The *Panelka Palimpsest*: Transformation of Everyday Life in a Prefabricated Neighbourhood in Sofia

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Preface

The dissertation is the result of my independent research alone. It does not exceed the word limit for the Degree Committee of the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies (SSEES), UCL.

Cover image is designed by Nikolay Nikolov.
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Abstract

Nikolay Nikolov
The Panelka Palimpsest: Transformation of Everyday Life in a Prefabricated Neighbourhood in Sofia

From the onset, the role of Soviet architecture was not just the physical construction of buildings, but also the reconstruction of the way of life – perestroika byta. Many prominent scholars in urban anthropology have used that to diagnose the present, to understand societies, pinning the discontinuities (Buchli, 1999) in material culture against the seeming ubiquity of socialist aesthetics and ideology. To showcase the extent to which architecture acts as a catalyst for social change, scholars of Soviet material culture often examine the relationship between a dominant institution (monuments, public or private buildings, and spaces) and the urban whole.

My thesis attempts to go one step further, replacing the centre (‘dominanta’) with the periphery, with that which remains unseen in its ubiquitous unoriginality (‘banalka’) to focus on the prefabricated mass housing system, colloquially known as the panelka – a universal legacy of socialism that has come to contain almost all aspects of domestic and everyday life in Bulgaria. I demonstrate two ways in which a methodological palimpsestuousness (Dillon, 2006) of prefabricated concrete can help trace the discontinuities of everyday life in socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria. Firstly, by examining the changes in the quotidian practices panelki inhabitants used to carve out lives for themselves (as processes of micropowers), both before and after socialism. Second, and most importantly, showing how the institution of panelki fails, constantly, as a ‘social condenser’ (Ginsburg, 1928), but in doing so, engenders a productive power that can fulfil the original social and political promise of change, albeit in unexpected and counteractive ways.

Referring to the notion of “prefab civilisation” (Kotkin, 2007), the neighbourhood of Mladost has a special place in the overall stock of prefabricated concrete. It is both a remnant of the past, remaining largely unchanged from its initial built form, and a hint to the future, with individual interventions marking external façades like multi-coloured mosaics. Using data collected through participant observation over four years of intermittent life inside a Mladost panelka, as well as hundreds of interviews and photographs of flats and inhabitants, this research show how the materiality of panelki produces both resilience and attachment to the socialist past and concrete ecumene. The thesis further explores how this palimpsestuousness transcends the locality of Mladost to serve as diagnosis of the present for the Bulgarian post-socialist landscape as a whole.
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Map 1: Mladost’s Prefabrication Typologies
Chapter One: Introducing the *Panelka* Palimpsest

1.1 Architecture, Power and Ideology

The *panelka* flat is, in many ways, a ubiquitous symbol of Soviet-style socialism. In every country, *panelki* neighbourhoods redefined the meaning of (post)socialist home, presiding over unprecedented waves of urban migration, outlasting the regimes that inaugurated them and the first families that inhabited them. The push towards the prefabrication of mass housing, initiated by the Soviet Union’s Nikita Khrushchev, would be directly imported, down to the exact prefabrication technologies and building typologies, by socialist regimes struggling to contain demographic crises. In Bulgaria, the *panelka* institution literally accommodated the “the most rapid and drastic change of an Eastern European nation from a rural to an urban, industrialized society” (Kelleher, 2009: 44). Today, more than two million people (Lueneburg, 2016: 25), or around one third of the Bulgarian population, call *panelki* their home. But more than that, a miniscule *panelka* flat is often transformed into a family home where up to three generations can be found cohabiting – people born before, during, and after socialism. The prefab home has seemingly shed its ideological foundations to provide shelter and financial security to an enormous number of people trying to make ends meet in perpetual cycles of post-socialist instability. *Panelki* remain an unexpected source of stability (despite edging into their fourth decade past their supposed expiration date) in a divided Bulgaria 30 years after the fall of socialism.

The aim of this research is to trace how people inside this ubiquitous institution attempted to carve out different lives for themselves, before and after socialism – how they embodied variations of (post)socialisms as everyday, *normal*, life that was “not necessarily equivalent to ‘the state’ or ‘ideology’”(Yurchak, 2005: 7). To peel the layers of history in each *panelka*, to trace a more nuanced genealogy of everyday life, not only during socialism, but after its dissolution, and all the paradoxes it entails, means examining how “people living within that system engaged with, interpreted, and created their own reality.” (ibid.: 18). Bulgaria offers a unique, if under-researched, opportunity to study what happens to that daily life, down to its most banal and superfluous details; to do so in a country where the *panelka* first had a deeper impact on the social fabric than in other European countries; but, most importantly, to trace those developments to the present day, where the Bulgarian *panelka* has been transformed into the largest post-socialist concrete canvas on which individuals can experiment with and mould in their own image.
Bulgaria was transformed from the most rural to one of the most urbanised societies under socialism, with panelki being the main reason for the extremely high rates of private housing in the 1990s. The panelka served as the remedy for the intense housing crisis following collectivisation and as the first point of contact with city life for hundreds of thousands of people. Despite all this, these panelki were given over to people as empty, grey concrete boxes. It is within these homogenous empty spaces that people began carving out a home. For a fortunate few, that process was finally complete in the last few years. For others, the final iteration of the perfect home is an unattainable normative benchmark.

Here, the process of remont¹ is key, because it is through remont that the concrete canvas is continuously reinterpreted. While concepts, like de Certeau’s ‘making do’ (1984), as well as the overarching process of renovation, are applied universally, remont “has a particular explanatory power for citizens of the former Soviet space in characterizing the specificity of their lives, cities and shifting political regimes” (Alexander, 2012: 255). Remont is a way of analysing the contemporary world of post-socialist countries as a constant work-in-progress. In the words of Catherine Alexander, “if we look through the lens of repair and making-do, then we see that the moments when things fall apart and are reconstituted or patched up, allow people and things to object to normative categories, relations and practices” (ibid.: 263-4).

Remont is the artistic power of expression that reveals how individuals interpreted, engaged, and remade their everyday lives under socialism and after – nothing is permanent and everything is in flux; nothing occurs according to the overarching plan and everything is always incomplete. This is why the focus of this dissertation is to attempt a reading of everyday life and how it has been transformed by looking at the way the materiality of panelki produces resilience and attachment amongst its inhabitants. The Bulgarian case offers insights into how panelki, one of the most powerful social condensers of Soviet-style totalitarianism, created not ideal socialist citizens, but a palimpsest of diverse individual narratives embodied within the panelka home. The aim of this research is to use the insights from the Bulgarian case as a point of departure for future research about the transformation of everyday life through panelki in other countries.

The question of how societies can be interpreted and studied through their material culture, and more specifically through architecture (Blier, 1995; Hillier and Hanson, 1989; Levi-Strauss, 1966; Shanks and Tilley, 1992), is a particularly potent one when it comes to the legacy of the Soviet Union. The process opens up

¹ According to Catherine Alexander, “remont derives from the modern French usage of ‘remonter’, which indicates returning vigour to something, either by replenishing stocks or oneself; ‘un
detailed ways of investigating how human beings are transformed and reproduced into social subjects, who, in their daily lives interact and are affected by the material reality that contains them. The focus will specifically fall on the context of socialist material culture (i.e. exported directly from the Soviet Union in terms of ideology, architectural style, aesthetics, and technology) and societies, where architecture, both privately and publicly, was directly utilised in the creation of new human subjects and personhoods. It was under socialism that “the audacious dream of modernity... was pushed to its radical limits: grand designs, unlimited social engineering, huge and bulky technology, total transformation of nature.” (Bauman, 1991: 38-39). It is in the former socialist bloc where, through architecture and the built environment, the social fabric was fundamentally transformed, and where “through the ordinary and everyday, society would, paradoxically, attain the extraordinary” (Clark, 1995: 251). It is argued here that the realisation of these grandiose processes, as the construction of a real-life social condenser, can be traced back to the panelka, an institution that has remained largely invisible because it has been neglected as ordinary and everyday as the sky above it or mountains behind it. But it is precisely that banality, which is transformed into, at times extreme, originality at the hands of skilled inhabitants carving out lives for themselves inside their prefab concrete walls.

When it comes to the analytical category of change in the context of the former Soviet bloc, there is an overwhelming insistence and focus on 1989-1991 as “the defining moment of rupture and point of departure for transformation” (Caldwell, 2005: 3) from socialism to post-socialism. But change, particularly towards post-socialism, is never uniform (for more about the dynamic links between past and present, see Boym, 1999; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Creed, 1995; Leonard & Kanef, 2002; Yurchak, 2005) and, in the realm of the domestic sphere, there are important practical continuities that shape people's lives. To focus on daily life, to conduct a diagnosis of the present, and the way it has adapted since the fall of socialism, is to move away from a strictly temporal focus on singular dates and the overarching regime changes (democratic transitions). Those events rarely coincide directly with the lifecycles, daily alterations, and renovations that ordinary people find much more consequential to their individual narratives (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999).

30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the most permanent legacies of socialist domination, both in the public and private realm, are the remnants of its built form. A multitude of universalised institutions and spaces continue to impose a banally simplified past upon competing versions of the present. First by homogenising cityscapes and discourses about the advent of socialism from Moscow to Bratislava, and then further containing the boundaries of everyday life for a second generation, born in Soviet prefabricated flats, but born after the
demise of the Soviet-styled totalitarianism. So, to argue that the power invested in architecture by ideology continues to have a dominating and direct effect on different post-socialist societies (Clark, 2005; Murawski, 2013) is to miss a crucial point about the palimpsestual and capillary nature of power relations (Buchli, 1997, 1999). Human subjects are never linearly transformed according to the overarching tenets of ideology and the totalising aesthetics of socialism, despite its active contribution “to the conceptual worlds of Soviet people” (Humphrey, 2005: 40). The complex interrelations between subject and material culture require further contextualisation and disentangling, especially with regards to the post-socialist present. There is a great need, which this research addresses, for a reflexive examination of the concrete ways in which the overarching macropowers (such as ideology and architecture) of state socialism were juxtaposed and eroded by overlooked and banal micropowers (like everyday domestic life), and what part, if any, of those relations continue to exist today (Buchli, 1999). To do so, the socialist social condenser par excellence needs to be re-examined in terms of the unintended consequences, or productive failures (Buchli, 2017), through which new human subjects were constituted.

It is important now to clarify two central concepts, which will be used extensively throughout this dissertation – the notion of banality and the process of micropowers (or microresistance). Banality, as it pertains to everyday life in the panelka, requires particular contextualisation. It is not to be mischaracterised as the trivialisation of evil, as defined by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann In Jerusalem: A Report On The Banality Of Evil* (1994). Rather, banality is approached as a diagnostic tool, neither inherently ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, that allows the researcher to read the panelka flat like a palimpsest – tracing each concrete scar and uncovering every intervention upon the prefabricated surfaces. It does not extend a binary opposition because, following Yurchak (2005: 131), such dichotomisation of ‘for’ and ‘against’ limits our ability to really examine the realities of actually existing socialisms – and in this case post-socialisms, too. The importance of banality in the context of panelki, is finding meaning in the ways concrete, as blank space and canvas, is constantly transformed and renegotiated by panelki inhabitants.

On the one hand, the uniformity of panelki results in the mass construction of everyday life as boring, predictable, and prosaic. It is imbued with ideology in terms of its central role in creating new homogenous socialist citizens through material culture. On the other, that same uniformity reveals that grey concrete upon which individuals can experiment with breaking the mould, with being different, with carving out spaces for themselves. However, because the panelki are so ubiquitous, these internal processes of transformation are frequently overlooked as banal and incidental. To the contrary, it is argued here, that originality-as-resistance within the domestic space – of making something out of
nothing – is what makes it possible to locate and read the layers of individual histories etched onto the panelki palimpsests, to make sense of how individuals interacted with a rigid system and opened it up to new interpretations.

According to Yurchak, tracing the “conditions that made the [Soviet] collapse possible without making it anticipated,” (2005: 4), socialism necessitated a paradoxical and unintended space of spontaneity that seems banal and hidden at first sight. Yurchak summarises this paradox of life under socialism as a process of deterritorialisation:

The unanimous participation of Soviet citizens in the performative reproduction of speech acts and rituals of authoritative discourse contributed to the general perception of that system’s monolithic immutability, while at the same time enabling diverse and unpredictable meanings and styles of living to spring up everywhere within it. (ibid: 29).

Yurchak borrows the term ‘deterritorialisation’ from Deleuze and Guattari and applies it to the Soviet system, transformed from the inside out, at the level of everyday life and discourses. Because those micropowers remained largely invisible in the face of what was an immovable monolithic system, they remained invisible, ordinary (banal), and hidden in their seeming unoriginality. These micropowers, or deterritorialisation processes, as defined by Yurchak, introduced new meaning and possibilities,

The system was internally mutating towards unpredictable, creative, multiple forms of “normal life” that no one anticipated. This deterritorializing move was a move toward greater freedom, but one that was not coded in the emancipatory rhetoric of grand narratives (such as “living in truth.”) (ibid.: 125).

These ways of living were palimpsestuous in the sense that they were both within the system and outside it, creating new micropowers that enabled people to carve out lives for themselves. Crucially, according to Yurchak, “[t]hese styles of living generated multiple new temporalities, spatialities, social relations, and meanings that were not necessarily anticipated or controlled by the state, although they were fully made possible by it.” (ibid.: 127).

This, of course, traces back to Foucault’s analysis of power relations as ubiquitous (Sheridan, 1980: 184), where it flows through the smallest capillaries in the social body, permeating every aspect of everyday life. Power relations can only be located locally as micropowers or microresistances in everyday life – “therefore power cannot be manipulated or overthrown institutionally.” (Buchli, 1999: 12). Whereas Yurchak’s focus is on unofficial discourse and Buchli’s on the Narkomfin kommunalka, I trace these transformations in the everyday life of panelki inhabitants. That is why the word ‘banal’ contains such importance. It encapsulates the complexities of the deterritorialisation of socialist domination through the lens of a myriad of local and decentred microresistances.
The focus on the banality of everyday life in the panelka allows the researcher to trace how individuals managed to carve out concrete, if contradictory, lives for themselves, both within the Soviet-style totalitarian system, and after its dissolution. However, in order to do so, a notion held by some scholars of Soviet material culture will be contested – the (structuralist) notion of the overarching totalitarian state as the central and only source of official power (as domination), enforced absolutely upon an undifferentiated and homogenised social body. More specifically, in relation to the built environment, such scholars posit a direct link between state power, ideology, and architecture, where architecture “takes precedence over the economic” (Humphrey, 1983: 187) in determining social change. Accordingly, it is further argued, to varying degrees of assumed causality and linearity (see Collier, 2011; Humphrey, 2005; Kotkin, 1995), that there is a direct link between what function and purpose the built environment was intended to have and what it actually ended up doing, i.e. the Soviet achievement of extreme modernity and an “astonishing and perhaps admirable uniformity in material life” (Humphrey, 1998: 17). In a sense, this notion of ideology as designed into architecture reaches its pinnacle in the 1970s, when the universal implementation of the panelka institution established a kind of ‘hypernormalisation,’” (Yurchak, 2005: 37) of these “prefab civilisations” (Kotkin, 2007: 520), where at all times and places the material realities seem “interchangeable” across different socialist states.

I argue, however, that this totalising force of the built environment upon the human subject is only totalising if seen from above and from a distance. More importantly, this research shows how some of the earliest attempts at resistance to the ‘hypernormalisation’ of the domestic space in Bulgaria occurred years before the fall of the socialist regime. These were not outright attempts at protest or dissidence; but they were not strict relations of power either. Panelki were intimate spaces of “imaginary elsewhere – the ingenious experimental cultures that were both internal and external to the body of the Soviet state” (Yurchak, 2005: 183). Spaces simultaneously in the system and outside it – they were what Yurchak calls vnye², outside, beyond. Similar to the way X-ray records were used for samizdat of pirated music and boiler room jobs were requested as a way to, paradoxically, retain some sense of freedom, the internal workings of the panelki inhabitants, their interactions with the seemingly immovable force of concrete all around them, their craftsmanship and attempts at DYI, added new layers of meaning and signification to the seemingly unoriginal and homogenous domestic space. The goal here is to trace these markings and peel the layers to interpret some of that meaning.

² "A condition of being simultaneously inside and outside of some context – such as, being within a context while remaining oblivious of it, imagining yourself elsewhere, or being inside your own mind.” (Yurchak, 2005: 127).
With microresistances – the process of being vnye – and various forms of
deterritorialisation occurring in the hidden corners and walls of everyday life,
panelki should be analysed as palimpsests containing multiple personal histories,
not catalysts for a homogenised society. This is important in overcoming the
fictional rupture of the regime as the defining moment of change in the everyday
life of people. The transition to post-socialism defies these cut off points,
particularly when looking inside the panelka, and offers a much more gradual
shift in how individual subjects transform their domestic space according to
changes in their possibilities of personhood.

More specifically, I would like to argue against the notion of the socialist
dominanta consolidating power in post-socialism, as proposed by Michal
Murawski (2013, 2018), which is seen as a centralised, vertical, and all-seen site,
or array of sites, of power exerted in and through architecture. According to
Murawski, Warsaw’s Palace of Culture was “consciously intended to endow
Warsaw with an entirely new political morphology, focused on itself – and the
surrounding, twenty-five hectare Parade Square – as pivot and dominanta”
(2018: 38). The Palace was to function as nothing less than the centre of gravity
“to which the rest of Warsaw would be ‘harmoniously subordinated’” (ibid.: 39).
Sofia has its own National Palace of Culture – Natsionalen Dvorets na Kulturata
(NDK) – which, while paling in grandeur and scope, commands an enormous
area in the heart of the city. Yet, as has been argued so far, my focus is not on the
central, on the one-of-a-kind, on that which is the original in its domination.
Instead, to trace the deterritorialisation of Bulgarian socialism and after, it is that
which is the most seemingly peripheral and unoriginal aspect – everyday life –
which request the utmost attention. To highlight this substitution of the centre
for the periphery, of domination for a myriad of microresistances, of the original
for the banal, I intend to replace the concept of the dominanta with my own term
– banalka. That is to mean those peripheral, local, and often-unseen politics of
space that nonetheless have an impact on how human beings constitute
themselves as individuals underneath amidst all the overarching political and
economic changes.

I would like to investigate this notion of the anti-dominanta, which is anonymous
in its universality and hidden in terms of the unintended consequences it had on
the millions of lives it was built to condense. This means reversing the idea of the
Foucaultian panopticon, the all-seeing and disciplining institution of power. It
means gaining access to local, concrete and standardised spaces, and following
the artistic attempts of people transform them into something altogether
different. To move beyond the structural power of institutions (dominanta) and
their ability to mould kinds and categories of people is to reflect on the way
Michel Foucault worked his way through the three axes of knowledge
(discourse), power, and ethics, to finally focus on the intricate processes of
subjectification, where one invokes particular techniques or rationalities to constitute him/herself as a subject.

To apply it to the context of Bulgaria means juxtaposing the legacy of panelki, an institution designed to finally embody the Soviet dream of building communism, with its gradual domestication by an increasingly resourceful social fabric. To exemplify this transformation, this research focuses on the first prefabricated neighbourhood in Bulgaria, called Mladost\(^3\), and its protracted rejuvenation efforts in the last 30 years. Rather than studying a single dominanta, I instead rely on two archetypal panelki – one of the first, and one of the last to be built in the neighbourhood – as markers of the boundaries of banality in everyday life, not just of Mladost, but Bulgaria as a whole. The two panelki are examples of standardised typologies of rooms inhabited by millions across Europe, but they are also unique palimpsests of individual histories. Their transformation is a synecdoche and a diagnosis for the overarching changes in everyday life in Bulgaria over the past 70 years. To conduct such a history is to focus on the capillaries of power, which exist anonymously and in peripheral ways, beneath the overarching and Goliath-like domination of Socialist Realist skyscrapers. The focus on those central institutions, the palaces (of Culture), was the sole intention for their construction; the blanketing of entire cities by panelki canvases of all colours and styles is the unintended consequence. It is no wonder, then, that the Warsaw Palace of Culture continues to dominate the skyline unchallenged, but panelki face an uncertain future – from government-initiated destruction in Russia, to government-initiated renovation in countries from Germany to Slovakia.

