and Roma expert Dragoljub Đorđević points out, this model has been heavily criticized "no matter its supporters have noticed huge benefits, particularly in the post-

communist societies, it is one of the discovered wisdoms with no alternative in multiethnic and multi religious societies" (Đorđević, 2002: 18). He also thinks that Roma who are in transnational situation and who live within other cultures, appreciate and find the theoretic and practical intercultural attitude suitable. This means that "intercultural attitude as a theoretic and practical model is something different from the multicultural one, actually its promotion tends to encourage a good quality community in which minority ethnic groups will not be completely integrated or assimilated. They will keep all sorts of distinctiveness, and in a fair interaction, they will exchange the cultural and other welfares" (Ibid.). Many inter government, international and local NGOs dealing with Roma issues have analyzed the problems of the Roma population when it tries to exercise its human rights, particularly the housing right, the right for education and employment and they have developed a strategy for their resolution. This approach has diverted the Roma integration from problem resolving to social problem acting and making adequate decision. Jakšić and Bašić critically explain that the document The Draft Strategy and giving the Roma new authority tended to create policy regarding the Roma people but did not answer the question of strategic planning (Jakšić and Bašić, 2005: 179).

The initial irrational dynamics of implementation of such action plans only triggered protests among the citizens[2] unprepared for the process of integration and enlarged the already existing social distance with the Roma minority, additionally discouraging the Roma to pursue this complicated process. The too often used term integration became part of the politically correct vocabulary inadequately used in public and often abused. For the time being, it seems that rushed actions, as the abovementioned authors say the chance to contemplate and institutionalize a solid foundation for resolving numerous problems of the Roma national minority was missed (Ibid.).

Although Edward W. Soja says that the theoretic context of the modern society promotes the right to diversity in every sense and the combat against fragmentation (Soja, 1996: 35), nowadays experienced in Serbia imply doubt whether, in relation to generally proclaimed theory, for successful process of integration in near future it will still be necessary to establish the so-called positive Roma ghettoes, based on the concept of marginalization[3] consisting of topological dichotomy center – periphery, or the essence of creating ghettoes would be defining individuals and groups according to their status compared to the central zone, defined through the symbols and values of the society and it is thus hypothetically possible to manage to keep the Roma system of values and the identity manifested through a specific lifestyle.

In this sense, it is an open discussion of how and in what manner a society should organize a strategy of housing the Roma who are a deprived social group, i.e. make big planned settlements, or otherwise, place single families among non-Roma population.

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[2] *Not in my backyard* is the reaction that the Roma constantly face. For example, the inhabitants of Ivan Ribar settlement where the Roma were supposed to be temporarily removed from Gazela which was pulled down, blocked the streets for two days requesting the city authorities to repeal their decision because they thought that the Roma living in their neighborhood would cause public peace and order disturbance, pollute the common area and reduce the value of the land.

[3] "In strict sociology use, this term does not have a negative implication, especially not in the sense that it could be associated with some features of a character (if we say that an individual is marginal, it does not refer to his/her intelligence, competence, personal characteristics etc. but we only position the individual in the social space). This is exclusively a technical term, as the case is with many other terms that in every day speech have multiple meanings"(Šućur, 2000: 212).

3. ASPECTS OF ROMA LIFE EXPERIENCE

The institutional space strives to materialize its abstract domains in the circumstances of different values of the social context. The concrete social context consists of social relations that transform the intents and the realization of the institutional space. The local level thus represents a polygon at which knowledge and reality directly collide through attack and defense, i.e. combat. This constant combat between the concept of life and real life actually depicts life experience, which turned to a transparent media, shows the quality of the specific social space and not only the quality inbuilt in it. Henry Lefebvre additionally explains that the fragmentary and uncertain relation between the diluted representations of the space on one side, and representational space on the other, means and describes the subject – the subject that lived, experienced and understood, within the spatial practice framework (Lefebvre,1991: 230).

In addition, bearing in mind that working with Roma as socially very specific entity, many institutional disciplines and specializations overlap and each of them is acting with their own abstract views but the experience they went through must be observed as a whole. The projection of the experience in general is focused on multidiscipline projection of results acquired through individual analytical approaches with expected and unexpected relations that could have been discovered.