In Murawski’s research, the Palace of Culture “ended up far outliving its own conditions of existence,” i.e. the Marxist-based socialist economic model (Murawski, 2013: 199). The dominanta maintained its powerful stance after the fall of the regime, “seeped into so many different domains of urban life” (ibid.: 221). In the context of panelki, it is more important to examine how power relations were institutionalised within the finest grains of the social body. The shift from the outright public and central place of architecture, to its role in the peripheries and inside the domestic space, allows an inspection of the value and place of the human subject underneath the overarching discontinuities in the relationship between power and ideology. The aim is to look inside the concrete

\(^3\) Mladost means youth. The names given to many prefabricated neighbourhoods designated a strong sense of normative urgency about the process of social condensation – Mladost, Druzhba (comradeship), Nadezda (hope), etc. Mladost was the first prefabricated neighbourhood built in Bulgaria, constructed literally from scratch. There were primarily fields where the first panelki were built and the first roads were built along with the dwellings. Today, Mladost 1 is the first of five Mladost districts (1, 2, 3, 4, and 1a), which have a combined population of 114,000 people (Mladost Municipality, 2017). That constitutes just fewer than 10% of Sofia’s overall population (1,264,064), as of December 31, 2016 (National Statistical Institute, 206).
walls that continue to contain the cityscapes in the former socialist bloc and determine how human subjects continue to reinvent themselves underneath the discursive battles about the legacy of the past and the path to progress in the future, but also, fundamentally, how these human subjects created their concrete sites of \textit{vnye}, experimenting with the malleability of the built environment surrounding them.

\section*{1.2 Socialist Material Culture as a Diagnosis of the (Post-Socialist) Present}

By looking at material culture in this context, a kind of ‘diagnosis of the present’ is made possible “into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, and saying” (Foucault, 1984a: 46). The focus on the transformation of the domestic space, its reading as a palimpsest made up of layers of individual histories and narratives, offers new understanding “precisely by digging some new boreholes into the daily lives and looking afresh at the elements, the strata, the tensions and pressures we find there” (Cooke in Reid and Crowley, 1999: vii). According to Michel Foucault, discussing the complex power relations materialised in specific institutions, there is a traceable governmentality which forms disciplined human subjects within a concrete space (1970, 1977, 1984b). For example, in \textit{Discipline and Punish}, the particular architecture of the panopticon, a structure first envisioned by utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, is capable of moulding an undifferentiated mass into docile individuals. The prisoner, by being aware of their role within the institution, knowing the limits to their possibilities of performing certain actions, being aware of a possible surveillance, makes authority self-reflexive. The subject internalises the figure of invisible authority, perpetuated through the material space, and begins a process of self-enforcing certain limits on his/her behaviour. This idea of the self-governing individual has become particularly influential, especially in contemporary sociology and postmodern philosophy, examining the notion of the neo-liberal social contract, constitutive of such forms of subjectification. According to Nikolas Rose, “Contemporary individuals are incited to live as if making a project of themselves: they are to work on their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations with employment and their techniques of sexual pleasure, to develop a ‘style’ of living that will maximise the worth of their existence to themselves” (Rose, 1998: 157).

These relations of power are situated within the sites of the everyday life, like the home, the school, the hospital, where they are constantly re-enacted by thinking, speaking, and acting subjects. Power, as noted above, is “ubiquitous, not
because it is able to assemble everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced at every moment, at every point, or rather in every relation of one point with another” (Sheridan, 1980: 218). Yet, this ubiquity, as inherently situated within concrete physical sites, presupposes that the relationship involves a human subject who is, to some extent, free to make decisions for themselves, and ultimately, to have a say over their ‘possibilities of personhood’ (Hacking, 2004). It is argued here that post-socialism, or rather post-socialisms, can be diagnosed and interrogated through the material of concrete – we can analyse the politics of everyday life, the legacies of socialism, the canvas of the social hierarchy illustrated onto the façades, all through the vantage point of the panelka. Furthermore, it is argued here that the malleability of that material also means there were similarities across the Soviet bloc, in terms of the enforced macropowers, as well as qualitatively different forms of individual forms of resistance. And in order to approach these processes, this dissertation will attempt to deconstruct the relationship of ideology and power in the Soviet Union and how that was subsequently copied and applied to socialist states in Europe.

Subsequently, a Foucaultian approach to the notion of the subject will be applied, focusing on his reformulation of the authority-led constitution of subjects (subjugation) in his early works, to the idea of the self-created thinking subject (subjectification) discussed in his final lectures. This theory will be applied to the everyday life in socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria in an attempt and locate the spaces and places inside the socialist home where the relations of power occurred then and continue to occur now. This will be discussed with references to dozens of panelki flats in Mladost’s Blocks 45 and 52. These flats demonstrate how everyday life changed little before and after socialism, but within it, sites of resistance and attempts to shut out the outside world, to differentiate one’s self from the rest, were formed long before that demise. This hidden continuity has a powerful impact on the meaning of post-socialism and the place institutions like panelki have in contemporary society.

Similar to the traditionally deterministic structural theories in anthropology (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Deetz, 1977), which tend to displace agency as mechanistic and, essentially, irrelevant to the overarching prerogatives exerting influence, many scholars of Soviet material culture and social change have tended to separate the totalitarian regimes from post-socialist realities, taking that as the crucial break in tradition, which inaugurated a new kind of social transformation through human empowerment (see Andrusz, Harloe, and Szelenyi, 1996; Hirt, 2006; Murawski, 2013, 2018; Stanilov, 2007; Zarecor, 2014). In other words, micropowers and tactics of resistance become most intelligible in a post-socialist context because they successfully enforce themselves upon the overarching structures. This is most clearly illustrated through the processes of internal and
external renovations (remonti) of the panelki flats enacted by both the state and individual inhabitants. The homogeneity of the socialist prefabricated housing construction is forcefully rejuvenated, albeit following very different approaches, in post-socialist societies. Accordingly, it becomes possible to contextualise larger social dynamics by a juxtaposition of the changing functions and aesthetics of legacies of architectural power, for example the Palace of Culture in Warsaw, as examined by Murawki, or in this case, the case of the Bulgarian panelki.

When discussing the dichotomy between structure and agency, it is important to consider Bourdieu’s attempt to transcend that struggle with the introduction of the concept of habitus. In particular relevance to the socialist context, where public social action was a performance designed to perpetuate the regime’s legitimacy, Bourdieu writes,

If all societies and, significantly, all the “totalitarian institutions”, in Goffman’s phrase, that seek to produce a new man through a process of “deculturation” and “reculturation” set such store on the seemingly most insignificant details of dress, bearing, physical and verbal manners, the reason is that, treating the body as a memory, they entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, i.e. mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of the culture. The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious than the values given body, made body by the transsubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as “stand up straight” or “don’t hold your knife in your left hand.” (1977: 94)

The cosmology of the body as the imposition of implicit pedagogy is applied here to the domestic space as a whole. There multiple cosmologies are in constant conflict, opening up otherwise incommunicable stories about the lives those spaces contain. From looking at the marks on walls to see which individuals attempted to hang pictures on the reinforced concrete walls, to studying the methods of those that tried to drill new electrical sockets in those walls and save space. Each injunction reflects an almost artistic relationship between flat and inhabitant, where within the total installation of everyday life, each is trying to transform the other, most often in what are at first sight banal and counter-intuitive ways, but in fact are able to produce new meanings and realities for those individuals.
This representation of the unconscious social action, guided and determined by higher-order systems of structuration, is most visibly destructive during outright totalitarianism, as realised under Stalin. Stalinism, as the most radical expression of a modernist urge towards ‘total art’ (Groys, 1992), saw the silencing and disappearance of the individual in a state of “stagecraft [as] a thespian art” (Geertz, 1980: 120). There, human beings found themselves in total mobilisation within a state ritual, resulting in everyday, common practices of unstoppable, and almost unconscious, pursuit of socialist piety. Just like the theatre as performed by the widows of Balinese royals, committing suicide by throwing themselves in fire, seemingly in serenity, people were made superfluous not as “means to political ends; they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for” (Geertz, 1980: 13).

Following Stalin’s death and the inauguration of the ‘Thaw’ period under Khrushchev, a new social contract was institutionalised through architecture. With the introduction of the prefabrication in mass housing, a new partnership was established between the human subject and the state, whereby the individual becomes a ‘willing participant’ (Fehérváry, 2013) in the regime. The gift of the panelka, as the inauguration of a new personal and protected space created new possibilities for micropowers, in terms of the lives people could carve out for themselves. The normative dream of social condensation through concrete, met with insufficient funding, pressures to build fast and for many, resulted in the universalisation of a banal paradox. Panelki became both heterotopic spaces whose homogeneity was deterritorialised by inhabitants seeking change and the most successful application of the totalising aesthetic (the prefab civilisation); both a reconstitution of a kind of caged freedom and the initiation of the full disciplinisation of the human subject by the proposed functionality of rooms; both a gift from the regime and the ultimate personal obligation – playing by the rules of a fictitious game.

The centrality of the panelka transgresses the socialist period, becoming the most visible and significant legacy following the fall of the regimes. Several scholars have focused on the effects of transition on the institution of the panelka (Fehérváry, 2002, 2011, 2013; Crowley and Reid, 2002; Zarecor, 2014), while others have presupposed the centrality of such spaces in coming to terms with the overarching socialist context (Buchli, 1999). What the case of Mladost and Bulgaria offers is something new – it shows not only how overarching discursive battles are materialised in domestic spaces (the ‘American kitchen’ phenomenon in Hungary; the notion of uiut⁴ in the Soviet Union), but also how individual

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⁴ Uiut, in both Russian and Bulgarian, refers to the notion of comfort, ‘homeyness’ or cosiness in the domestic space. A kind of Gemütlichkeit that has particular power with regards to the infiltration of Soviet ideology in the home (see Buchli, 1999 for a genealogy of uiut in the Soviet Union).
inhabitants-as-artists constantly renegotiate the bare walls of the failed social condenser.

The concept of the social condenser and the transformation of what it means requires some context. To do so, I intend to follow some of the discussions regarding the Soviet ideal of social condensation that resulted in the Journal of Architecture’s special issue on the subject in 2017. The social condenser, in the context of the Soviet constructivist architects in the 1920 and 1930s thinking about how to inaugurate the new socialist citizen, was intended as the literal “conductor and condenser of socialist culture” (Murawski, 2017: 376). Architecture played a central role because social condensation was to be primarily achieved through the introduction of new material forms that would “impact the human psyche” (ibid.: 377). It was a concept in temporal flux – both a normative institution embodying the future and an actual, contemporary, built form designed to transform the most basic and mundane aspects of the way of life (byt). This notion of byt and its transformation are key to understanding and evaluating the various iterations of Soviet social condensers – from the first experiments with kommunalki, like the Narkomfin, to subsequent attempts at centralisation, like the dominantas, to, ultimately, the mass production of residential buildings and the universal consolidation of the banalka social condensation system. Just like the Soviet TV show, Irony of Faith, which in 1975 told the tale of a drunken man flying from Moscow to Leningrad by mistake. The man enters a cab and recites his Moscow address only to be taken to an identical street in an identical panelka. The man then enters the doppelgänger building and flat using his key and falls asleep. This is the perfect metaphor for the complete domination of the banality of the panelka social condenser (banalka).

The role of constructivism in architecture, as well as the transformation of the social condenser will be discussed at length in this chapter. First, it is important to situate the work of Victor Buchli on the Narkomfin Communal House in relation to my focus on panelki. According to Buchli, the Narkomfin is “one of the most complete architectural realisations” (2017: 387) of the constructivist ideal of social condensation because it was imagined as making it possible literally to transform Soviet citizens into revolutionary communards and to enable the transition of Soviet society into the next level of social evolution as envisioned by the unilineal evolutionary beliefs of the early Soviet state. This would be done through individuals’ interactions with architectural forms, their textures, materials and spatial configurations, to produce a new form of social life and with it a new form of revolutionary social consciousness. (ibid.)
In Bulgaria, just like all other socialist regimes, the most extensive and forceful attempt to enact such transformative change was the ‘prefab civilisation’ determined by the construction of panelki. While the Narkomfin may well be an exemplary form of a social condenser, the panelki are its logical afterthought due to their unprecedented reach and unexpected resilience. The panelka, as will be shown subsequently, transformed a predominantly rural pre-World War II Bulgaria into one of the most urbanised countries in Europe. It also, coincidentally, resulted in Bulgarians having some of the highest rates of privately owned housing in the world following the collapse of socialism (see Dandolova, 2002). However, following Buchli, the concept of social condensation is critically interrogated in terms of its ‘productive failures’ rather than its ultimate social transformation. The focus here is on the unintended consequences in the deterritorialisation of socialism, how the panelka produces new and unexpected forms of meaning and microresistances in the daily lives of individuals.

The Bulgarian panelka is therefore somewhat of a heterotopic space in Foucaultian terms. It is both totalising in its bleak homogeneity and, simultaneously, a constant work-in-progress perpetuated by remont⁵ and renovation, which individuals approach as nothing less than an extension of themselves, of their aesthetic outlook. There is no final state that resembles one kind of post-socialism – like the process of returning to the West by enforcing open-plan interior design in Hungary – but a palimpsest of attempts to make something out of nothing, to fortify a home, and to carve out a life for oneself. This process begins before the fall of the Bulgarian regime, too, and what occurs in the decades after is only the explosion of its most eccentric forms, as most dramatically illustrated by the protracted and colourful façade mosaics of panelki across the country. The concrete walls, as blank canvases, are histories of the conflicts and fissures that have led to the contemporary state of things – they are not wholesome or always intended and it is within those disturbances and discontinuities that it is possible to diagnose the complexities of constantly changing post-socialist presents.

### 1.3 Panelki: The Gift that Keeps on Giving

This part of the thesis concerns the relationship between the structure of the panelki – the predominant architectural form across the socialist bloc after the 1950s – and the everyday life of inhabitants. The (almost omnipresent) rectilinear dwellings constructed from prefabricated concrete panels became the

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⁵ Remont, meaning renovation or repair, has been applied to other socialist contexts as a metaphor for changes in daily life. Walter Benjamin (1986), in his observations about his trip to Moscow, traces its roots to pre-Soviet times, while Boym follows through and studies how remont exists in an era of privatisation in Russia (Boym 1999:393).
universal domestic housing solution after Stalin’s death and his replacement by Nikita Khrushchev. What is most crucial here is to situate how the reversal of the domineering Socialist Realism tradition in architecture, to the earlier, more utopian goals of total societal metamorphosis, explored by Constructivist architects during the avant-garde movement in the Soviet Union in the 1920s was realised (Buchli, 1997, 1999; Collier, 2011; Groys, 1992; Fehérváry, 2002, 2011, 2013; Kotkin, 1997; Parusheva, et. al., 2010; Zarecor, 2014). According to Stephen Kotkin, this reversal realised the long-awaited, albeit with destructive unintended consequences, the final stage in constitution of an international socialist society:

Consider the children’s playgrounds in those places, erected over the same cracked concrete panel surfaces and with the same twisted metal piping—all made at the same factories, to uniform codes. This was also true of apartment buildings (outside and inside), schools, indeed entire cities, even villages. (2007: 520)

Other scholars of Soviet material culture, like French and Hamilton, argue that the continuity extends even further back: “if one were transported into any residential area built since the Second World War in the socialist countries, it would be easier, at first glance, to tell when it was constructed than to determine in which country it was” (1979: 15). The introduction of prefabrication transformed the lives of, and redefined the meaning of ‘home’ for, tens millions of people (Fehérváry, 2012; Reid, 2014) and embodied the inauguration of urbanised and industrialised socialist societies in a matter of decades.

The panelka was built according to four overarching requirements: a return to the architectural roots of the early Soviet avant-garde⁶; a remedy and ‘cure’ for the growing housing crisis across the Eastern bloc caused by waves of collectivisation and forced industrialisation; a new social contract with ‘willing participants’, and an injection of the large build-up of personal savings – intended for homes, primarily – back into the economy. In Bulgaria, specifically, it had a fifth and rather unique function – an institutionalisation of what is known as ‘personal property’⁷. Unlike any other socialist regime, that juridical

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⁶ The prefabricated concrete panel manufacturing system was hailed by Nikita Khrushchev as a new form of construction, invented within the Soviet Union, to supplement and eventually replace the former housing stock. This form of mass housing was part of Khrushchev’s overarching repeal of Stalinism and the Socialist Realism architectural tradition. In the first years, the concrete panel, mixed with notions of science and technological progress reflected the early avant-garde ideals of the socialist future.

⁷ According to Parusheva and Marcheva, the term ‘personal property’ was introduced in 1951 by the Bulgarian regime to rectify “the contradiction of official ideology and the existence of private housing” (2010: 203). The law used "personal property" to give socialist citizens the right to personal belongings – car, clothes, and most importantly, space. According to Dandolova,
right would eventually cement the panelka as a space beyond the grasp of the regime (vnye) and of public life.

The panel block, or panelka/panelák, as it is referred to in Bulgaria and Slovakia/Czechia, or Plattenbau in German, signalled a return to the ambitious architectural avant-garde of the 1920s because it once again represented the pairing of ideology and the built environment, as the final realisation of the long-planned socialist path towards modernity. With the panelka, an institution enforcing the large-scale cross-border ‘hypermoralisation’ of socialist values and norms through material culture, the pre-Stalinist notions of enabling social transformation through architecture were revived. In Eastern Europe, as well as the Soviet Union, architects and designers, many of whom had been taught by the early-Soviet avant-garde, assumed the task of ‘designing socialism’ after Stalin. Their goal was to modernise and civilise by displacing the individual from the familiar and the known; to create and sustain a new material reality, stripped of all conventionality and domestic tradition (the social condenser). The panelka was both the institution and the main apparatus for the final realisation of the planned city of the 1920s, intended to catalyse “the most backwards of nations to jump directly into the most modern of worlds” (Holston 1989: 78).

The aspect of the relationship between the domestic space and the subject, particularly in relation to the seemingly all-powerful Soviet totalitarian system, has been explored in depth. Yet, scholars have tended to focus on earlier architectural institutions, such as the communal buildings (kommunalka) from the 1920s (Attwood, 2010; Buchli, 1999; Brumfield, 1990; Gerasimova, 2002), institutions of public Socialist Realist power, like the Palaces of Culture, or the renegotiation of city centres (for Sofia, see Stanoeva, 2016). It is specifically in Buchli’s seminal book An Archaeology of Socialism that one is able to see how individual inhabitants managed, almost unconsciously, to form various counter-intuitive sites of silent resistances. There, even the most mundane and invisible choices, as for example the combination of distinctly contradictory items (religious icons, Stalin busts, Lenin literature) on a single cupboard in one kommunalka, mark a substantial and coercive shift away from the overarching macropower, enacting, in essence, “different and contradictory cosmologies of social being” (Buchli, 1999: 187).

Likewise, similar analyses looking at the domestic site, as a one of individual and concrete resistances to the totalising Soviet aesthetics, have been applied to the institution of the panelka (Fehérváry, 2002, 2011, 2013; Parusheva & Marcheva, 2016; Reid, 2014; Zarecor, 2014). There, the partnership between the state and

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however, it is the 1971 Constitution that officially replaces individual with personal and sets Bulgaria apart from all other socialist countries (2002: 241).
the individual is investigated, because the *panelka* creates an active, willing participant. In the words of Fehérváry, the *panelka* constituted a new human ‘right’ that was promised to every socialist citizen, i.e. the right to your own private space. That private space became heterotopic, much more so than that observed inside the *kommunalka*, an *Other* from the institution and the overarching surrounding material reality. A heterotopia, taken from the Foucaultian notion of an (anti)space which connects to other physical sites “in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect” (Foucault, 1984b: 24), as it relates to the *panelka* is best described by the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic,

An apartment, however small, however crowded with people and things, kids and animals, is ‘ours’. To survive, we had to divide the territory, to set a border between private and public. The state wants it all public – it can’t see into our apartment, but it can tap our telephone, read our mail. We didn’t give up: everything beyond the door was considered ‘theirs’. (1992: 91-92)

This flat, however, is only a right that has been handed down from above. A ‘gift’ designating a particular set of rules and actions to be followed by both state and inhabitant following the exchange (Fehérváry, 2013). In the words of Marcel Mauss (1992: 10), such a gift establishes a dual relationship of obligation and bond between recipient and donor, in which “one gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence.” The panel flat creates a new ‘economy’ through which the overarching relations of power are “distributed in homogenous circuits capable of operating everywhere, in a continuous way, down to the finest grain of the social body” (Foucault, 1977: 80). What this means is that the new economy in the Soviet context inaugurated a new relationship between macro- and micropowers and did so according to a renegotiated social contract. It is within that social contract, as the ‘gift’ of the flat, that we trace the transformation of a new human subject, capable of conducting some form of independence, privately. However, as the case of Bulgaria shows, the process of gift giving is slightly different. With personal property, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 3, inhabitants were allowed to purchase their flats. The gift, therefore, was not so much the actual space of the flat, per se, but the new juridical right to *own* it, to have power over that piece of personal property. Consequently, that established a new relationship between flat and inhabitant, where human subjectivity was directly reflected by the walls that contain it.

Let’s begin by distinguishing the importance of personal property and how it varies from other forms of property under socialism. According to Michael Heller, in market economies, property is categorised according to different rights
over that property. However, what matters more in the socialist context is who has the right to own what property (1998: 628). Because, according to, Katherine Verdery, property – under socialism and particularly after – is “about everything: power, practices, institutions, land, the transformation of value, social relations, privatization, class formation, and so on” (2003: 32).

Under socialism, there are only three possible property owners – the state, an individual, or cooperatives. Of those, individuals can own personal or private property, where “personal property consisted of items of consumption, private property of means of production” (Verdery, 2004: 192). The state ownership was naturally the most important and powerful of the three, but the remaining two nonetheless empowered their types of owners – individuals and collectives – “to own and thus to appropriate” (ibid.) To own and to appropriate means individuals, specifically, were defined as juridical subjects. According to Butler, writing about the Soviet context, “juridical persons are those organizations which possess separate property, [and] may acquire property and personal non-property rights and bear duties in their own name” (1988: 179). So, argues Verdery, a juridical “person automatically entailed having certain property rights.” (2004: 192).

In Bulgaria, the transformation of property rights was finalised when the term individual (private) property was replaced with personal property in the 1971 Constitution. It was a simple way to deal with the contradiction between the official communist ideology (“abolition of private property”) and the de facto encouragement by the state for private construction (dachas and villas) and purchase of state-owned flats. It was the notion of ‘personal’ property that legitimised the unprecedented push and speed of the mass housing production in Bulgaria. As the urban population surpassed its rural population in the mid-1960s, the state stimulated “the sale of the existing and newly built state dwellings and simplified all legal and financial formalities8” (Parusheva and Marcheva, 2010: 209). Furthermore, state investment in housing (predominantly panelki) increased from 9% in 1960 to 49% in the late 1970s (Yaremenko in Parusheva and Marcheva, 2010: 209).

This was a way to guarantee housing for all the individuals coming from rural areas looking for work – in 1967, 25% of all employees were “first-generation citizens” (Marcheva 1997: 127). In this case, first generation citizen means that the individual is the first of their family born in the city. Owning a panelka meant

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8 “Like establishment of a real assessment of the price, postponement of the deadlines for payment, diminishing the amount of the initial fee to pay and eventually abolishing it in some cases, depending on the family situation and income.” (Parusheva and Marcheva, 2010: 212)
acquiring permanent resident permits, or citizen\textsuperscript{9} rights, to live in that city. The introduction of the term personal property reflected the state’s attempt to consolidate a new consensus among uprooted individuals seeking housing in the rapidly growing cities. According to Dandolova, “acquiring a house was a real privilege and gain in life” because publicly built dwellings, mostly panelki, were sold to individuals – not on a market basis, but rather based on production costs and public subsidies (Dandolova, 2002: 242). This resulted in the relinquishing of absolute state ownership and legalising individual rights to own and appropriate a home, as well legally reside in the given city. Hundreds of thousands of panelki, built by the state, “became private property, in contradiction with the socialist model. There were no other possibilities for acquiring a dwelling.” (ibid.)

Personal property created a new social contract between a consensus-seeking state and a newly inaugurated juridical subject (by virtue of owning property). It was defined as personal both to avoid the use of private property, but also to delimit the rights of individual owners – the panelka was theirs. Just like their car or villa, it was an item of consumption, not a means of production or a marketplace. By virtue of this relinquished space, the mass-produced empty and hollow panelka, as commodity and heterotopia, resulted in inhabitants gradually carving out sanctuaries from the overarching reach of the state. According to Fehérváry, in Hungary, “apartment interiors were evaluated not for conformity to a contemporary style but for how well residents succeeded in making a visitor ‘forget that they were in a panel building’ when they crossed the threshold” (2013: 141).

It is here that the above-mentioned studies into the relationship between architecture and power in the Soviet context fall short. This thesis extends Buchli’s diagnostic approach to study a given society through “the physical, and by metaphoric extension, the social architecture of its organisation” (1999: 1). However, it is argued here that in order to come to terms with the complex and protracted ways people carve out contemporary lives, the kommunalka and the dominanta centres should be replaced by the peripheral universality of the panelka, as the foundational project of the socialist dream that has the most fundamental and long-lasting impact on everyday life. The substitution of focus to panelka is a useful one in terms of being able to extend the analysis beyond a diagnosis of quotidian life under socialism and towards a diagnosis of different kinds of post-socialisms. The panelka is not a Bulgarian phenomenon and therefore the focus on its banality and how it plays out in different context can provide fertile ground for new research. More importantly, it is an institution

\textsuperscript{9} ‘Citizen’ and ‘resident’ (as city dweller) are interchangeable in Bulgarian – grazhdanin – which literally means ‘one belonging to the city’.
that goes beyond the limited application of the kommunalka within the Soviet Union, becoming universally applied across the entire socialist bloc. With the inauguration of the new social contract, where citizens are granted new social, political, and juridical rights through ownership, it is the panelka, which structures the most ambitious and widespread attempt to transform human subjects into modern socialist citizens. Consequently, following the demise of Soviet-style socialism, the panelki remain the dominant form of housing, in addition to also becoming sources of personal wealth and signs of social status.

On the other hand, while investigations prioritising the space of the panelka have been carried out, as for example by Fehérváry in Hungary, they in turn also exhibit certain limitations, particularly with regards to the fluid relationship between inhabitants and their homes in post-socialism. Fehérváry, in her examination into the formation of a new middle class, focuses on attempts to remake the home according to new norms and ideals guided by Hungary's European reintegration. The inherent notion of Western progress, of creating a new home out of an old and grey panelka, reduces the possibilities of resistance in the domestic space to ones that correlate with a predisposed linearity about a transition from socialism to capitalism. In fact, as the case in Bulgaria shows, the panelka establishes and perpetuates a strong relationship between inhabitant and flat, whereby one’s self is moulded and contained by those walls. While that relationship is visible both before and after socialism, it is the process and form through which inhabitants attempted to express themselves that changed. Nowhere else in Europe does the panelka inhabitant transform their domestic space to such an extent as in Bulgaria – closing in balconies, carrying out individual insulations and external façade renovations, selecting outlandish colours with which to paint façades, altering the functionality of rooms to suit different needs and fads, transforming first floor flats into shops, and higher level flats into private schools and offices. And this transformation is never consolidated – it is in constant flux because the subjectivities and social fabric of panelki change. This is not an attribute of post-socialism – it is an extension of the panelki institution as a failed social condenser, which inaugurated the right (or gift) to personal property and limited freedom under a totalitarian regime. It is why the Bulgarian panelka today is an actual colourful palimpsest of individual histories and subjectivities, rather than an institution of homogenised trends and norms, as originally intended.

It is exactly this notion of reconstruction and transformation, that was initially inaugurated in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, as for e.g. through the kommunalka, that is refined, standardised, and universalised by the panelka. Now, because this universalisation necessarily falls upon a new human subject, as willing participant, the way that it is actually enforced, realised, and most importantly, transgressed by individuals in their daily lives, depends entirely upon the given
context. So, while it is plausible, as in the case of Fehérváry, to argue that the panelka was institutionalised a certain way in Hungary, necessarily having a specific afterlife in post-socialism, it is also impossible to apply that panelka to any other context. It will be shown in the following section how that limitation is based on a particular misreading of the extent of the malleability of both the panelka itself and the role of the individual inhabitants-as-artists shaping their home in their own image. Instead, this thesis shows that the tools to read and diagnose the most extreme contemporary panelka case in Bulgaria can be applied to other post-socialist contexts. The panelka palimpsest is recognition of the different forms of subjectification that can be diagnosed through the seemingly banal ways everyday life in the domestic space is transformed.

1.4 The Battle Between Konstruktsiia and Stroitel’stvo

Before delving into the complexities and malleability of concrete panels, I would like to resurrect an incredibly influential debate concerning the relationship between architecture and ideology in the Soviet Union and how it shifted during the pre- and post-Stalin periods. What is most important in the context of this research is to trace how those discursive battles were transferred and applied outside the Soviet Union. I would like to extend the argument that the most important legacy of state socialism was not its economic model, but rather its powerful politics of space and its long-lasting aesthetic homogenisation of the diverse societies upon which it enforced itself. Rather than focusing on the overarching power politics, or the underlying system of economic transformation, it will be argued here that the most important way in which state socialism and society interacted and affected each other was on the basis of socialism’s totalising aesthetic. These interactions can be traced by looking at the social life inside panelki. There, the external façade and internal spaces remain flexible and malleable and offer a glimpse, as a kind of canvas and self-portrait, of the way these relationships were, and continue to be, supplemented and internalised by individual inhabitants after the ultimate demise of state socialism.

Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, a new and all-encompassing break with tradition occurred. It was a battle to erase and subsequently transform every aspect of the pre-socialist, bourgeois society was initiated. The Bolshevik state first set its gaze on the restructuring of the home, justified by the underlying Marxist philosophy about the connection between material reality and consciousness. For party leaders, architecture, as a space of politics, became the main apparatus through which the ‘reconstruction of the way of life’
(perestroika byta) was to be realised. In the words of Mikhail Okhitovitch, a theoretician of Soviet town and regional planning during the 1920s:

The goal of architecture of our period is not the construction of a given building, but the ‘Construction’, the shaping of new social relations resulting from new production conditions, under the form of building whose common character will be the expression of their social and productive contents. (in Brumsfeld, 1990: 183)

The way of life, or byt, was embedded with incredible political and ideological significance because it provided the path of progress towards Communism, as the foundation for a new social fabric. But byt translates as much more than its English translation – ‘a way of life’. Byt involves the overarching totality of horizontal relations between individuals, on the one hand, and vertical relations between state and society, on the other; it also means the strive to create a community, a sense of identity, ‘a collective consciousness’ in the words of Catherine Cooke (1995), all grounded, regenerated, and manifested through different forms of material expression and culture. Perestroika byta, the reconstruction of the way of life, was supplemented with other phrases, which recurred in the 1920s, such as zhit’ po drugому – to live in a different way; novyi sotsialisticheskii byt – the new socialist life, etc. (Cooke, 1995: 6). These were the discursive foundations for the social construction of a utopian future – one imagined as the realisation of the Communist City. Even then, the material foundation to supplement the discursive constitution of perestroika byta was clearly outlined. These concepts are fundamental to understanding the place, space, and role of the panelka when it becomes institutionalised forty years later.

In many ways, the discursive formation revolving around the reconstruction of the way of life follows the same path in the 1920s as it is in the 1960s. The renegotiation of byt in the 1960s, the core of the new social contract, was a highly disciplined and rationalised attempt (Buchli, 1997: 162) by the Party to construct a normative frame and aesthetic, according to which individual behaviour could be mould. If you recall the notion of the gift mentioned above, Mauss emphasises that the exchange of gift presupposes a particular relationship as behaviour, both on behalf of the donor and of the recipient. It will be shown at length how that applies to the panelka, where its institutionalisation necessarily and forcefully encouraged people to acknowledge their value as citizens and to, according to Nikolas Rose, “develop a ‘style’ of living that will maximise the worth of their existence to themselves” (1998: 15). In Fehérváry’s analysis, this process of subjectification is equated to a process of modernisation and normalisation, resulting in a particular kind of post-socialism. However, the relationship between the macro- and micro-powers is fundamentally different according to different social contexts, making it important to study how these
power relations are actually embedded across the socialist bloc and how are they internalised within the various formulations of the concrete panel.

What is valuable to distinguish here is the difference between (social) ‘Construction’ as konstruktsiia, as referred to above by Mikhail Okhitovitch, meaning the intellectual and inherently ideological process of planning the role between architecture and social change, and stroitel’stvo as building construction, a material practice grounded in real time and space. This distinction is crucial in the comparison between early Soviet Constructivism and its revival after Stalin’s demise. Consequently, this distinction also relates to the even more valuable differentiation between the initially dominant role of the architect and subsequently consolidated role of the engineer/builder.

Architecture in the 1920s was regarded as a harmonious relationship between science and art, predicated entirely upon the intellectual category of ‘Constructivism’ (Cooke, Papadakis and Benjamin, 1989: 11). The key premise of the early Bolshevik state, which was directly reflected in architecture, was the conventional Marxist wisdom that being, or the way of life (byt) determines consciousness (bytie opredelaet soznanie). Accordingly, the material base was to have a vital role in the necessary redevelopment of every individual proletariat’s backward political and social self-understanding. Among all the so-called ‘byt reformers’ (Buchli, 1995, 1997, 1999) of those early years, there was a general agreement for the need to reconstruct society in order to institute the necessary changes for the inauguration of Soviet modernity. Yet, what required further clarification, but achieved no lasting consensus, concerned the best way to bring about this ‘new way of life’. Essentially, construction (konstruktsiia), as an intellectual practice, was about planning how to organise a new byt in order to change it. Building construction, stroitel’stvo, on the other hand, was the necessary apparatus through which the ‘building of socialism’ was to be depicted and actually carried out.

The stroitel’, or builder, works on a “real site with muddy boots” (Cooke, 1995: 101) and is concerned entirely with the existing material reality of the physical world. This two-way relationship is vital to understanding the architectural tradition of the avant-garde in the 1920s. Its archetypal structure, the Narkomfin building\textsuperscript{10}, has been examined at length in Victor Buchli’s An Archaeology of Socialism. That building, created by the pioneering Constructivist architect Moisei Ginsburg,

\textsuperscript{10} The Narkomfin building is a renowned example of Constructivist architecture in the Soviet Union and is now listed as a "Cultural Heritage Monument" on the Russian cultural heritage register. It is a block of flats in Moscow, one of four buildings designed by Moisei Ginzburg with Ignaty Milinis in 1928. Narkomfin was in many ways the embodiment of the avant-garde ideals, a first experiment at communal life and a shared domestic space.
is the embodiment of a grandiose project to overcome the unsettling social, economic and political contradictions of the early twentieth-century industrial capitalism in Russia and realise the terms of the good life for the greatest number of people. (Buchli, 1999: 2)

Narkomfin was the most complete iteration of byt reconstruction, as pertaining to Marxist principles. The idea was that, with the right design, alienation could be overcome and the creation of a community, based on interaction and common usage of spaces (i.e. kitchen, gym, corridors, etc.), could be realised. According to Buchli,

[These] architectonic elements were marshalled to induce individuals away from bourgeois forms of social organisation towards socialist ones. In such a manner architecture and material culture were believed to have an explicitly denotative and transformative power to represent and then produce a particular form of social organisation. (ibid.: 67)

The dream was short-lived as the connection between ideology, the role of the state, and that of the architect changed in the 1930s. Buchli’s analysis traces the intricate transformations of who the inhabitants in the Narkomfin were, and how their domestic life was affected by the turn away from the Stalinist assertion of byt. It shows how the structure itself can be transformed according to changing notions of ideology and centralised state-power, regardless of the normative foundations upon which it was built. Buchli is able to show, focusing on the internalisation of the overarching macropower plays and shifts, how the Constructivist byt-reform failed, and how its built form, designed as a first step towards a ‘new way of life’ was gradually accommodated by the Stalinist drive away from the home and towards the physicality of the body.

According to Vladimir Paperny, the coming of Stalinism instituted an entirely new form of Soviet aesthetics, inaugurating in turn what Paperny calls “Culture Two” (2002: 1-10). This is directly opposed, as he argues, to the preceding “Culture One.” “Culture Two,” under the centralised control of Stalin, exists as the final realisation of socialism, or ‘the end’ of history. “Culture One: inaugurates the normative ideal of a future society – ‘the beginning’ of history. Paperny’s deterministic structural differentiation negates the opportunity to see how, silently and almost unseen, various forms of power dating back to the avant-garde continue to function today. It also fails to acknowledge how the Stalinist aesthetic imposes itself, questioning and testing the malleability of its predecessor. It was not purely a case of the Party taking over the role of the architect, of centralisation, of the vertical subsuming the horizontal. Even under the brutal totalitarianism of Stalin, where the body is prioritised outside and
over *byt*, it is possible to trace various forms of local micropowers to the push for
the reconstitution of daily life.

So, as argued by Caroline Humphrey (2005), while there may exist a positive
relationship between ideologically led architectural design and the actual effect
the given physical structure has on human beings, this positive change is never a
given. The built environment “contributed to the conceptual worlds of Soviet
people” (Humphrey, 2005: 40), but it was not a straightforward process. Instead,
“the structures and surfaces of the infrastructure acted not as templates for
generating the designated idea, but like reflectors that deflected it and made it
swerve aside.” (ibid.) That means that the “ideology in infrastructure” had
unintended consequences and the actual interactions between the individual and
material reality, between state and society, had their own and different logics.
This affects how *panelki* are analysed, too – an institution designed as a social
condenser, but realised as nothing more than a quick fix, with a predetermined
short lifespan, to a huge demographic problem. Likewise, the way it “swerved
aside” from the ideas about *byt* and created space for new forms of self-
realisation and construction is the focus of this research.

Equally important is the acknowledgement that “people confound attempts to
change their behaviour and forms of sociality unless they are willing
participants.” (Fehérváry, 2013: 13) This notion of the willing participant will be
shown to play a key role after the 1950s, following the return to the avant-garde
roots under Nikita Khrushchev. Following in the footsteps of Buchli’s
explorations of the unseen and miniature forms of personal and private micro-
resistances, a similar juxtaposition between the state ‘strategies’ pitted against
individual ‘tactics’ (de Certeau, 1984: 117) can be examined within the *panelka*
itself. It will be shown below how the allocation of *panelki* flats, in their barest
and emptiest form, created a positive power relationship between the regime
and the individual. That relationship is the antitheses of the Stalinist period,
especially in Eastern Europe where the regime was violently imposed in a matter
of months, and where the most archetypal institution and physical structure was
the prison/camp. Subsequently, the ‘Thaw’ under Khrushchev instituted a
normalisation of sorts, where individuals were encouraged to make themselves
known, to step up and participate. The ‘gift’ of the panel flat became the most
basic of human rights, one which citizens dreamed of and strived for, and whose
legacy, that of owning your own flat, continues to be one of the most important
sources of pride in the region.

The demise of Stalinism, however, does not necessitate a complete discontinuity
with the past. Instead, the inauguration of the new social contract via the *panelka*
marks a return to the avant-garde principles, yet its normative limits are
inherently and profoundly shaped by the legacy of Stalinism. Therefore, in order
to understand the foundations upon which this new social contract was established, it is important to explore the Stalinist period of architecture, as a distinct politics of space. During that time, the assault on the construction of the domestic space was discontinued, instead focusing on direct domination over the human body as such, establishing a novel connection and distinct hierarchy between social and building construction.