Such lived experience becomes a multi dimension phenomenon, the paper is going to scrutinize and observe it through the basic topics that by the European recommendations are considered to be urgent when resolving the Roma problems, which is protection of the socio-cultural identity, education, employment and housing.

3.1. Socio-cultural aspect

Life within a community meant life distant from the majority population because it provided undisturbed learning of the Roma language and many Roma families, scared of assimilation, refused their children to be educated and to learn the language of the majority population. Also, nourishing culture where materialism is not an imperative slowed down the cultural adoption and modernization that other societies embraced a long time ago. Roma customs characterized as less worthy became an obstacle in the equal participation of the Roma in the culture of the majority population, and the culture in general is treated with disrespect. As Šabić et al. point out, it seems that whenever they managed to preserve individualism from the cultural and national aspect, they paid a high price through discrimination, backwardness and poverty in comparison to the environment (Šabić et al., 2013: 68).

A slum is actually a place of hope, where difficulties have created a strong social cohesion and where a traditional culture survives (Ibid: 72). The orientation to life within a community as a specific socio-cultural mentality provides as Bašić notes, the Roma to nourish and develop a system of cultural values they carried with them, which includes the Roma traditional law *Romanikriss* and Roma identity system *Romanipen* (Bašić, 2010:14). The pattern of family is one of the primary values which include the extended family. As found by Raykova, the brotherhood pattern also known as *Phralipen*, is characterized by a strong leaning towards a collective lifestyle as a synonym for the protection and security which are in the Roma culture considered far more important than the individual way of life which is thought to lead to insecurities (Raykova, 2003).

Life in communities only stresses the social marginalization of the Roma, but as Zoran Šućur explains, life in the settlement provides the feeling of security, belonging, solidarity and integration of the family in the community. This spatial isolation contributes to the fact that Roma develop a specific lifestyle and identity norms within a city environment (Šućur, 2000: 219). In this sense to the Roma settlements are recognizable as authentic ethnic symbols where a collective way of life dominates, developed as a survival strategy which became a strong landmark of the Roma culture.

Under those circumstances, it is necessary to provide a social space in which the Roma cultural heritage would be preserved and fostered in order, through studious knowledge of their past and present, to be able to spread their culture, religion and customs in the sense of wiping out prejudice and becoming closer with the majority population. Also, settlements are a precise means of preservation of ethnic and the cultural identity and nourishment of the Roma lifestyle as a sign of security and share of responsibility which might be a significant resource for the integration process. Aleksandra Mitrović points out, in order to achieve social integration of the Roma in Belgrade, a relatively high level of shearing aspirations and problems in the society is required, a positive social adoption and relatively identical feeling of the level of vulnerability of all the members (Mitrović, 1992: 90) which already exists in the Roma community.

3.2. Aspect of collective housing form

When Roma arrived on the territory of Serbia, the Roma settled down in cities, more precisely, in the outskirts of the cities due to the type of trades they were practicing at the time and undisturbed life in the spirit of their culture. Technology development of the society, as mentioned earlier, caused that their trades were no longer in demand which affected their economic position and as such, the majority of the contemporary Roma settlements do not have the basic urban infrastructure. But OSCE/ODIHR Office noted in their Regional Report on Roma Housing in Western Balkans that any kind of action in terms of advancing the general Roma wellbeing requires the understanding of the wider housing context because the Roma are not the only group that needs aid when it comes to housing challenges (2014: 7). Programs with the goal of offering a long-term special treatment for the Roma population in the areas of land and housing ownership should be avoided because they would result in bitterness among the rest of the population as a significant part of that population suffers the same restrictions, particularly when the complexity of legalization is in question. Mina Petrović et al. also notices that the existing economic capacities and lifestyles of the Romani people lead to classic social housing mostly being an inadequate solution which is at the same time very expensive for the general society as it requires an almost total subsidizing, which additionally ignites the social distancing from the Romani (Petrović et al., 2012: 22).