1.5 Socialist Realism as Dominanta and the Totalisation of Aesthetics

As Stalin consolidated his grip, the early Soviet byt-reform was rapidly discontinued. There was a withdrawal from the domestic front and a renewed interest in the connection between city planning, urbanisation, and industrialisation: “the improvement of city services – that is the most important basis for the restructuring of byt on new socialist principles for the labouring masses” (Osipovich in Buchli, 1999: 61). Moreover, the shift had an underlying reconstitution of the connection between social construction, as an intellectual process, and construction as building. Stalinism was a process of industrialisation and militarisation. The reconstruction of society, according to how it ought to be as seen in the final stage of socialism, was defined not by the vestiges of the domestic realm, but by the notion of the human body as parasite. Whereas the early avant-garde looked to architecture to discipline and condition the collective body, Stalinism instead prioritised the immediate and large-scale purge of undesirable or alien bodies. According to Buchli,

The new sphere of performance focused instead on the physical bodies of Soviet citizens in the public realm; on those constituted as ‘kulaks’, ‘Trotskyites’, ‘class aliens’ and ‘wreckers’. The language of hygiene used to eradicate petit-bourgeois consciousness (as embodied by ‘dirt’ and ‘vermin’ in relation to furniture, design and domestic life) shifted with devastating results onto human beings themselves. (1999: 112)

The semi-autonomy of architecture from the 1920s, seen as the intimate harmony between art and science by Constructivism, was subsumed by the increasingly totalitarian state, which prioritised actual construction and city planning over the ‘utopic’ social-constructions of the homo-sovieticus (Zinoviev, 1984) from the previous decade. Yet, what this meant in real terms was not the discontinuation of Constructivism per se, but its logical and rapid realisation, catalysed by the push towards forced industrialisation and collectivisation. Therefore, the all-encompassing Socialist Realism aesthetic came to dominate not in direct opposition to the Constructivist project (see Paperny, 2002), but as its radicalised continuation, which it was never able to facilitate (Groys, 1992: 37). The core value of Constructivism was a totalisation of aesthetics. A planned
future, marked by homogeneity, order, efficiency, insistent upon the absolute, if violent, unification "of the individual and the whole – the state – in an organic totality" (Clark, 2011: 220). Thus, Socialist Realism and the Stalinist state represented the fullest expression of the modernist urge of totalisation and actually built upon and achieved the ideals of a "demiurgic restructuring of the material world" (Buchli, 1999: 107), as conceptualised by the Constructivists in the 1920s.

According to Katerina Clark, writing about the cultural and political life in Moscow in the 1930s, this push was expressed most clearly in the new official discourse of 'Higher!', which she argues reflected a new vertical imperative aimed at collecting and organising the entire Soviet population under one roof. This idea of the grandiose, the high-rising, material expression of the Soviet achievement culminated, argues Clark, in the “Stalinist ‘wedding-cake’ buildings of the forties and early fifties” (2011: 222), which were built in Moscow and duplicated almost everywhere else in the Eastern bloc, with the most shining and dominant examples being the Palaces of Culture in Sofia and Warsaw. Following Clark’s investigation into the Stalinist period and her argument that the 1930s up to the 1950s was the period when, through totalising aesthetics, “culture emerged as the area defining Soviet identity” (2011: 9), Michal Murawski traces the effects in Poland. He argues that the "transformative acculturation through architecture... directly taken over by the Stalinists in content but not in style from the modernist avant-garde,” was the ultimate architectural power, which unified and centralised, in Moscow and beyond, and continued to function unscathed after the dissolution of the regimes (2013: 46). For Murawski, the dream of the Palace of the Soviets, the building of the Stalin high-rises in Moscow, and the Palace of Culture in Warsaw, created unchallenged dominantas in these cities, social condensers of change, just as appropriated by the early avant-garde, which radiated their power from physical centres. Murawski quotes the Polish architect Edmund Goldzamt to show how,

The centre of the urban organism, when possessed of the right characteristics, is able to and should become a powerful agent in the transformation of society, simultaneously actualising and illustrating the ‘coming unity of interests in socialist society, the unity of the interests and ideals of the entire population of the socialist city’. (in Murawski, 2013: 33)

Murawski argued that the power of the Palace reflected the realisation of the totalising aesthetics dreamt of by the Constructivists in achieving, from the centre, the image of social order and cohesion, to which the entire periphery was to seek legitimation and coordination. Focusing his work on comparing Warsaw to Moscow, ‘the capital of communism’, Murawski, and to a certain extent Clark,
argues that the architectural revolution fuelled by the rapid Stalinist industrialisation had, in fact, the most dominant and long-lasting effects on both the individual and society in general. Moreover, argues Murawski, the dominance of these vertical and central structures, of their totalising aesthetics, long outlived the political and economic foundations of the state-socialist regimes. In Poland, the continual dominance of the Palace is a complex process with multiple micro- and macro- sites of power relations. Similar to Buchli’s analysis of the malleability of the Narkomfin according to changing dominant ideologies and state powers, Murawski explores how the structure of the Palace of Culture is able to internalise the overarching changes after 1989 and continue to exert its power, albeit according to different logics, on the post-socialist society.

This focus on the ‘extraordinary’ monumentality consolidated by the Stalinist state and the intentionality between the normative plan (konstruktsiia) and the construction (stroitel’stvo) is an oversimplification. The arguments cited by Humphrey, Clark, and Murawski, are important and instructive in that the monumental was dominant throughout the Stalin period of Socialist Realism, reworking the notion of the unified whole on the actual physical foundations of the industrial city. However, what is an even more important point with regards to the Stalinist period is the argument put forward by Stephen Collier (2011) in his book The Post-Soviet Social, in which he tries to investigate the afterlife of Soviet architecture in post-Soviet times by coming to terms with the continuities underneath the overarching breaks with tradition among the various architectural traditions. Collier, following the Foucaultian concept of biopolitics, tries to explore the enduring practices through which government, as an administrative apparatus, made “its population’s health, welfare, and conditions of daily existence as objects of knowledge” and targets of its intervention (Foucault, 2008: 207). Stalinism instituted a new form of governmentality through industrialisation, a new gorodskoe khoziaistvo (the city as substantive economy), a totalised field of collective life of “apartment blocks, schools, and clinics; doctors, teachers, and pipes, wires, roads, heating systems, electric substations, and other elements of urban infrastructure” (Collier, 2011: 5). Under Stalin, by focusing on the material needs and the practical problems of planning, a new technology of power essential to the Soviet path to modernity was carved out. It was no longer the outright utopian ideal of the creation of a new way of life, of the new socialist citizen, but the reorganisation of all aspects of social existence, according to the basic and practical problem of working towards the ‘material want satisfaction’ (Polanyi, 1957: 243) of the new Soviet population.

A key difference between Constructivism in the 1920s and the subsequent Stalinist Socialist Realism was the inversion of the relationship between konstruktsiia and stroitel’stvo. While the avant-garde prioritised Constructivism (konstruktsiia), the intellectual practice of planning the material foundations for
the achievement of communism, its replacement prioritised the brute force of the builder/engineer (stroitel’). “The ‘official’ message to urbanists was ‘Enough discussing! You will build and plan what the government orders,’” according to Mark Meerovich (in Collier, 2011: 33). Accordingly, a new superstructure, exemplifying its dominance through centralised and high-rising physical sites of power, functions as “a hyper-administrative state in which there is, so to speak, a fusion, a continuity, the constitution of a sort of massive bloc between governmentality and administration” (Foucault, 2008: 92-3).

With the end of Stalinism comes a ‘second cultural revolution’ (Buchli, 1997), seen as the return to the Constructivist roots. Here is the essential split between scholars of Soviet material culture, who try to prioritise which of the two, Constructivism (konstruktsiia) or Socialist Realism (stroitel’stvo), had the longest-lasting effects on society. Such binary oppositions are counterproductive, especially with regards to the panelka, the embodiment of the ‘second cultural revolution’, an institution synthesising notions of both konstruktsiia and stroitel’stvo. Of course, as cautioned above, the connection between material culture and the individual is never causal, nor is the connection between plan and reality, and so while the panelka is examined here as the final step towards Soviet modernity, it was also internalised and moulded by those it was meant to affect. And so, contra Clark and Murawski, the greatest legacies of the socialist aesthetic are not public buildings and spaces but rather, they are the sites of daily life diffused across the social body, and more specifically, the private realm – the home, byt. More importantly, it will be shown that while the institution of the panel block, the embodiment of the new Cultural Revolution, realised the dream of byt-reform and, by guiding behaviour and disciplining the everyday life of its inhabitants, it also realised the avant-garde dream for the actual attempt at the definitive constitution of a modern socialist individual. Yet, it did so as a synthesis between the process of building and the concept of social construction, falling short of the overarching normativity of Constructivism, but still transforming the domestic space and affecting the possibilities of personhood for inhabitants. What that means is that while a new socialist citizen was inaugurated, it was not according to a normative plan for the reconstruction of life through architecture, as embodied inside, say, the Narkomfin. Rather, the panelka saw an imperfect and unplanned attempt at solving an overwhelming housing problem; a temporary fix, which gradually became the universalised housing institution, rising to absolute prominence throughout the socialist bloc.
1.6 The Panelka and a Reconstitution of the Social Contract

From the moment of Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, in which he denounced the Stalinist regime, the issue of byt-reform regained prominence. It echoed a return to the avant-garde foundations. So much so that official discourse concerning the role, place, and space of the private realm was mimicking, almost exactly, that of the early 1920s. However, there is one important difference between this ‘second’ Cultural Revolution and its predecessor. It once again concerns the different meanings of construction (konstruktsiia vs. stroitel’stvo) and, as such, the different hierarchy and relationship between architect and planner/engineer, and now, crucially, the inhabitant and the state. The turn away from Stalinism was, of course, ideological and a return to earlier notions of reaching full-blown communism through the adaptation of behaviour and disciplinisation of consciousness, catalysed through the material reality surrounding the proletariat. However, the Khrushchev initiative was also a direct continuation of Stalin’s policy, serving as a kind of panacea to the consequences of industrialisation. It was first and foremost a massive building campaign, especially focused on providing housing. It was a cure for the large displacement of people, uprooted by collectivisation and lured to the city by job prospects. It is this mix between a rational response to a growing crisis and the ideology of building a new socialist way of life through a renewed focus on the private realm that differentiates the role and consequences of this architectural tradition, as a politics of space.

The complete overhaul of Stalinism was directly reflected in Eastern Europe, which followed in line with the period of ‘Thaw’ in the USSR. This process of ‘normalisation’ is evident in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, all of developed their own dominant housing practices and typologies of prefabricated concrete panels (Zarecor, 2010). This settlement and normalisation should not be regarded as liberalising processes, as argued by Collier – even though Collier sees liberalism as a general shift in any governmentality, a scaling down, or in the words of Foucault, “a governmentality to which one is opposed and whose abuses one wants to limit” (2008: 319-320). The decentralisation of byt-reform, the recapturing of the home and the private space was waged on two fronts: through the institutionalisation of the new mass housing initiative and upon the pre-existing Socialist Realist constructions. The normalisation meant a new tabula rasa for the ultimate disciplinisation of society, according to the principles of byt-reform. New articulations of internal spacing, notions of ‘design’, household advice about proper household behaviour (and good taste) are the concrete practices, which lead to the actual realisation of the dream perestroika byta. Yet, unlike the Constructivist architects, who sought to overhaul the entire concept of the socialist city to enforce ‘a new way of life’, the byt-reform
following the rise of Khrushchev was significantly different in accommodating its Socialist Realist predecessor in terms of the place held by the architect compared to that of the engineer and planner. It was a return to the promise of constructing a new way of life, but one that could be built quickly and cheaply. The need to house people was overwhelming and surpassed the normative constitutions for ‘a new way of life’. There is a hidden continuity in the practices, which started in the 1950s and continued until the end of the regimes, cementing strong uniformity in the Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe. As a result, according to Mark Smith (2010: 113), “to some extent, this was the end of architecture... the final takeover of the profession by construction experts,” which is exactly the inversion of the avant-garde dichotomy of social construction and building construction that characterised the coming of Socialist Realism, referred to in the section above.

Verticality, to build ‘Higher!’, as the guiding principle of Socialist Realism, was noted above, with Murawski specifically focusing on the notion of dominant public sites of architectural power, situated centrally in a socialist capital city. Now, keeping in mind the synthesis of both Socialist Realism as stroitel'stvo and the Constructivism as konstruktsiia, would not the panelka be deemed as a kind of anonymous collective dominanta? After all, some of those building remain dominant, even in the post-socialist cityscape. Yet, opposed to the obvious verticality of some individual high-rising panel blocks, particularly in the USSR, is their spread, mainly among the periphery of cityscapes across all socialist cities that makes them blend in, become invisibly ubiquitous, and thus, exist almost as anti-dominantas, or, to use another concept – banalki. More importantly, again, is the question of the new social contract, as it begs the question of “whom does the panelka belong to?” My argument is that these institutions, which were in no way less ideologically tainted or infused by functions of macropowers, were domesticated better than the dominant public buildings. As such, even today, the Palaces of Culture, Soviet army monuments, radio and TV towers, department stores, etc. stick out and remain visible, as they were originally designed to, while the panelki stay hidden in plain sight. That is how, precisely, the synthesis between konstruktsiia and stroitel'stvo made the inauguration of the new social contract so powerful and long lasting.

According to Buchli, the “new apartments meant a new life, a new skin, everything was thrown out and the past forgotten as well” (1999: 175). But the way subjectivity is transformed within and through the institution of the panelka is a highly complex question because the process is not totalising, but rather flows and interacts, moulds and is moulded by individuals in diverse ways. Often the changes are not explicit, comprehensible, either from the outside or within, and they cannot be communicated because they exist in the absolute banality of everyday life. So much so that it is important to note that the disciplinisation and
transformation affect bodies first, rather than minds, or the consciousness, as preached by the Constructivist in the 1920s. Similar to the way that Foucault (1977) is able to show in Discipline and Punish how the soldier is a subject that is carefully crafted and produced through the construction of the institution of the barracks, it is possible to show how the panelka also serves as a similar kind of politics of space, through which a hidden but omnipresent kind of pedagogy relating to the right way to live is transfused through and by the concrete walls, a kind of aesthetic which guides bodies towards the most infinitesimal of involuntary gestures, like 'stand up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand', as argued by Bourdieu.

It is argued here that regardless of the overarching uniformity of the panelka across the socialist bloc, in terms of its aesthetics, its function, and its legacies, it did not affect human beings in the same uniform manner. The concrete is a malleable material, in both the social construction and building construction sense of the word. As argued above, the connections between structure and agency, between the plan and the outcome, the role of the institution and the effects on the desired behaviour changes, are complex and, while linked, not causal. Similarly, disciplinisation, in the Foucaultian sense, is not an expression of an 'ideal type' – that of the disciplined socialist Man. Instead, argues Paul Rabinow, we should focus our attention on the different techniques applied in local contexts, which nonetheless,

Don't take effect in the institutions in an integral manner... they never work out as planned. This difference is not between the purity of the ideal and the disorderly impurity of the real but that in fact there are different strategies which are mutually opposed, composed, and superimposed so as to produce permanent and solid effects which can perfectly well be understood in terms of this rationality, even though they don’t conform to the initial programming: this is what gives the resulting apparatus (dispositif) its solidity and suppleness. (Rabinow, 2003: 40)

Panelki are the institutionalisation of such apparatuses, understood as mobile and malleable “responses to particular dimensions of larger problematisations” (ibid.: 51). The larger problematisation in our instance being of course the underlying question of the reconstitution of the social contract vis-à-vis the inauguration of the human subject as willing participant and owner of personal property. Moreover, what is particularly important within this apparatus is how micro and macro relations of power flowed and were reflected within it. That is to say that while in the 1930s, as argued by Caroline Humphrey, we see an establishment of an all-dominant and powerful state, which could rule people by means of housing (2003: 167), what we can witness in the panelka is an inversion of this kind of power and the establishment of a new, positive form of
power relations, in the Foucaultian sense of the word. Power is different from domination, which is exercised upon human beings without freedom of conduct. Foucault argues that power can only be exercised upon ‘free individuals’, and while that may at first seem contradictory within a socialist context, it nonetheless still holds true. With the shift from the Stalinist focus on the body as parasite to the renewed Constructivist dream of a perestroika byta, we see a supplementing shift in the way power flows. With the inauguration of panelki, we see a reversal of the disciplinisation of power, the negative power to say, “No!” That is replaced by a different form of relations between the willing participants and personal property owners and the state. It resulted in a process of subjectification, turning each empty flat into a space that could open up new ‘possibilities of personhood’ (Hacking, 2002) rather than create a homogenised mass of socialist citizens.

The period of normalisation and the inauguration of the panelka in the socialist context is a period of positive (micro)power, or more specifically, of empowerment. Consequently, the goal, catalysed by the immediate need to solve a housing problem, but also backed up by the desire to modernise, to lift the poor and backward peasants into a new, concrete way of life, meant that individuals were offered the opportunity, in the way conceptualised by Bourdieu (1984), to institute a novel way of experiencing one’s body’s connection and interaction to their immediate social and material space. The personalisation of the empty panelka, as gifted by the state, renegotiates the importance of byt once again, granting of a certain, if caged, freedom; a white canvas with a limited set of colours. It is a partnership between a more inclusive and normalised state and a willing participant, an act of home making. According to Susan Reid,

The provision of separate apartments apparently increased the possibility for Soviet citizens to gain privacy and control over the terms of their everyday lives. Homemaking, as a form of consumption, required citizens to engage with the state on a daily basis at the micro-level of material production in everyday life. (2014: 89)

The panelka flat is the institutionalisation of protected privacy under a regime based on surveillance. The flat owners had unprecedented control over what occurred inside their home. The separation of public and private resulted in a concentrated performance about the new way of life – daily life between 9-6 for adults and children was owned, controlled and guided by the state. However, the life after work and school, those hours before sleep were now a no-man’s-land, neglected by the state and quietly utilised by individuals. There is a normativity introduced, especially once a gift the size of a panelka flat comes into play. The willing participant receives a gift in return for engaging with the regime and playing according to the new rules of the game. That is the relationship and the
new social contract. But underneath, that contract is rarely honoured as individuals create hearths of individuality out of the panelki sameness, carving out DIY improvements and changes that correspond to what they want, as opposed to what they are told to want by the regime. Because most of these processes of subjectification happen within the safety of the home, they are hidden from sight. Only after the end of socialism do their most extreme versions come to light in various settings – but those are not the beginning, but the extension of a long tradition of resistance via home improvement.

1.7 The Greyness of Public Spaces vs. the Colours of Private Life

The private space becomes the anonymous epicentre of politics within the socialist system. Similar to the tactics performed by inhabitants in the Narkomfin, which voluntarily or involuntarily blocked the overarching ideological strategy behind the structure, what we see in the panelka can be read as a palimpsest of local micropowers with intrusive marks on every single concrete panel. The panelka flat becomes this space the moment it is inhabited and develops this notion in an even greater sense once the regime falls. This is because there is a new set of relationships between inhabitant and state and between inhabitant and concrete. We see, post-1989, a much more violent and self-centred attempt to mould, repaint, replace what was given and make it, as much as physically possible, a reflection of one’s self.

It is important to note that while furniture and taste were subjected to unification, it was the DIY tweaks and shifts – the transformation of a balcony into an extended kitchenette, the introduction of French windows in a living room, the separation of a bathroom into a shower and toilet – are the most important process to trace. While it may seem unoriginal at first, the very existence of improvisation is key relationship of power. It is a small crack in the overarching standardisation and uniformity. Each sheepskin, painting, or carpet is an opportunity for the inhabitant to add a narrative to the greyness of the monotone canvas. It is within such banal everyday life actions that we can begin to trace the development of the kind of empowerment realised within and through the allocation of prefabricated panel flats and its radical continuation post-1989. Thus, the ‘greyness’ of the concrete had more than an aesthetic quality – it had a political quality. It was a sign of deprivation and repression, but also a provocation towards the inhabitant to interact with it. This complex interrelationship becomes fully developed and somewhat violent after the fall of the regime, when the right over one’s private property becomes even more central and vital.
This substitution of ‘the grey’ as a sign of deprivation and repression is key and reflected in the writings of some dissident writers – Havel’s (1985) notion of anti-politics, as finding meaning, preserving the self in a space of ubiquitous and all-seeing total power; Kundera’s (1984) notion of the preservation of the European identity, unsuccessfully frozen under totalitarianism, and even Georgi Markov’s (1990) attempt to chronicle the always involuntary attempt to shield the self from ‘them’ – an Other that is everywhere penetrable but the mind. But the question here is never a black and white examination of socialism as good or bad (see Yurchak, 2005), but rather, in the circumstances offered and the new partnership established, how people adapted to shifting power relations and vice-versa.

Therefore, by means of the institutionalisation of the prefab housing stock and the promise of the new home in the attempt to redistribute wealth and solve the deep housing shortages across the former socialist bloc, regimes inaugurated a fundamental human ‘right’, which each individual could strive for and request. It is therefore no wonder that the panelka became the central institution through which people acknowledged their misbalanced relationship with the state and, subsequently, the most symbolic and dominant legacy of the recent past after 1989. Furthermore, the institutionalisation of the panelka successfully realised the dream of perestroika byta, but did so in a different way than the Constructivist plan. In fact, instead of pursuing the utopian dream of striving for modernity through the fundamental reconstitution of ‘the city’ at large, what was pursued instead was a fundamental politics of space, founded upon the process of “removing people from their familiar environments and inserting them into a radically new material context” (Fehérváry, 2013:62), of transforming individuals by making them want to live in the socialist city.

1.8 The Centre vs. the Periphery

The institution of panelka is the epitome of everyday mediocrity and the counter-productivity of life under a socialist totalitarian regime. On the one hand, panelki were both a return to the Constructivist belief in social condensation through architecture and the ultimate achievement of extreme modernity in terms of enforcing an “astonishing and perhaps admirable uniformity in material life” (Humphrey, 1998: 17). On the other, panelki were given a short life expectancy – one of the key arguments used in contemporary Moscow by authorities looking to demolish entire prefab neighbourhoods. They were constructed according to limited typologies replicated en masse across Europe and the Soviet Union; inside, bare and grey concrete walls only welcomed the first socialist inhabitants to start the renovation of a new flat. On the one hand, the panelka flat is the
archetypal socialist home, the ideal home for a country industrialising at a fast pace. On the other, a building compromise to fit as many people within its panels as humanly possibly. On the one hand, a beacon of socialist economic power and redistribution of wealth. On the other, as the cases of Bulgaria and other Eastern European nations show, the reason why a huge majority of their populations became owners of private property immediately after the fall of the regimes.

The paradox of the panelka, both in terms of its built form and social fabric, is a synecdoche for life under socialism en mass. It is the prime example of a deep normative division between the architect (konstruktsiia) and the engineer/planner/builder (stroitel’stvo) that was never fully resolved in the socialist bloc. Its failure as a universal social condenser of socialist values means there are vast differences inside the walls of different nations. The extreme case of Bulgaria, where the panelka was personal property long before the regime collapsed, shows what happens when the institution is taken over by its inhabitants. Other cases, like Hungary, show how overarching discourses about consumerism and Western norms have had their effect on the internal transformation of the panelka.

This always-expanding palimpsestuousness of the panelka is how this thesis makes the reading of the most banal and hidden parts of daily life possible. Michal Murawski develops an incredibly complex theoretical case for the centralisation of socialist legacy in the study of Warsaw’s contemporary social life. Murawski focuses his research on the “‘intentionality’ behind Stalinist architecture in Poland” (Murawski, 2013: 30). That intentionality necessarily implies that there is a direct and traceable link between the design of the Palace of Culture and its final iteration as built form. Murawski extends this Marxian and structuralist argument for a working distillation of the history “in which the Palace of Culture’s designer and patrons aimed for the Palace to function in a totalising, unified and holistic manner in the context of the city” (ibid.). Following Caroline Humphrey’s metaphor of the prism, “gathering meanings and scattering them again, yet not randomly” (Humphrey, 2005: 55), Murawski sets out to demonstrate “epistemic intentionality and aesthetic effectiveness of socialist planning and design” (Murawski, 2013: 22).

I argue that the palimpsestuousness of panelki provides fertile ground on which to argue for a decentralisation of socialist architecture in favour of the periphery. The malleability of the material of concrete offers a kind of genealogy into the hidden continuities of the past and how they continue to function today. Just like the prism has a multitude of surfaces, the panelka offers multiple ways inside the most intimate and banal moments that come to define everyday life for millions of people. The shift away from structural power and towards capillary power relations leaves room for ‘possibilities of personhood’ of diverse human subjects,
whose private life is contained by mass-produced prefab concrete. My aim in the following chapters is to demonstrate how this relationship between material culture and human subjects was played out in Sofia’s Mladost neighbourhood.

1.9 The Bulgarian socialist regime: a brief history

In more ways than one, the time when the first inhabitants moved into a panelka on Bulgarian soil was when the socialist regime made a symbolic step away from a period of systematic Stalinist repression and towards literally building a certain consensus. The years between 1944-1962, with some late recurrences up until 1962 (the year the first residential panelka was built), are often described as the period of the consolidation of power (see Crampton, 2007; Znepolski, 2008). Following Bulgaria’s occupation by the Red Army in 1944, one by one institutions crumbled. First, an armed coup was orchestrated, followed by,

The usurpation of power in settlements across the country by partisan subdivisions, acts of mass violence and the progressive destruction of the existing public order, the expansion of the communist party, the quelling of all rebellion by oppositional forces, nationalisation, the transformation of property rights... the creation of concentration camps. (Znepolski, 2008: 24).

By 1962, with the symbolic closure of the last of the camps and the erection of the first panelka, the socialist regime had established full control over the Bulgarian society. It is with this second period, the period of consensus and normalisation, with which this research is primarily concerned. It is during this period when individuals consciously or subconsciously reconciled with the fact that, most likely, they would spend their lives under this regime and therefore sought ways to adapt, to carve out lives for themselves. But in order to understand those processes, it is important to briefly touch upon these early years of totalitarian repression so as to contextualise Bulgaria’s socialist regime amongst the rest of the bloc.

The transitional period, between 1944-47, is how long it took for the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) to assume full control over state institutions and establish a one-party rule. During these years, the infamous People’s Court and the surrounding revolutionary terror resulted in the destruction of entire social strata, particularly among the higher classes. The People’s Court directly sentenced 9,155 people, of which 2,730 to death and 1,305 to life imprisonment (Capital, 2017). The 2,138 people who were execution make up a number higher than any other country with a post-WWII tribunal (ibid.). Until today, however, there is no official statistic accumulating the total number of victims of the
socialist regime in Bulgaria. After 1989, different narratives in the discursive battles about the legacy of socialism offered up a spectrum of competing truths. According to Znepolski, who is one of the leading contemporary historians concerned with the way Bulgaria remembers and reconciles with its recent past, “they vary between 5,000 and 138,000 killed without trial and verdict or declared missing” (2008: 105-106). Perhaps the most consistent figure, however, remains 25,000, as announced in front of parliament by Interior Minister Hristo Danov in 1991. The brutality of these early years follows a specifically Soviet model of uprooting and renegotiating the social body and eliminating the chosen ‘Others’ – bourgeoisie, so-called fascists, members of the intelligentsia, and countless others who simply refused to pledge allegiance to the Party. The regime goes further than other Eastern and Central European equivalent and, according to Georgi Dragiev, the chief prosecutor at the People’s Court, the Soviet Union signified Bulgaria’s takeover of power after 1944 as the ‘shining example’ in the region (Znepolski, 2008: 114).

In the years that followed, until 1956 and the official process of destalinisation, a cult of personality is slowly established, once again following the rules first tried and tested in the Soviet Union. The returning Soviet émigrés, with Georgi Dimitrov at their helm, formed the party pyramid. Dimitrov was to gain a lasting status of ‘teacher and leader’ of the Bulgarian people (ibid.: 126) and after his demise, was to be embalmed and displayed in a mausoleum built to mirror Lenin’s own tomb. Here’s an excerpt from Dimitrov’s diary, which above all else shows just how loyal he remained to Stalin,

Dear Comrade Stalin, having departed for Bulgaria in order to participate in the parliamentary elections, I would like to express my deepest gratitude for having had the chance to work under your unfaltering leadership for so many years and to learn so much from you, and also for the trust you have shown in me. (Dimitrov, 2003: 510).

With the rise of Dimitrov and the consolidation of a cult of personality to mirror Stalin’s, Bulgaria underwent a classic period of Stalinism. The bureaucratic and nomenclature institutions, mirroring the Soviet examples, were to remain in tact until the very end. With regards to the topic of this dissertation, a Soviet economic model was implemented as well, introducing a period of forced industrialisation and collectivisation.

In 1944, as noted at the start, Bulgaria was entirely dependent on agriculture – or, in other words, it lacked a proletariat with which to legitimate the supposed grassroots proletarian revolution. In a party survey conducted that year, fewer than 30% of communist party members self-identified as workers (Znepolski, 2008: 62). By 1950, only 20% of the population resided in urban areas
(Benovska-Subkova, 2009: 11). As one party slogan from those years would urge: ‘we build the factory, and the factory builds us’. The Soviet-style socialist way of life had to be enforced from above and the way to do that was collectivising the land and activating a new generation of industrial workers. As boldly promised by the leader Georgi Dimitrov himself, this so-called ‘modernisation’ would take no longer than two decades – compared to the centuries it had taken other nations.

Collectivisation, complete before the first panelka was built (more than 90% of the land was nationalized under the Labour Co-operate Agricultural Economy [TKZS] initiative by 1960), reduced the labour force involved in agriculture from “the 82.1 per cent of 1948 to 35.6 per cent” by 1960 (Crampton, 2007: 355). Most of those people migrated to the cities in search of work and a better life. However, in what was still a predominantly rural country, no city had the infrastructure to accommodate the people flooding in. In a census from 1946, “24.68 per cent of Bulgaria’s population has been classified as urban dwellers; by 1965 it had risen to 46.46, and by the next census in 1975 more than half of the country’s inhabitants, 57.99 per cent, were living in towns” (ibid.) This resulted in an extensive housing crisis. The institution of the panelka was brought in from the Soviet Union as an immediate remedy and panacea for this problem.

This process of artificial proletarisation caused unprecedented uprooting and cultural shocks for a significant portion of the Bulgarian population, who were forced to adapt to new ways of life in the city – to become model ‘socialist citizens’. In the words of James Scott, such aspirations remind us of a “project of internal colonization, often glossed, as it is in imperial rhetoric, as a ‘civilizing mission’” (Scott, 1998: 82). This had a profound effect on the traditional forms of identification in the Bulgarian village – family ties, language and dialect, connections to the traditional home. This will be discussed in further detail below, with specific context provided by ethnographic research focused on the emotional and psychological effect of the move to the socialist city. For now, it is important to focus on the term ‘villager’ itself. In Bulgaria, following collectivisation and forced industrialisation, what used to be a term of great pride became inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, it describes the mere fact of village residence, while at the same time it is associative to the English word ‘peasant’, a term which “constantly threatened their claim to modernity” (Creed, 1998: 274). Until this day in Mladost, as in every part of Bulgaria that I have ever visited, selyanin is a derogatory term meaning uneducated, foolish, unwise, lacking in taste, etc. It also denotes that you are a foreigner in the city, that you do not belong because you simply aren’t enlightened enough to follow the rules.

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11 The Bulgarian word for ‘villager’ is selyanin, which derives its meaning from the root word selo, which means ‘village’.
The situation in rural Bulgaria after collectivisation, however, often paints a different picture – how different depends on the region and the vantage point of the researcher (see Creed, 1998 and 2011; Kanef, 2004; Leonard & Kanef, 2002, Nikolov, 2002). According to Gerald Creed, one of the most authoritative voices when it comes to the history of the Bulgarian village under socialism, “the prominence of [collectivisation] in [Bulgarian villagers'] historical consciousness is due in large part to the dominance of agriculture at the time of communist accession” (1998: 34). Over the next 45 years, collectivisation became a synecdoche encompassing all aspects of rural transformation by the socialist regime. Just like the early years of power consolidation and the subsequent urban planning plans, collectivisation followed the Soviet blueprint exclusively.

In Zamfirovo, a north-western village which one of the fieldwork sites for Gerald Creed in his seminal Domesticating revolution, “early enthusiasts for collectivization told me that the Soviet kolkhoz was their inspiration and model, and there was no evidence that any alternate program for agricultural development was even considered” (ibid.: 36). Like in other socialist bloc states, collectivisation can be described as the “the cooperativization of agriculture followed by, and combined with, the de facto (although never de jure) nationalization of cooperatives.”

This grand scale effort meant villagers had very little choice but to cooperate with the new system. According to one village informant cited by Creed, “Of course, you did not have to join the cooperative, unless you wanted shoes on your feet and a shirt on your back” (ibid.: 61). On the one hand these villagers no longer had access to commodities outside their immediate line of production; on the other – they were “being required to hand over more and more of what they did produce through the expanding requisition program” (ibid.). Creed argues that collectivisation was not immediately accepted or supported and it took until the last years of the regime for its full domestication. In the 1950s and 1960s, his informants recounted “horrendous working conditions” (ibid.: 70-71). But by 1988, things had changed drastically – very few villagers were left working on the land on a full-time basis and many had begun to receive benefits like pensions and healthcare. Over those two decades, and especially after the demise of the regime and the process of land restitution, collectivisation was looked at with a sense of nostalgia. According to Creed,

Many villagers combined misery and nostalgia in their personal histories of the period, recounting harrowing details with a wistfulness that is hard to comprehend.” The explanation lies in the intervening thirty years of reform and domestication, which affected everybody’s evaluation of the past and, in turn, their ideas about the future. (ibid. 71)
But there seems to be some interpretative leeway and variation when comparing Creed’s ethnographic fieldwork with another prominent scholar of the Bulgarian village – Deema Kaneff (see Kaneff, 1998; Kaneff, 2004; Leonard & Kaneff, 2002). According to her recurring research in a very pro-socialist north-central village of Talpa (not the real name of the village), collectivisation should not be viewed as an external process forced upon the traditional Bulgarian village that took decades to be domesticated. Rather, Kaneff argues, it was a new institution that perpetuated old rituals surrounding community and labour as central forces binding the rural identity that occurred all over Eastern Europe (see Pine, 1996 for Poland, Verdery, 1999 for Romania). Moreover, Kaneff’s research points to the perpetuation of the traditional Bulgarian village via collectivisation as the shared workload – everything from the preparation of food to the construction of local institutions – is a central aspect of interaction among family and neighbours. This is something that is backed up by research from Iván Nikolov in south-eastern villages, like Sakar, where the construction of new homes – for example for newlyweds – involved the entire village participating in various rituals from the very first laid stone (I. Nikolov, 2002).

Kaneff further argues that support for collectivisation in Talpa and the subsequent revolt against the post-socialist push towards restitution can be traced back to those early years, which Creed’s informants remember as somewhat harrowing. According to Kaneff, collectivisation meant the rapid modernisation of rural Bulgaria – from electrification and infrastructure, to the introduction of machines in the previously labour-intensive agricultural work. Again, as will be discussed below, research by Nikolov can back this up with examples of discourse symbolising the communist party as the ‘saviour’ who lifted ‘peasants’ from the ground and onto a bed. However, I take some issue with many of the remaining conclusions drawn from Kaneff’s extensive work in the field. As I will argue here, the dual force of collectivisation and forced industrialisation transformed the Bulgarian village rather than cement and preserve lasting forms of identification like work and community. As argued by Creed, collectivisation was indeed domesticated by the end of the regime, but it is a form domestication where nostalgia is mixed with misery. The main reason for this is because Bulgaria, like Romania, experienced levels of collectivisation and urbanisation that are unmatched anywhere else in Europe.

We have already talked about just how rural Bulgaria was prior to the advent of socialism, but an even more important detail is how small and individualised private land plots at that time. According to Verdery, “in Bulgaria and Romania in the 1930s, 89 and 92 percent of all land, respectively, was held in farms of under 10 ha, whereas in Hungary in 1935, 81 percent of agricultural surface was held in farms of over 10 ha” (Verdery, 2003: 44). In other words, the number of people affected by collectivisation was far higher in these two countries than the rest of
the socialist bloc. Consequently, a much higher proportion of the population in Bulgaria and Romania remained employed in agriculture after the advent of socialism – 74% compared to “57 percent in Poland and 53 percent in Hungary, but only 38 percent in Czechoslovakia and 29 percent in eastern Germany” (ibid.: 45). But where Bulgaria becomes the outlier is the speed and impact of collectivisation with 51% of all land collectivised by 1952, compared with “3.1 percent [in Romania], 3.5 percent in Poland, 8.1 percent in Hungary, 19 percent in Czechoslovakia” (Cătănus and Roske in Verdery, 2003: 46). The socialist regime transformed the social fabric of Bulgaria with speed and spread that can only be compared with cases from within the Soviet Union. So, when it comes to the period of post-socialism and the attempts at land institution, the process in Bulgaria is far more protracted and complicated because it concerns much smaller land plots and a far higher number of land claimants. This contextualisation helps to raise several critical questions – how many people actually remain in the village to keep the traditions that Kanef references alive? If Bulgaria is so quick to urbanise and such a large proportion of the rural population migrates to the cities, can we really consider collectivisation as an identity retaining force?

According to Kanef, even the village of Talpa had undergone a tremendous demographic crash under socialism – to 30% in 1980. “In Talpa,” she notes, “the population has declined from 2,000 in the early 1940s to a present population of 650, with over two-thirds pensioners” (2002: 25). That in turn caused significant labour shortages in the village and the gradual drain of youth, but it also resulted in deep fissures in terms of communal and kinship ties, especially when it comes to old rituals and traditions preserved in the village. According to Verdery, collectivisation everywhere was a process intended to break, not rebuild, ties between peasants and their land,

Kinsmen and co-villagers had been used against one another, rupturing earlier solidarities; the influential members in each village had been humiliated and dispossessed; the former poor now held political advantage; and land was no longer the main store of wealth or the means for villagers to manifest their character, skill, or diligence (Verdery, 2002: 46, emphasis added).

This is why this research is concerned with the panelka and the Bulgarian city – it is within those utterly empty and grey walls of mass produced unoriginality that these uprooted people are forced to start a new life, work, and family. This existential crisis is one of the most fruitful and popular subjects to be explored in Bulgarian fiction and television in the 1970s – the ‘new’ society, in definition, is neither rural, nor is it fully urbanised: “neither city, nor village, neither citizens nor villagers” (Znepolski, 1980: 153). It is within this context that I use the term
“disappearance of the village” in subsequent chapters to designate the depletion of the villages and the incredible number of people who move to the city to call the empty panelka their home.

2.0 Order of Chapters

This introductory chapter is followed by a discussion about the methodological approach I adopted during the years I lived in a Mladost panelka. It builds upon the notion of the palimpsest and applies it to the concrete environment of panelki flats. The following chapter develops some of my fieldwork experimentations, where I approach each home as a kind of ‘total installation’ of the combined lives of its inhabitants. Using the flat as forensic scene of personal histories, I took dozens of photographs to analyse some important fissures and ruptures in the built and ideal form of the panelka. Each inhabitant is approached as an artist, using DIY methods and renovations to make their home otherwise than it is. I then juxtapose conversations I’ve had with the inhabitants and with the architects and engineers of those buildings to show the conflicts within some of the main aesthetic visions and iterations of panelki.

Chapter Three situates the introduction of panelki in Bulgaria in historical context. The disappearance of the village, following waves of collectivisation and forced industrialisation and the disavowal of the traditional Bulgarian house, are just some of the political-economic and architectural forces that contributed to the prefabricated mass housing phenomenon. The historical examination of Bulgaria’s swift urbanisation and housing shortage lays the groundwork for Chapter Four, which tells the story of the construction of Mladost, organised around a close examination of the life and work of its main architect, Bogdan Tomalevski. The chapter also employs a discursive analysis of how the regime and its architectural elite critiqued panelki as they increasingly came to dominate cityscapes around the country. The chapter shows the conflict between konstruktsiia and stroitelstvo play out concretely in Mladost – to the individual plans for panelki – and shows the consequences it had on the discrepancy between the dream and reality of Mladost – the first prefab neighbourhood in Bulgaria. Chapter Four also discusses the introduction of personal property in Bulgaria’s constitution in 1971 and how that greatly impacted the relationship between flat and inhabitant in the years that followed.