The Roma settlement – *mahala*[4] has always been the urban type of Roma community and has played a decisive part in preserving the ethnic compactness as Roma cultural identity. It has already been mentioned that life in communities provides the feeling of security, belonging, solidarity and integration of the family in the community. The exploitation of these resources just established by life within the community as a form of housing would be able to advance further development and prosperity to the housing

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[4] This technical term has its older more traditional definition – gipsy mahala. Gipsy mahala is an old form of a settlement located in towns of old urban forms created during the Turkish rule in Serbia (Macura, 2000: 185-186).

settlements. In that sense, one of the innovative solutions is to make use of the significant solidarity that exists inside the Roma community through organized building for self and communal helping out. The on-site explorations and interviews with the residents of Roma settlements confirm that everyday solidarity inside a neighborhood is especially materialized through the building and annexing process of a single barrack. The constant participation in barrack construction provided the residents with skills and abilities needed to functionally take part in the building and expanding of their homes (Grbić, 2015: 72). That would reduce additional financing which enables the positive sensitivity of the immediate environment and the general public, which is the premise for the reduction of the social distance towards the Roma population. Draining internal resources can be made up for through organizing construction courses where the Romani people would receive basic technical knowledge needed to plan and carry out construction work following the building for self-model.

In this context, collective housing form also represents a mechanism in the form of knowledge and skills which are necessarily embedded into the lifestyle of the community, and which create the possibilities of participating in the decision-making processes during the creation of the future neighborhoods of the future cities. The participatory design and the implementation of local user knowledge are certainly an important principle to be included into any future strategy.

3.3. Aspects of education, professional upgrading and employment

The Roma are mainly insufficiently qualified for finding employment in the dominant labor fields. Their orientation to self-employment and free-lance professions is a consequence of a lack of education. During history, the Roma showed inclination towards certain kinds of jobs and professions that provided a certain level of incorporation in the formal kinds of labor. Zoran Šućur says that the Roma had always preferred to be independent from the majority of the population and that their integration with the local ethnic communities on the European territory provided monopoly over certain professions that were not favorite to the native population, due to insufficient economic motivation or because those jobs were not suitable for their image in the society (Šućur, 2000: 216-217). They preferred such jobs, and above all, they chose such jobs because they guaranteed independency from the majority population and their traditional way of life. Thus, they developed those tradesman activities and skills that were in line with their cultural identity. Many traditional Roma vocations died because of industrialization and nowadays vocations are more or less of a low status. The mostly widespread job was collecting and sale of waste materials. According to the Ethnicity Centre research results published in 2002, 42.9% of Roma families support themselves doing this job (Jakšić and Bašić, 2005: 97). This occupation should not be considered as 'reserved' for the Roma, but according to the experience so far, this percentage will not drop in near future as the waste sites will be needed in future as well, which cannot be ignored when the Roma infiltration in planned 'non-Roma' settlements is fostered.

The long-term eradication of the unemployment problem imposes the problem of education. In so far practice of avoiding 'ghetto like' education and later on employment, it was the attitude that Roma children attended the same schools as the non-Roma ones. Experts' experience showed that the Roma children were mostly poor and poorly dressed

and due to bad knowledge of the Serb language could communicate poorly with other children, thus they were insecure in the new environment. At school, other children often refused to accept them. The Draft Strategy on Giving the Roma New Power sets a reported example of different classrooms for the Roma children in primary schools. This happened because of the non-Roma parents who objected mixed classrooms with Roma children. Schools that had a greater number of Roma students were named 'Roma schools' and as a consequence, parents withdrew their children from those schools. This tendency of segregation at schools is frustrating the Roma children and is of great danger for deterioration of interrelations.

In order to protect the Roma children from belittling and discrimination at schools, psychologists often send them to special schools, happy because they saved them from the street. In those schools they are successful because they are not mentally deficient but they stay stigmatized. Attending a special school definitely diminishes their chance to continue with higher level of education (Jakšić and Bašić, 2005: 106). Completion of a special school and conditions of life in Roma enclaves mean poverty and low social and cultural status of a future adult Roma who will not be employed because of lack of education and was not educated because there were no conditions for it.

On the other hand, the best results in education of young Roma were achieved through NGO programs when schools were organized in the Roma settlements. Also, Ethnicity Centre research shows that children who went through pre-school programs are more successful when attending school because through those programs they learnt how to adjust to obligations, adopt a feeling of responsibility, learnt the language of the majority population, which was one of the major obstacles in integration (Ibid: 108 – 109).

In order to be integrated in every sense, the Roma need to adjust to the generally accepted norms and values of the industrial civilization because formal education brings employment with formal salary which further on provides social security and advancing in the social status.