Chapter Five opens up the panelki and examines them as a collective of fluid ‘total installations’ in the everyday life of inhabitants. It places special emphasis on the role of DIY remonti (renovations) as the start of a never-ending process of moulding the concrete panels to the, often extreme, desires of individuals. It shows how the internal changes, predominantly seen as a post-socialist
phenomenon (Fehérváry’s ‘American kitchens’) actually began in the 1970s – what the colourful palimpsestuousness of the last three decades resembles is only the extreme eccentricity of these processes unleashed under a new system.

All the chapters presuppose Chapter Six, as the diagnosis of the present, where I lay out the relationship between the human subject and the panelka institution and how they correlate with the introduction of private property and its uses today. The focus is to decipher the rejuvenation of youth (Mladost) by looking at how its changing social fabric is affecting the material reality of the same old panelki flats. This enables a sort of reading of panelki façades and interior designs that unearth details about everyday life that would otherwise have remained invisible and hidden in plain sight. I then conclude by offering some insights about how this approach can be applied to other panelki in Bulgaria and abroad in order to learn about the intricacies of daily life contained within them. It is this reading that enables the research to delve into the anonymous peripheries, to open up the universal institution and find out how, concretely, human beings created ‘total installations’ of individuality and palimpsest of layers upon layers of personal histories.
Chapter Two: The *Panelka* as Palimpsest: A methodological reading of concrete panels as ‘total installations’ of (post)socialist *byt*

2.1 Introducing a Palimpsestuous Methodology

This chapter addresses the methodological approach I undertook to test the main research questions about how the institution of *panelka* can be read like a palimpsest. The concept of the palimpsest is used to provide a diagnosis of the present – in terms of tracing how inhabitants adapted their everyday life inside their concrete *panelki* walls before and after socialism, and what that power relationship can tell us about the changes to individual subjectivities and the possibilities of personhood today.

The bare *panelka*, with its crooked grey walls, as first handed over to inhabitants, is often unrecognisable following the ever-expanding process of *remont*¹² – the paradox of which is the need to fix and renovate that, which is brand new. But those processes reflect the scope for free expression inhabitants find when attempting to manipulate the brittle, yet seemingly stable, built form of their reinforced concrete walls. For example, the more inhabitants associate their sense of self and happiness with their *panelka* flat, the more likely they are to immerse themselves in long-term efforts to reinvent it – both in terms of its functionality and its external form. *Remont* is the vantage point through which I trace the artistic events where objects are deconstructed, moulded, or destroyed, only to be put back together. *Remont*, as such, is a process that highlights an essential feature of everyday life in post-socialism: “enduring transformation is not the same as progress” (Alexander, 2012: 266). The *panelka* becomes a calling card of the people it contains, but a calling card that is palimpsestuous – prone to changes, *remonti*, and upgrades that correspond to changes in the way inhabitants understand and see themselves.

The term ‘palimpsestuousness’, coined by literally theorist Sarah Dillon (2007: 244), is approached as a metaphor with a complex genealogy, but one whose inherently beneficial effect on the development of modern thought can be traced. According to Dillon, the process of palimpsesting has a particularly productive social power. The erasure is not only always incomplete, but can result in unintended consequences – “as the iron in the remaining ink reacted with the oxygen in the air producing a reddish-brown oxide ... the practice of medieval palimpsesting in fact paradoxically preserved [ancient text] for posterity” (ibid.: 12). With regards to the *panelki* concrete canvas, palimpsesting is both an

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¹² *Remont* has a deep connection with the Soviet experience, with Walter Benjamin in writing in his *Moscow Diary* in 1926-7, “everything ... [is] under the banner of remont” (Benjamin, 1986: 36).
internal and external process. The internal process of tearing apart and building back up, of making something out of nothing, is analysed through the lens of *remont*. Externally, the concrete canvas has a different function and form – the external panels are the front door to the outside world and they reflect how individuals want to be seen from the outside and distinguished from their neighbours and their façades. In many ways, the external façade of each flat resembles the life of the individual panels that made up the Berlin Wall – panels that were once part of a whole, yet have individual, “failed” existences outside the memory of their collective whole. That separation of the parts from the whole, the inauguration of new entities and subjects creates a particular kind of ‘dissensus’ (Dolff-Bonekämper, 2002). According to Dolff-Bonekämper, these fragments of ‘lieux de discorde’ produce ‘sites of dispute’ because parts of the same are now in different states of decay. She observes further that a monument like the Berlin Wall “is argued about and becomes precious because it does not embody cultural and social consensus on historic or present events” (2002: 247).

The chapter also addresses my own biography and family history in relation to the two panelki in *Mladost*, Block 45 and Block 52 (Figure 1), which were chosen as the main fieldwork sites. Furthermore, answering some questions relating to the conducting of fieldwork at ‘home’ and of doing autoethnography, is vital in positioning my own subjectivity within this body of work. As I will argue here, having witnessed, seen, or heard about a majority of the external and internal changes that have occurred in these two panelki in the last 25 years enables me to approach them, so as to try and read them, like palimpsests. Being aware, spatially and visually, of every nook and cranny, every new layer of paint, new window frames and doors, new (and old) inhabitants, fills in the genealogical gaps necessary when talking about peeling the layers of the seemingly banal. Furthermore, in terms of biography and memory, my proximity to the site of this research allows for a certain reflexivity and critique when it comes to the analysis of all the qualitative data gathered from participant observation and interviews.

My fascination with the prefabricated neighbourhood goes back to my early childhood when the concrete around me was my urban jungle. Growing up in *Mladost* meant, in many ways, that concrete carved out the limits to my experience of the world. My home, my friends’ homes, my school, my doctor, my dentist, our garage, the supermarket, the basketball courts were all prefabricated within the original blueprint of what would become Sofia’s first concrete neighbourhood. I grew up in Block 52, played tennis and hide and seek against the then-still-free-from-graffiti wall and went to countless birthdays and parties where I could navigate flawlessly because the floor plans and interior designs were almost identical. My father, Ivan Nikolov, who is an ethnographer, would also show a certain curiosity towards this subject matter, eventually writing a
short article about our panelka in 2003. In preparation for it, he conducted a series of interviews with our neighbours as well as a small questionnaire. In many ways, that article is the reason I endeavoured to do this research – it was an invitation for a much more in-depth body of work in a country where, shockingly, very little has been written about the legacy of the predominant form of housing until today13. The article my father wrote set the gears in motion for me back then and would be one of the main sources of inspiration when I returned many years later to once again look at the panelki as a researcher in my own right.

When I was 13 years old, my family moved to Bratislava – it was the first time I had ever seen prefabrication blanket a foreign cityscape like it does in Sofia. But there was a major difference. Over the five years that I lived there, one by one, panelki across the city were transformed from grey and solemn looking buildings of the past to newly refurbished, thermally insulated, and colourfully painted reflections of the present. Following a state policy for renovation and the improvement of the energy efficiency, Slovakia – like most other Central European cases – gave panelki a new face and lease of life. But with that change came the erasure of histories etched on those walls. Histories still preserved today in Sofia. The renewed uniformity that I saw in Bratislava was so visually impressive in comparison to Sofia, that I started to see the nature of that prefabricated concrete differently – as a canvas reflexive of the overarching discursive battles about past and present. What was gained in terms of aesthetics, energy efficiency, and architectural integrity in Bratislava was also immediately lost in terms of using the surface of those panelki as palimpsests to glean anything about who might live inside. The ‘Europeanisation’ of the panelki that stand to the northwest is counteracted and juxtaposed with the aesthetic vernacular that has retained dominance in Bulgaria.

Despite leaving Bulgaria 16 years ago, I returned to Block 52 regularly – usually in the summertime and during Christmas, each time noticing slight changes to façades and faces. My distance gave me the opportunity to internalise these transformations more vividly, to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary. It was as if the mosaic of colour that I see today was expanding, one balcony at a time. But what I was gaining in terms of my aesthetic appreciation of the incredible diversity, I was also losing in terms of personal connections. As the years went by, neighbours slowly stopped greeting me, speaking with me in the lift, and even stopped holding the lift door open because they could no longer recognise me. Some people moved out and new neighbours moved in, slowly depleting the diverse relationships that I had built as I child. By the time I decided to make

13 One outstanding book, Almanac of a Panel Trakiya by Nina Toleva, stands out in its ambitious attempt to conduct an in-depth sociological study of the unique panelki neighbourhood in Plovdiv, called Trakiya, as a living organism.
**Mladost** my fieldwork site, it had become a solitary place to go back to – in more ways than one. Our own flat had slowly been emptied out of personal artefacts and mementos after several *remont* cycles of our own. The years had jumbled valuable details in the memories of my parents, particularly when it came to questions I asked my father revolving around his research. No notes or interviews remain and many of the clarifications I requested received no clear answers. For example, I knew Block 52 was not like the other *panelki* – it was shorter and smaller, built nearly two decades after all its neighbours – but my parents were fuzzy about the exact story of its construction.

So I began to wonder about how other families remembered the story of the *panelka* and if they, too, had transformed their interiors to such an extent that almost no memory of the original setup remains. I knew I could use my own memories to try and jolt theirs about things they may have deemed too banal to recount – like who professed their love for an alternative 1980s Bulgarian rock band on the first floor stairs parapet; or when did they switch the original black electrical sockets, which stuck out of the walls, with new ‘modern’ ones which fit smoothly against the wall. In this sense, this research is autobiographic and this methodology contains aspects of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Autoethnography is a research approach that combines personal experience with a system of theoretical and methodological tools in order to decipher a given cultural context. In my own case, the goal was to make the *panelki* “aesthetic and evocative by using techniques of ‘showing’” (Adams, 2006), which are intended to bring the readers and the informants “into the scene” (Ellis, 2004: 142), and help fill in the gaps in their own, oftentimes shared, histories. The autobiographical aspect is in itself palimpsestous. If writing ethnography requires the “thick description” of culture (Geertz, 1973), then autobiography requires peeling more layers in order to “produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (Ellis, et. al., 2011: 27). In other words, autoethnography is about conducting a reflexive history – both looking at the ways my own subjectivity has changed as a result of conducting fieldwork, but also using my own biography to spur, critique, question, and piece together the individual histories of my informants.

Lastly, a word about the process of conducting research at ‘home’. According to Alvesson, this involves a setting where the author has “natural access” to a given cultural setting where she or he retains an active participant status (in Ybema, et. al., 2009: 159). Ethnography at home is to be distinguished from autoethnography because the former does not primarily place “one’s experiences in the centre,” but, instead, looks outwards (ibid.: 160). This research, while employing aspects of autoethnography in putting together the pieces of the collective *panelki* history in *Mladost*, nonetheless retains a predominantly analytical and document-driven interpretation of the cultural setting. However,
given the fact that I have been displaced from the social life of the neighbourhood and building for many years – more years that I actively lived there – it is not fully accurate to deem my research as conducted at home. Life in these flats, as will be discussed later, has become increasingly atomised after the demise of socialism, making any lasting relationships very difficult to retain. Besides some immediate neighbour connections in Entrance C of Block 52, where I grew up, gaining access itself was very difficult. This is particularly true for Block 45, where I had almost no connections at all and resorted to an, ultimately unsuccessful, ethnographic courtyard approach employed by Caroline Humphrey in Russia to find a way inside people’s flats (Humphrey, 2005). This included conversations with the local seamstress and shoe repairman, whose offices were converted basements in Block 45. But, overall, despite my years living here, I felt very much an outsider due to the highly sensitive requirements of my research – I needed to not only step inside people’s homes, but also photograph both their proudest innovations and their most hidden corners. That included bathrooms, bedrooms, areas that were in desperate need of renovation, intimate spaces, etc.

It took several visits within a period of four years to be trusted inside the flats of many of the informants, particularly the older ones. In many ways, I am now, for the first time since leaving Bulgaria 16 years ago, once again an insider, once again ‘at home’ whenever I return. However, I am not known locally as ‘Nikolay’ or ‘Ivan’s son’, but as ‘that London researcher’ or ‘that young man with the book about panelki’ which, if anything, shows that I remain stuck in a limbo between being fully accepted inside this community and being an external viewer with a researcher label. Given just how hard it was for me to collect all the discursive and visual data over the years leads me to think that it would be virtually impossible for a researcher without roots in Mladost to immerse themselves in this field. The trust that I gained, particularly when it comes to broaching topics of mental health, death, and money, cannot be taken for granted, particularly in a neighbourhood that has doubled down on second, often metal, front doors and steel bars over windows. Privacy and secrecy remain highly valued and the home, one of the most sacred and protected spaces in Bulgaria, is almost never opened up to an audience and revealed as the artistic exhibition and self-portrait that I recognise it to be.

My goal in carrying this out was not only to build upon the oral or lived histories of individual inhabitants and record some immediate spatial, temporal, and social changes that have occurred inside this, in more ways than one, unique block of flats. The goal, rather, following Ulf Hannerz’s work on urban life and ethnography, was to triangulatw everyday life, of “finding several routes to the same fact” (Hannerz, 1980: 312). This is another important reason why my research focuses on the two neighbouring panelki – they offer a powerful contrast in terms of their generation and socio-economic makeup. Block 45 is
one of the first ever, and most widespread panelki typologies, built in Mladost and Block 52 – one of the last and most unique. The interior design, size, and value of panelki were very different and they affected who ended up getting a flat inside. To begin to unravel the complexities of everyday life inside, it was important to compare the differences between two very different panelki existing just metres from each other.

The relationship between inhabitants and their panelki, between their biographies and my own, is juxtaposed and cross-referenced with the relationship between that panelka and its architects or planners. Using semi-structured interviews with both types of subject, my research focused on carrying out open conversations, pegged directly against the surrounding material culture – how inhabitants saw and described, say, their closed-in balconies – and compared it to what the architects or planners had to say. Those responses were used as stimuli for reactions from one and the other. The conflicted and counter-intuitive relationship, which panelki establish between the inhabitants and the professionals, opens up the main battleground and space for transformation inside those flats. They reveal the weakest points of the structure, which are coincidentally also those points that carry the most meaning with regards to changes in daily life. The way different subjects react to the spaces themselves and to different views about those spaces reveals details about the notion of ownership over panelki, about their normative role in society and, most importantly, about how panelki are seen today.

2.2 ‘Total Installations’ and ‘Ethnographic Conceptualism’ in the Soviet Bloc

The triangulation of the “protean” and “serendipitous” nature of urban life (Hannerz, 1980: 304) is extended by illustrating a portrait of the often unseen and mundane changes (remonti) of the domestic space by inhabitants. This follows the approach of Ilya Kabakov, perhaps the most important living Russian artist, and his focus on ‘total installations’14. Kabakov’s works are “metaphorical investigations of the social and psychological failures of Communist ideology as manifested spatially in Soviet institutions” (Schlegel, 1999: 3), whereby personal memories and historical artefacts are transformed into anonymous and fictional representations of Soviet life par excellence. Of those institutions, Kabakov places strong emphasis on the precursor to panelki – the kommunalka. It is there, inside

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14 Kabakov’s total installations are a type of Gesamtkunstwerk – a total work of art (see Groys, 1992). The installations, most often juxtaposing the banality of daily life with the dreams of socialist utopia, incorporate a myriad of artforms (painting, sculpture, music, theatre, etc.) to both illustrate the world as it is and create a three-dimensional space of total illusion.
the domestic space, that the paradoxes of the ideological system above are played out and materialised – onto walls, floors, windows, and furniture. Kabakov even told film director Amei Wallach in a 1992 letter that the future is a world where everyone “will live in an installation” (Wallach, 1992: 86) – that world is the world of the *panelka*.

The flat as total installation is used here in direct response to Boris Groys’ argument that Stalinism and Socialist Realism are akin to a grandiose *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a total work of art) project, where aesthetics is “the highest goal in the building of socialism” and, consequently, “socialism itself is regarded as the supreme measure of beauty” (1992: 75). Groys argues further that this underpins the final realisation of the Constructivist dream of life as a total work of art. Just as life was organised “in monolithic artistic forms” (ibid.: 9) of Socialist Realism, it is argued here that, in fact, the universal institutionalisation of *panelki* takes it a step further, into the uncertain, always transformative, but not always progressive, world of post-socialism. According to Groys, the fall of Soviet totalitarianism and the Iron Curtain was akin to a collapse of an entire ecumene – the *tsimtsum*15 of Communism. As such, with the final light of that all-encompassing communist reality extinguished, a new space is created “of signs emptied of sense, this infinite surplus of pure chance” (Groys, 2010: 168), where new forms of personhood, meanings and symbols can be tested. According to Groys, this results, particularly with regards to the birth of conceptual art, like Kabakov’s, in a “wilful, individual occupation, a wild privatisation of vacant spaces that have remained unpopulated after the *tsimtsum* of the great religions and ideologies” (ibid.). The spaces in question are *panelki* flats, which, through *remonti*, are both highly volatile and individualised and always a metaphor for the external political changes and macropowers. According to Kabakov – addressing the question of total installation as *Gesamtkunstwerk* – to *enter* a work of art, the viewer must regard it as material reality,

> When you enter a space where chairs, tables, and paintings are set up around you, you get the feeling that you are in a room or an office of some kind. And yet, at the same time, you are told, "This is not a room or an office – it’s art." ... "What do you mean, art, if when I look straight ahead I don’t see what’s behind me? Art is something that stares me in the face." "No," they tell you, "not in the face, it’s something that’s all around you."

(Kabakov, Tupitsyn & Tupitsyn, 1999: 72)

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15 According to Groys, who builds on the term used in the Lurianic Kabbalah to describe the creation of conceptual spaces in which independent realms can exist, *tsimtsum* is akin to “God’s partial withdrawal from the all-unity, which creates free space necessary for the world to exist” (Groys, 2010: 161).
The way panelki flats become real-life installations will be examined at length in Chapter Six. Here, it is important to show the methods used to triangulate the subject of life. On the one hand, flats were treated as homes of actual people – clerks, lawyers, truck drivers, doctors, etc. These were familiar spaces in which I was gradually welcomed as researcher first, neighbour second. During those conversations, I encouraged these inhabitants to speak freely about topics of their own choosing, while I focused on the topics and tone – specifically analysing their choice of metaphor, the spaces and artefacts that they focused on. The autoethnographical material, following Kabakov, attempts to universalise the notion of the panelka domestic space by documenting those mundane and banal aspects of everyday life shared by everyone. But when the borders between the “literally and literal [are] easily transgressed” (Boym, 1994: 193) in Kabakov’s work, and inside the panelki, is when the visual narratives of everyday life are both specific and universal. According to Groys,

Kabakov uses his albums and installations to tell fictional stories about fictional events that are not even clearly identifiable as art events or otherwise. It is more a case of their becoming art events solely through the ‘story’. (Groys, 1992: 36)

For panelki, that means that every artefact used inside the ‘total installation’ of the flat loses its value as an independent object and becomes a document, or more specifically a layer within the palimpsest, each “illustrating the story being told by means of the installation” (ibid.). Therefore, the inhabitants are simultaneously artists manipulating their concrete surrounding and sculpting their domestic space. The flat is a form of self-portraiture – manipulating the concrete panels inside and out – that changes through the years. This portrait is not a traditional work of art – it is part of the story of the social life inside panelki. But that portrait, that story, remains hidden in the banality of everyday life, a life ultimately shared by all panelki inhabitants, until it is opened up and showcased by them, as artists. The chairs and tables remain artefacts in a prefab room, as Kabakov notes, until “they” – in this case the inhabitants upon being questioned by an outside researcher – tell you about the underlying history and aesthetic of their unique panelka flat.

The introduction of the panelka as a space for conceptual art is key to my attempt to triangulate the subject of everyday life. It enables a tracing of how individual subjects carve out lives for themselves by carrying out remonti – a type of micropower – to the ideal form of the domestic space. Their interventions help decode the past and diagnose the present relationships between structure and subjects (as a way of showing if and how today is different from yesterday) (Foucault, 1984a: 46). Following Ssorin-Chaikov’s work on ‘ethnographic conceptualism’ (2013: 5), conceptual art is used as a research tool. Ethnography
is conducted as conceptual art and vice versa – “ethnographic conceptualism posits a symmetry of art and anthropology” (ibid.). In a seminal paper, inspired by an exhibition of gifts offered by the public to Soviet leaders, which was co-curated by him, Ssorin-Chaikov pays specific attention to the fact that an object can hold dual meaning – as both an ethnographic object about the exhibition and an artwork in the exhibition. He notes how the “exhibition’s visitors’ book” was transformed from “a site of heated polemic about Soviet history” (2013: 7) to an exhibition artefact the moment a comment in it read, “[t]hank you for the exhibition—we found the visitors’ book of comments particularly interesting and educating” (ibid.) This is important because it shows how the exhibition audience is transformed into both informants (debating Soviet history) and artists (whose debates commend attention of other visitors).

As noted above with regards to socialism as a total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk), I treated architects and inhabitants as both informants and conceptual artists who interact with each other’s work (as audiences). The inhabitants assume the role of first-tier audience, making their mark as artists (like the comments in the book) by an on-going process of external and internal remonti; the architects/engineers are the second-tear audience (comments about the comments), who are asked to engage with the contemporary state and look of the once uniform and pure forms of panelki from the past. I navigated both levels, using my own biography and intimate knowledge of life in panelki, to encourage the artists to open up about their oeuvre on the one hand and using that data collection, historical, and theoretical knowledge about socialist architecture, to get the experts to open up about their professional work and legacy. The attempt here is to negotiate a critical self-reflexivity of the people interviewed as they engage with the structure of panelki – not as a fixed built form, but as something that is flexible and fluid, here and now – like contemporary art, in a way. This is designed to avoid the anthropological tendency to gaze into a timeless and far-away past (Marcus, 2003) and instead approach the ethnographic inquiry “into what is taking place without deducing it beforehand” (Rabinow, 2008: 3) – just like the way Kabakov approaches total installations and how I approached panelki flats during my fieldwork.

There are multiple underlying socio-economic rationales that may provide insights into why the DIY remonti are so extensive and pervasive among inhabitants of panel flats: maybe the lack of options in terms of design and furniture during socialism, maybe the limited budgets then and after. Either way, it is remarkable how authoritative inhabitants, particularly the male heads of household, are about the decision to manipulate the infrastructures of their flats – the gendered nature of remonti will be discussed in Chapter Six. Some have come up with truly unique solutions to the rigid construct that is a flat made up
of prefabricated panels, each of which helps support the overall structure and therefore cannot be removed or altered.¹⁶

But what happens inside the home, by whom, when, and why is only one part of the everyday life narrative. The research utilises extensive archival research and a discursive analysis of the official party narratives and critiques of panelki to understand how the original aims of the panelka social condenser were subverted – one which enabled inhabitants to carry out microresistances (as remonti) and to shape their domestic space according to their own sense of self, rather than being disciplined and shaped by that space according to the overarching socialist ideology (macropower). The productive failure of panelka as social condenser is analysed according to the extensive conflict between konstruktsiia and stroitel’stvo during the last decades of the socialist regime. The failure of panelki to reach their full potential, the resort to standardisation and homogenisation of a very limited number of typologies, the greyness and emptiness of ‘new’ flats gave panelki a sense of independence from state power, where it was up to individuals to carry out DIY, to improve their home as best as they could. The flat’s privacy became a hearth, an island, separated, but not entirely independent from, state power. That is why the processes of change discussed above, as forms of art, are not post-socialist phenomena. They first occur, hidden and unseen, during socialism and explode in colourful calling cards of difference in the past three decades.

It is within this complex space that we finally uncover invisible-because-overlooked layers of change in everyday life. To understand why panelki are palimpsestous, productively failing in their behemoth promise of social condensation, we need to uncover what remains between the four walls after all the ideological and discursive battles have been concluded. According to the French historians Bertaux and Malysheva, from the huge trove of state secrets protected by socialist regimes, “the nature of daily life was undoubtedly one of the most closely kept ones” (Bertaux and Malysheva 2004: 25). In the following chapters, by means of exploring the oral histories and material cultures of individual flats, this thesis will attempt to uncover this secret and, more importantly, follow the flow of microresistances underneath the larger changes in the tectonics of macropowers. Because, as argued by author Georgi Gospodinov, “Thank God, it is not ideologies, not utopias, nor states – but the days in which we live … our everyday life, which remain. It is that fleeting byt, which turns out to be more permanent than all ideologies” (Gospodinov, 2016: 45).

¹⁶ The prefabricated concrete panel system is called a "skeleton-less system" (bezskeltna sistema) because it is constructed like a stack of cards, with each panel linked to other panels on each of its four sides.
Such an eclectic approach interrogates contemporaneity as a fleeting moment that is always changing and applies it to the seemingly immovable and rigid institution of the *panelka*. I set out to juxtapose the “what has been” with “what is” without being constrained by the demarcation of pre- and post-1989\(^\text{17}\) social life. I bridge the gap between pasts and presents by verifying, as thoroughly and extensively as was possible within my research timeframe, the accuracy of two main hypotheses – both concerning the relationship of power and resistance between the *panelka* and its individual inhabitants. The main hypothesis posits that, if inhabitants were able to carve out individual lives for themselves during socialism, then the distinctive materiality of the *panelka*, as a counter-productive social condenser, would uncover the most hidden and banal, yet powerful and political, aspects of change in everyday life. These resistances are not post-socialist phenomena linked with the rise of consumerism and a new middle class, but reflect a continuity going back to the first DIY *remonti* inside newly built flats. Subsequently, and this is the second hypothesis to be tested, if the ubiquity of this productive power (not just domination) (Foucault, 1977: 194) can be traced to the banality of the domestic space and everyday life of concrete individuals, then it should flow through the intricate capillaries of the social body. The changes in the social fabric in post-socialist Bulgaria are palimpsestous, uncertain, and always changing. Therefore, productive power (as microresistance), according to Sheridan is,

*A plurality of instances, each a special case, distributed in an irregular way in time and space. Sometimes a broad series of resistances converge to bring about a major upheaval, a ‘revolution’ but like power, and inextricably linked with it, resistance usually takes the form of innumerable, mobile, transitory points.* (Sheridan, 1980: 185)

Post-socialism, like the institution of the *panelka*, is paradoxical in its simultaneous universality and specificity. But to identify one with the other inhibits our ability to diagnose the cataclysmic social and cultural changes that individuals in Bulgaria are still coming to terms with. It inhibits our ability to interpret the paradoxical and intertwines ways in which lives and domestic spaces are transformed and reinvented. If productive power can be traced to the *panelka*, then this research can illustrate and explain why one family can put their flat through four rounds of *remonti* in the space of three decades, and what that says about everyday life in post-socialism, where nothing is permanent – the

\(^{17}\)The fall of the Berlin Wall and the wave of democratic transitions are incredibly important historical events, signalling a change in the cultural, political and economic constitution of Bulgarian society. However, I propose that there are more minute and immediate ruptures that affect the way inhabitants interact with their domestic space that start before 1989 and continue, in many ways undisturbed, in the years that follow. It is important to also mention that Bulgaria’s transition to democracy was different from other Eastern European countries as it was more of a palace coup than a revolution backed by popular demand.
The kitchen is a bedroom for a while, before being turned into a study; the bedroom becomes a kitchen before becoming a child's room; the living room undergoes several iterations before settling, for now, into an open-plan space.

These dynamics are visible and forceful attempts at the insertion of completely novel and contradictory cosmologies, but most of the processes of change are far more ephemeral – down to the choice of paint, or how a balcony\textsuperscript{18} is closed-in. It is these elements in the panelka that can be used to diagnose the concrete, yet contradictory, present in post-socialist Bulgaria.

\section*{2.3 Contextualising Panelki and the ‘Fall’ of Socialism}

In order to paint an urban portrait of the intertwining layers that have, historically, come to define life inside panelki, I follow Michal Murawski in his attempt to propose a distinctive methodology. A ‘Palaceology’ that seeks to decode the interactions of a concrete public building – Warsaw’s Palace of Culture – and the surrounding city and which, in turn, approaches that building as both the subject and object of research. However, as discussed in Chapter One, I argue against Murawski’s centralisation of the Palace as dominanta of post-socialist urban life – a gravitational centre, a vertical and all-seen site of power exerted in and through architecture. Instead, I focus on examining the anonymous and peripheral ways in which power, ideology, and human subjectivity are intertwined in architecture. In my view, panelki have remained under-researched because they tend to be overlooked. The same cannot be said about Soviet monuments and dominantas, which were designed to occupy the public consciousness and history books. So, this research hopes to substitute the dominanta for the banalka, an institution marked by an almost universal anonymity.

In order to trace the ubiquity of power, one cannot be blindsided by the glaring domination of Stalinist skyscrapers; instead, it is imperative to look beyond the center, to \textit{re-see} those institutions, which despite blanketing the peripheries of entire cities, are often overlooked or hidden in plain sight \textit{because} they become so domesticated and unoriginal. This is why the focus falls on the panelka – a universalised form of mass housing across the socialist bloc that places the material of concrete as the single most forceful physical and structural limitation of everyday life. For a majority of people in the regimes that sought to create a uniform byt across physical, social and cultural borders, the panelka inaugurated the notion of the so-called ‘prefab civilisation’ (Kotkin, 2007). The

\textsuperscript{18}The closed-in, or sealed off, balcony is a unique Bulgarian tradition in which individual rooms are extended and repurposed. The balcony is often regarded as the weakest point of the panelka, the place where the inhabitant can achieve the greatest intervention.
standardisation of urban life was forcefully spread from Moscow to Sofia in two decades:

Consider the children’s playgrounds in those places, erected over the same cracked concrete panel surfaces and with the same twisted metal piping—all made at the same factories, to uniform codes. This was also true of apartment buildings (outside and inside), schools, indeed entire cities, even villages. (Kotkin, 2007: 520)

The idea of a ‘home’ and its relation to the domestic and private space, as ecumene, was literally mass-produced and perpetuated through concrete. Concrete became a material theology according to which the ‘prefab civilisation’ was able to spread. The spread is reminiscent of Oleg Grabar’s exploration of the Islamic ecumene in architecture. Grabar demonstrated that “ecumenical patina” by tracing its ability to “claim vast terrains, artistic traditions, styles, and periods, including the modern and contemporary, and sometimes to transcend religious and cultural divisions” (Rabat, 2011: 19). For Ulf Hannerz, ecumene is the region of “persistent cultural interaction and exchange” (1989: 215). Appadurai goes further, arguing ecumenes generate societal bonds, or “imagined communities” (as per Anderson, 1983), based on a permanent “traffic in ideas of personhood and selfhood” (Appadurai, 1996: 28). In the case of concrete, as socialist ecumene, homogeneity, standardisation, and prefabrication play key roles. According to Duyvendak, to feel at home, “a certain homogeneity already prevails: one feels at home with one’s own people (however defined) in one’s own place (be it particular, generic and/or symbolic” (2011: 111). Or in Yurchak’s terms, this is the idea of svoi – i.e. your own – which establishes a certain familiarity, support network, and unspoken understanding among a group of people bearing the brunt of the bureaucratic machine together.

Making reference to the ‘prefab civilisation’ provokes a discussion about the totalising social and aesthetic force of the panelka’s concrete ecumene in the socialist bloc. My ethnographic fieldwork, meanwhile, is the most practical and detailed way to trace discontinuities within that totality, i.e. challenge some of the deterministic assumptions about the way ordinary people carve out lives for themselves and how that changes after the socialist regime. For example, take Kristina Fehérváry’s decades-long research into the Hungarian panelki and their life after socialism. There is an assumption of closure (the symbolic year of 1989) that signifies a new and present role of panelki as the “ultimate heterotopic space” (Fehérváry, 2013: 234) that holds the power to transform its inhabitants. For Fehérváry, heterotopia is invoked by the difference the inside and outside of the walls denotes in post-socialism and how the home is transformed into an enchanted island of normality and meaning in a sea of post-socialist (democratic/capitalist) chaos.
I hope to demonstrate, following Buchli, the utility of "shifting away from our preoccupation with presence" (1999: 5) – particularly when it comes to links between the materiality of this ecumene and everyday life in post-socialist contexts – and towards a focus on "absence," on the productive power and microresistances that underlie the uncritical assumption of progress from socialism to post-socialism (on discussions of the 'undecidability' with regards to both totalitarianism and liberalism, see Mouffe, 1996: 6). That is to say that, while I agree with Fehérváry that the panelka can be analysed as a heterotopic space, I disagree that it only becomes one in a post-socialist context. Rather, I seek to resee the role and place of panelki and focus on the specific, albeit contradictory and changing, attempts of individual inhabitants to carve out everyday lives for themselves in the same panelki flats, where that life may not have necessarily changed drastically because of the transition from socialism to democracy.

Because these cases are both specific (in the sense of demarcating individual lives of inhabitants in their specific flats) and contradictory (in the sense that the relations of micropowers between the subject and the space change constantly and incoherently), my research required the above-mentioned method of triangulation. That mixed approach juxtaposes ethnographic with artistic methods, archival research with discursive analysis, to help peel the invisible layers of everyday life, to read them like a palimpsest. This methodological approach helped understand and see how some inhabitants could resist the seeming inflexibility of the immovable concrete walls and radically transform their domestic space in ways that do not coincide with the binary of socialism/post-socialism and, more importantly, by doing nothing more than ordinary and mundane renovations, or remonti, like closing-in of a balcony to extend a room, applying heat insulation to an external wall, turning a kitchen into a bedroom, or vice versa. These resistances to the original architectural plan of the panelka social condenser, as well as the overruling of the functional organisation of the internal space and ecumene, illustrate radical discontinuities in the constitution of daily life, which do not directly coincide with the overarching power struggles and changes in state power.
2.4 The ageing *Mladost*\(^{19}\) and the Protracted Process of Rejuvenation

The discussion so far has contextualised the choice of conducting research in *Mladost*, and more specifically, Block 45 and Block 52 (Figures 2-5). The Bulgarian example of prefabricated panel dwellings is unique in two ways. One is historical, the other contemporary. Historically, the family home (*zhivelishte*), as a right and sense of belonging, is a deeply rooted notion in Bulgarian culture. Curiously, this strong historical bond between subject and home in Bulgaria meant that the sense of the *panelka* as ‘human right’, as explored in cases across the socialist bloc (see Drakulic, 1992; Fehérváry, 2013), assumed its most radical version in Bulgaria. There, the introduction of the juridical right of ‘personal property’ in the 1971 Constitution inaugurated de facto *private* ownership of *panelki* flats. According to Iskra Dandolova, it legalised “the right of each individual to own and enjoy the use of housing property” (Dandolova, 2002: 241). Subsequently, in the 1980s, 94% of the housing property was “personal” in Bulgaria, while public and cooperative property, like in Hungary (Fehérváry, 2013: 85-6), continued to grow.

This process is a complex one and it is difficult to work out the discourses that underpin the choice for the legal framing, but, Parusheva and Marcheva (2010), it is historically linked to that bond between Bulgarian identity and private property. This is supported by a 1939 Italian survey about homelessness in Sofia, which concluded, “the building of social (municipal) dwellings for rent was out of the question (“unthinkable”), for Bulgarian people were “fanatically attached to their home and to the private property” (in Parusheva and Marcheva, 2010: 202). And this is visible today, too, as rates of privately owned *panelki* continue to be incredibly high, while the role of the state remains problematic and distant. The transition from personal to private property and how they affect the relationship between *panelki* and inhabitants will be discussed in Chapters Three and Five respectively.

The new ‘skin’ that rejuvenates, in patches, the old *Mladost* façades after 1990 (See Figures 6-9) resembles “a new life ... everything was thrown out and the past forgotten” (Buchli, 1999: 175): an island of normality, a heterotopic space (Fehérváry, 2013). That mosaic of colour across *panelki* is that second uniquely (contemporary) Bulgarian trait. Whereas countries like Germany, Poland and Slovakia, as noted above, have enforced national policies that address the state of the panel housing stock, including external insulation, new colourful façades, and

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\(^{19}\)The symbolism of naming a neighbourhood ‘Youth’ plays a particularly important role in the research, because, indeed, between 1962-1979, when the majority of the *panelki* in *Mladost* 1 were built, the population was predominantly young families. In the past 27 years, the demographics have significantly changed, where *Mladost* is now an ageing neighbourhood, with some instance of crumbling and neglected *panelki*, fewer and fewer young families, teenagers and children.
internal repairs, in Bulgaria, the state of panelki, once again, has largely remained a private affair. Each inhabitant is left to look after his or her own property. And that allows an anthropologist to read those façades, translate, date, and interpret them as concrete portraits, or profile pictures, that consciously or subconsciously reflect the inhabitants within. These calling cards, or visitki, are always changing, of course, because the remonti never cease and the external façade is that large palimpsestuous canvas made up of layers and layers of data. The extent to which it is possible to read the panelki like a palimpsest and use their visual, discursive, and historical data as cues to constructing a history of their social fabric, a diagnosis of everyday life in Bulgaria, is the key research aim of this dissertation. Despite the original plans for the construction of panelki as social condensers, the use of prefabricated concrete as a sign of modernity and strength, the buildings, in fact, have no final state. They are constantly renegotiated, adapted, moulded, and transformed.

But the ruptures, discontinuities, and conflicts that intricately demarcate these changes in the domestic sphere are not merely external. The most hidden processes concern the mundane tasks conducted inside the home – many of which were done in secret, some of which can be traced. And this is why the focus falls on Block 52, Mladost 1, Sofia, Bulgaria, but also its immediate panelki neighbour – Block 45. The block of flats offers an incredible opportunity to revisit, compare, and update the above-mentioned piece of ethnographic work conducted by father, Ivan Nikolov, in 2003, a turbulent time during the transition to democracy in Bulgaria. The research conducted inside the block contextualises who the inhabitants were, what their lives and homes were like, and what the relationship among them was. A return to that same site today allowed me to trace the intricate changes to each of these subjects and update the social makeup of the panelka – who has remained, what have they changed, who has made what remonti, what are the inter-neighbour relationships. Interestingly, the research conducted in 2003 prioritised one of the three entrances that make up Block 52 – Entrance C, where most of his informants lived, including our own family. My own ethnographic fieldwork involved a more holistic approach – conducting semi-structured interviews and taking pictures inside almost every flat (there are 53 overall). I also conducted interviews with some of the key figures that oversaw the very first panelki constructions in Sofia, as well as dozens of interviews with the engineers and architects who built panelki in Mladost.