Currently, the Roma settlement community seems to be the most appropriate background for the establishment of education centers where young Roma would be prepared for participation in the labor market. Qualified but unemployed Roma should be included in the program of further education. Wherever possible, trainings should be organized in order to provide skills training in certain trades, especially those skills that are required on the labor market. As far as the children are concerned, seems more adequate to organize kindergartens within the Roma settlements so that they learn the language and are prepared for primary education in schools that might also be opened within the Roma settlements and in addition, bilingual education would be present. In this way, unpleasant stigmatization that they face in mixed institutions would be avoided and Roma children would have access to education from early age.

4. SUMMARY AND PROSPECTS

The institutional space is trying to create concepts that are based on facts of ideological subtext. It does not treat the core problem as a special problem but is generalizing it through definitions and approaches, which easily closes the views and the information from

experience and events from real life. In the institutional context, the idea of a Roma settlement has a negative connotation as a ghetto which first of all implies segregation, restriction and certain social pressure from the majority population. In the opposite direction, the ghetto is expressed as resistance to cultural conventions of the majority population which can be concluded as an action of opposing and challenging the majority culture. In fact, it is not based exclusively on undermining the dominant ideology of a certain society but on consolidation of possibilities to overcome the existing unfavorable context and to develop as a parallel reality within the majority population. In context of Roma settlements, positive interpretation of the term ghetto (as life within a community) opens different social functions that can become an important component of a model how to solve the Roma problems.

When considering the everyday life experience of the Roma during the research, it was perceived that life within a community was based on high level of sharing expectations and relatively identical feeling of vulnerability of all the members. This creates a feeling of strong connection and security which should not be broken. Splitting up the community disturbs its functional integrity as a whole as well as the integrity of the members individually. On the contrary, community should be supported through a process of self-confidence and fostered through self-improvement in order to be able to finally conquer the social space and utilize the society welfares. As concrete research showed, Roma settlements represent a social resource for the broader concept of the modern organization of social life which has a multiplier effect. Unity in the socio-cultural dimension would better preserve the Roma system of values manifested through a lifestyle that definitely needs improvement through economic prosperity. In order to include the Roma in the formal types of jobs and self-improvement of the economic status by insisting on skills training and education, it is better that it is specific and targeted and conducted within the settlements.

According to everything noted in the study, the negative attitude towards the life inside a Roma settlement as ghetto community could also be an absurd of the institutional space. Numerous affirmations in the sphere of social upgrading and social consciousness as an inevitable link in the chain of interculturization of social life which must be included in projects for successful integration of the socially endangered members of the Roma population into the general society persist and remain possible only in terms of ghetto positive alternation. Preserving a group does not mean preserving it as an entity, but rather preserving individuals as its members.

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PRELUDIUM ZA POBOLJŠANJE USLOVA ŽIVOTA ROMA U SRBIJI: PRILOG ZA KONTEKSTUALIZACIJU I PRILAGOĐAVANJE PARADIGMI KULTURNIH POLITIKA

Rad predstavlja suočavanje institucionalnog prostora dominantne društvene etike sa subjektivnim prostorom konkretnog korisnika u prilog proučavanju i razumevanju situacije socijalno ugroženih Roma. Na nivou institucionalnih namera rad uporedno predstavlja opšte teorijske preporuke za naseljavanje deprivilegovanih društvenih grupa u cilju realizacije društvene i sistemske integracije. Na nivou planerskih strategija, kroz istraživanje proživljenog iskustva Roma u Beogradu, rad diskutuje romski život u okviru zajednice kroz aspekte na koje se odnose nacrti republičkih strategija i akcionih planova: obrazovanje, zapošljavanje, stanovanje i očuvanje kulturnih karakteristika. Isprepletani rezultati na svim nivoima istraživanja ukazuju da je život u okviru zajednice romskog naselja objektivan resurs za profilisanje modela romskog stanovanja kao podrške opštoj društvenoj integraciji sugerišući smer prilagođavanja aktuelnih teorijskih preporuka za reorganizacije društvenih života.

Ključne reči: *Romi, neformalna naselja, stanovanje, obrazovanje, zapošljavanje, očuvanje kulturnih karakteristika*