I think returning to Block 52 to conduct ethnographic research enabled a much more nuanced and accurate reading of the complex panelki, as palimpsests,

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20 The lack of personalisation is a distinctive aspect of every panel neighbourhood in Sofia. The inner-block streets technically have names today, but they are not known, shown, or labelled. Every panelka has a number and an ”Entrance” which specifies a block of flats. So, Block 52 is made up of Entrance A, B, and C, each of which has six floors.
because I had peeled some of those “ghostly traces” that reappear when the “remaining ink reacted with the oxygen” (Dillon, 2006: 12). The previous research offers a limited map with which I could revisit and attempt to understand a complex structure that is still very much alive and therefore always changing. According to painter Oskar Kokoschka, it is impossible to paint a “synthetic” portrait of a city because “by the time we grasp one aspect, the city has already changed” (in Orbst 2011: 34-35). My father acknowledges this in the first page of his article – “the writer of these lines has an extensive practical experience of living in and impressions about the way of cohabitation, familial contacts, friendship or feuds, in the panelka” (I. Nikolov, 2003: 113). In the years spent inside 52, both as inhabitant and researcher, I tried to mirror that sentiment and train my senses notice details people learn to ignore – from the smallest nooks and cracks to the sound the elevator door of the first floor makes when it slams shut. I wanted to experience the panelka as a living and breathing organism. My father further acknowledges the benefits of a “lived memory” to any research studying the development of these buildings as architectural and social microcosms. He shows the diverse social makeup of Block 52’s Entrance C, where out of 18 families, “two are second generation Sofia-born” (ibid.: 116) – or in other words, 16 families included people who were all the first to be born in Sofia. Today, of course, there are second-generation Block 52-born inhabitants, including the flat below mine, where the daughter of the original inhabitants now has a child of her own. The 2003 article hints at some linkages between class, education, party affiliation, and the means and ways each of those inhabitant was allowed access to buy their flat21 – like the doctor who healed the daughter of the director of Domostroitelnen Kombinat22 and was offered a flat on a third floor. But in its very limited space, the article only scrapses the surface. It only sees the first layers of the palimpsest that is all the more complex the closer one looks. For example, as will be shown later, mental illness and the stigma revolving around it, played a key role in the shakeup of the originally intended social fabric of Block 52. But mental health was silenced, seen as a private matter and a source of shame, which resulted in vulnerable people being hidden away from the outside world, isolated within panel walls. After the fall of socialism, a number of disturbing instances forced the conversation of this neglected and invisible phenomenon within panelki life into the open.

To trace these differences and build upon the original research meant going further back in time in my own conversations with every inhabitant. But the data from 2003 helps demarcate and triangulate the local sites of discontinuity. It

121 Despite the introduction of personal property, purchasing a flat was not straightforward as the housing shortage was perpetuated despite the immense construction of panelki. So, many would have to wait years to have a chance to buy something. Others, like a large selection of the first inhabitants of Block 52, had connections and were able to purchase it immediately.

122 The so-called house-building factory DK was where all the prefabricated concrete panels that make up every single panelka were constructed.
enables me to build a timeline about which of the inhabitants have changed, how has their approach to their flat changed, in their own view today as opposed to their views 15 years ago. It is a way of reading each individual flat as a palimpsest within the totality of the panelka, of marking the “protean” and “serendipitous” changes in everyday life (Hannerz, 1980: 304), of “finding several routes to the same fact” (Hannerz, 1980: 312).

Interestingly, the comparative study between these two ethnographies paints another portraiture that would otherwise have remained completely invisible – the secret vernacular codes established between neighbours. In 2003, Block 52 is like an “exhibition experiment” and incubator of innovation, a lab “that creates new knowledge” (SSorin-Chaikov, 2013: 7). Take the inhabitants, who would bang on their radiator pipes to send “signals” to each other, effectively inventing a new code for communication and an impromptu musical performance (I. Nikolov, 2003:118). When I was a young child, before the age of mobile phones or even pagers, each family had a distinguishing whistle that was used to signify a command to return home. My family’s tune was a chopped up version of ‘Strawberry Fields’. At one point, I was able to distinguish and mimic several whistles and use them to try and locate friends in the neighbourhood. That is contrasted with the way the younger generation today, still children in 2003, who use coded written messages on the side of the third-floor lift panel wall to debate and dethrone their favourite rapper or football team. The latter would have remained sort of weightless and without context without the former – because it is only one layer among a multitude of attempts to manipulate the material culture of the panelka as a medium of communication, like a palimpsest.

And, interestingly, when confronting the older inhabitants about these “younger” days, there are important notions of neighbourly collaboration and idea-sharing that seem to have dissipated today – as one resident said, it is now “weird” to even ask a neighbour for some salt, when not even 20 years ago, the whole Entrance C would host each other for dinners and parties. This tells us that even within the last two decades the role of the panelka – first as community of young people, then as fortification against strangers, and finally an uncertain present of reconciliation – everyday life has changed. There is no overarching notion of post-socialism that categorises that life – it is the ephemerality of this period of transition that precipitates such drastic changes in behaviours and attitudes inside the home, which cause various transformations of panelki.

This immersive approach helped me assume the permanent role of inhabitant and neighbour, taking an active part in the social fabric of the block, including paying bills, participating in neighbour meetings, helping with the upkeep of the makeshift rose garden out front. I was not only there, observing from a distance, I was fully engaged as an equal to the other inhabitants in their duties within the block. As noted at the start of the chapter, this immersion allowed me to be
welcomed back into the neighbourhood, where for the first time in years people nodded as we pass each other on the street, make small talk about my life in London. But most importantly – neighbours hold the front door of Entrance C and wait until I walk in. My research made me part of the audience of the exhibition of Mladost, in all its changes and reiterations over the years. Just like Ssorin-Chaikov’s Gifts to Soviet Leaders exhibition and Kabakov’s installations about life in the kommunalka, Mladost’s panelki became the literal recreations of everyday life in post-socialism, as well as the literal and metaphorical institutionalisations of the productive failures of socialist ideology. To reference Kabakov’s synecdoche of total installations as representing daily life, and vice versa, again – in Mladost, everyone lives in an installation.

However, it took many attempts to become truly ‘immersed’ in my field and not get singled out as a ‘foreigner’ or ‘other’ in a homogenous and highly surveilled community. At first, while building connections with the inhabitants outside Block 52, where I had fewer contacts, I attempted to meet people by using a courtyard approach – singling out inner-block spaces of everyday sociality (benches in front of panelki, mini-markets, bus stops, playgrounds) to introduce myself, clarifying I am “a neighbour.” This approach proved unsuccessful, with most people unwilling to engage with a “total stranger,” let alone let him into their homes – the notion of fear of the Other has implications about how inhabitants fortified their flats in the 1990s, as well as implications about why national renovation programmes have failed to garner public support. This will be discussed at great length in Chapter Six. The moment I felt part of the community was during a two-month stay in 2016, when an old friend I knew from school saw me on the street and introduced me to his grandfather, an inhabitant of Block 45. From there, I was given carte blanche to speak with their neighbours, who now knew me as ‘Stefcho’s friend.’ It was that symbolic moment, mirroring the classic “going native” moment in anthropology (Geertz, 1973) that I finally became absolutely immersed in Mladost, as one of their own, as someone who had roots there and not just some outside researcher. I was a Mladost boy and that stays with you for life, as far as these folks are concerned.

Lastly, the context of Block 52 within the entirety of Mladost is important to the overall methodology in terms of the ordinary becoming extraordinary and in terms of the identification of the universal with the particular. Block 52 is a unique panelka – a six-floor, three-entrance building with internal balconies built in 1986, surrounded by far larger eight-floor panelki built around two decades earlier. Block 52 was built, despite the protest of the inhabitants of these buildings, on what was designed to remain a green space according to the original Mladost urban blueprint. However, in response to the pressure for better

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23 Most panelki have balconies that are individual slates of concrete that protrude from the overall external façade, i.e. they are built in addition. Block 52 has balconies built into the design.
quality housing in the 1980s, Block 52 was constructed as a building cooperative after a special deal was struck between the factory designing the concrete panels (Domostroitelny Kombinat) and the municipal authorities; this is why six flats, all of which in Entrance A, were allocated to the families of people working in that factory (DK), while most other flats were offered to people from the municipality. This was highly unusual in a system of constant housing shortages, complex loan and purchase systems, and years of waiting for a panel flat elsewhere in Mladost and Sofia. In many ways Block 52, while essentially a panelka, resembles the monolithic construction that would come to define the Bulgarian housing market after 1989. As such, the processes that occur inside that building, particularly before in the 1980s, demonstrate hidden traces of change far more familiar with the subsequent era than with the socialist period.

For example, an extensive internal remont by an inhabitant in Entrance C was initiated as Block 52 was being constructed in 1986. It hints to a larger process whereby inhabitants were attempting to enforce their vision of how everyday life ought to exist spatially before the construction was complete. Several other inhabitants of Block 52 had their kitchen balconies closed-in to expand those rooms.24 One inhabitant even remembers receiving a fine from the authorities, as changing the external look of a panelka was strictly prohibited by the socialist regime.25 These interventions were in many ways unique, particularly when compared to the panelki all around. That is why it was necessary to extend my research beyond 52, conducting semi-structured interviews with inhabitants in Block 45, in particular, and dozens more with people living in Mladost 1 as a whole (see Figure 1). What is notable about the interviews conducted in 45 is the extensive generational divide and the inferior interior design of these older panelki models. Some flats there are now home to four generations of inhabitants. Many respondents even remember the day the foundation for Block 52 was laid and offer a different vantage point for the changing meaning and space of what it means to live in a panelka, even during socialist time.

The juxtaposition between these two blocks uncovers the gaps and schisms that tend to define prefabricated mass housing construction as uniform and monotonous, because while there were only a few models (or as they are called in Bulgaria, nomenclatures) according to which panelki were built (Figure 1), the internal differences between individual flats, and between different models can be incredibly detailed, layered and varied, like a palimpsest. This places the notion of DIY remonti as a fleeting moment of artistic output – a critique and

24 Subsequently, the utilities, like the oven, fridge, washing machine, sink, etc. are placed where the balcony once was, while the former kitchen is made into a dining room.
25 It was prohibited subsequently, too, but it was never enforced. One inhabitant in Block 45 recalls trying to file the required papers that 'legalise' his closed-in balcony as added space to the flat, but giving up because the process was too 'complicated'.

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resistance by inhabitants onto the concrete panels – that is not determined by overarching political and social changes. But there is more to these two panelki that the sum total of the data gathered in them. In many ways, 45 and 52 offer an ideal research site, two seemingly identical institutions encapsulating different generations, worldviews, aesthetics, and most of all, difficulties. The truth is that life in the panelki is no easier today than it was 50 years ago and it has taken a toll on people here, both young and old. Much of this data could not be included in this research, but was incredibly moving and emotional for me. Like the above-mentioned seamstress whose husband had passed away in their flat a mere days before we spoke and she could no longer drive to their bee farm on her own, so I took her and her gratitude and resolve on the one hand and loneliness on the other are difficult to put into more words.

Furthermore it must be acknowledged here that there were other important limitations that I was faced with while collecting data in Mladost. Access, again, was the main one, particularly when in came to 45. Block 45 is one of the biggest panelki in Mladost 1, with 14 entrances. Through my friend Stefcho, I gained access to a majority of the flats in three of those entrances and a few isolated flats in other entrances. I remember that at the start I faced many tense moments with angry neighbours telling me to stop hanging around. One even threatened to “come down and break my phone” after he saw me taking a photo of his balcony – luckily, I knew him from when we used to play football as kids and so the tension was diffused by our unexpected familiarity. But there were nonetheless barriers to access, especially in the beginning and especially in Block 45 that made the data that I gathered somewhat swayed in favour of 52. Particularly when it came to the most sensitive topics like mental health, death, and privacy. Especially when it came to even mustering up the courage to ask whether I could see their toilet and photograph their bedroom. Over the four years of conducting research, I was able to somewhat balance out this bias and use my own biographical knowledge of family relations to piece together that which was left unspoken in many flats. Yet, it is fair to say that had I had more time, I would have tried to delve deeper into the social fabric of 45.

With that in mind, I would like to add one final note about the data gathered. While the focus of this research has been primarily these two blocks, I spent a significant chunk of time just talking to people and visiting other panelki in and around Mladost. Each flat is indeed its own gallery and palimpsest, and while the methodology laid out here works well as a diagnostic tool to decipher the workings of everyday life through the vantage point of material culture, there are many more layers to be peeled. Not just in Mladost or Sofia, but Bulgaria as a whole. The palimpsestuous methodology should not start and finish with these two blocks. It is imperative that future research builds upon it, adds layers of discursive and visual data and includes more personal histories. What seem like
individual *panelki* patches of colour in *Mladost* should be expanded to compare entire neighbourhoods, perhaps even cities, in order to come to terms with the ever more capillary and miniature marks, fissures, and scars etched onto the homogenous concrete by people carving out lives for themselves.

### 2.5 Concrete panels and the Gaps Between Past and Present

One of the most pressing issues regarding contemporary anthropology concerns its temporal dynamics (Rabinow, 2008). Historically, anthropological studies have remained unconcerned with changes in time, holistically tasked instead with interpreting larger notions of culture and society. I follow Paul Rabinow here in asserting that anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork in the future should not retain history as the primary focus. Rather, a non-linear “anthropology of the contemporary” (Rabinow and Marcus, 2008: 55) opens up a new arena and methodology in which the present, *today*, is historical, i.e. different from yesterday. As such, “the work uncovering the contingencies of the present and their genealogical lines” (ibid.) can be incredibly helpful methods in my own ethnographic research.

However, where Rabinow is concerned with prescribing these methods for a different anthropology of the future – uncovering the practices that make a “difference yesterday, today, *and tomorrow*” (ibid. *italics added*), and thereby doing away with key analytical models that have come to dominate classical schools of thought – the key objective here is to keep one foot firmly on the foundations of urban anthropology. Like George Marcus in his own discussions with Rabinow, I am approaching my research into the *panelki* in Sofia as a means of “bridging the past and the present” (Rabinow and Marcus, 2008: 11) in an attempt to identify and trace how, concretely, people interact with their built environment.

The metaphor of the palimpsest, as it applies to anthropology more broadly and socialist material culture more specifically, is referred to by Victor Buchli in his revisiting of the “astonishing longevity and persistence of the ‘social condenser’” (2017: 389) of the Narkomfin building in Moscow. According to him, a building like the Narkomfin, which has survived (barely, but survived[26]) various changes in ideology and relations of macropower, cannot be analysed by only

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[26] This opens up a curious discussion about the place of history and architecture in today’s Russia. A decree in Moscow (Guardian, 2017) invoked plans for the demolition of prefabricated buildings, induced with the legacy and ideology of Khrushchev, yet, it seems there is now an official move to protect the legacy of older Constructivist interventions, like the Narkomfin. There is a renovation project (Strelka, 2017) for the building, headed by Aleksy Ginsburg, the grandson of the building’s actual architect, that may see it brought out from its not so distant crumbling past.
acknowledging one of its many failed iterations. He continues, “to focus on one inevitably decaying and unstable form (its iteration as idealised plan, built form, or any of the other iterations in the past, present and future) is to miss the point” (Buchli, 2017: 389). The Narkomfin is infinitely more than the sum of its parts, potentials, and possibilities. It is more than an iteration of built form, always by definition in a process of gradual decay. That instability, argues Buchli, is what makes Narkomfin profoundly productive: “its protean, constantly evolving totality produces a position outside history and outside embodied memory with which to imagine an alternative other” (ibid.: 390).

This, as it relates to the notion of panelka and the study of everyday life in post-socialism, is crucial. For example, as discussed above, the distinction of the flat as a heterotopic space post-1990 in Fehérváry’s work offers only a temporary iteration of how the relations of power play themselves out between panelka and inhabitant as artist. What I seek here with my approach, following Buchli, is to avoid distinguishing any one single iteration as final, but instead focus on the constant temporal and spatial shifts that underscore the overarching productive power of the panelka as both synecdoche and central institution of, socialist and post-socialist everyday life in Bulgaria. That requires a certain methodological asceticism, according to Matei Candea, whereby the site of Mladost is a “contingent window of constantly changing productive power” and never a “holistic entity to be explained” (Candea, 2007: 181). So, rather than using the collected data from my fieldwork as a definitive and “total ethnography” of the city (Murawski, 2013), where Block 52 is the centre and Block 45 its precursor and doppelgänger, I am analysing the palimpsestuousness, internally and externally, of the panelka; distinguishing between its constantly changing and often unseen iterations and erasures over time; learning about the changing narratives and spatial registers; using these productive capacities, to paint a larger picture and offer a diagnosis of everyday life in post-socialism.

In terms of anthropological archaeology, this is reminiscent of a study conducted by Rivièrè (1995), who described a temporal practice of rebuilding dwellings by the Ye’cuana community in Venezuela. There, even if the dwellings were not decaying or unstable, they were nonetheless reconstructed every six years, or in connection to the passing of an older member of the community. Similarly, Borić (in Buchli, 2017: 391) notes a more vertical reconstructive practice, whereby “the Mesolithic and early Neo-lithic dwellings of Lepenskii Vir” in Serbia are rebuilt on each, creating a complex palimpsest looking up. In both cases, the motivator for the cyclical building/destruction/reconstruction process is connected to rituals about longevity and superstitions.

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27 The first Narkomfin flats went on sale in May, 2018. 46 flats were made available to buy, the cheapest of which is valued at 30 million rubles (£330,000) (Calvert Journal, 2018).
To some extent, this is true in some cases of remonti in panelki – particularly surrounding the moment of generational change symbolised by the death of an elder. Oftentimes, when the ‘kids’ take over the flat from their parents, they tend to make extensive changes to the otherwise quite pristine and unchanged interior and exterior of that flat. There is a correlation between the extent of the remonti and a notable, or welcomed, event that has occurred, or is occurring, for the inhabitants. For example, one inhabitant on the fourth floor in Block 52 conducted a “summer-long” remont, including the installation of French windows to cover up the living balcony that distinguishes the façade of the fourth floor from the rest of the building. The entire process was planned to coincide with a visit by the inhabitant’s son and his daughter-in-law\(^\text{28}\) who live in Australia. This particular flat will become the focus in Chapter Six, not only with regards to this, in many ways unique, remont, but how it reveals a very important precursor to such interventions. According to Mary Douglas’ 1991 article regarding the idea of the home and the space of domesticity, it is primarily the complexity of coordination, not the stoutness of walls that is the strongest indicator of structural change. This notion of complex coordination has value in recent years in particular, as the social fabric of panelki becomes more fluid – with younger generations replacing their parents as prime inhabitants, or with young generations choosing a life abroad and returning only occasionally.

This process of heterogeneous decay is something that is observable in Mladost, where the individual identities of panelki only become visible as unique mosaic constellations of the lived experiences within (Figures 6-9), when they are disassociated from the totality of the ‘prefab civilisation’ that this housing system embodies across the socialist bloc. That is how it is possible to approach the application of anthropology of the contemporary – a genealogical examination of history of the present – by looking at panelki and tracing how they “secure an ‘outside’ to any given narrative of history and memory” (Buchli, 2017: 392).

### 2.6 Visual Anthropology as a Temporal Map of Panelki

Anthropology’s relationship to photography and the privileged vantage point of objective “camera-like presence of an ethnographic observer” (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2013: 9) has been criticised for its implied impartiality by scholars linked to the reflexive turn of culture as text (for e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986). Consequently, in light of the importance of ethnographic conceptualism and total installations to my palimpsestuous methodology, the dichotomy of eye-mind is important to discuss. Ssorin-Chaikov cites LeWitt in corroborating this with regards to

\(^{28}\) It would be her first visit to Bulgaria and her father-in-law planned a bombastic remont to both impress her and finally realise a few “dreams” he had had for a long time – including being the first in the neighbourhood with French windows.
conceptual art: “it is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions” (1967: 84). However, the use of photography here serves the methodological function of creating a temporal map of the panelki. More specifically, following an approach by Romanian photographer, Bogdan Girbovan (2018), who took 10 photos from the same vantage point inside each room of each flat in a ten-floor building. The resulting compilation juxtaposes the artistic cells of each inhabitant and takes them out of their context, outside of time and memory, showing the infinite possibilities of carving out unique ways of life in otherwise identical flats.

In my case, the photographs of panelki kitchens show the uniqueness of each room and remont (see Chapter 6, Figures 33-35). The photographs are the visual cues that enable a sort of forensic exploration that traces even the more miniscule interventions – from the paint, to the doors and lamps, to the rugs or floors, and the choice of furniture – in each flat that make them utterly unique and reflexive of the people that inhabit them. These photographs, each only a mere fleeting moment in time of the artists and their works of art, add new layers to the ethnographic research and “a conceptualist depiction of this exhibition’s operational infrastructure” (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2013: 7). The photographs superimpose the inhabitants as both informants whose data is to be analysed and artists whose customised flats are each a concrete piece of the experimental exhibition as a whole.

As noted above, fieldwork was extended beyond Block 52, focusing particularly on Block 45, as well as the entire micro-neighbourhood of the surrounding buildings. That extension adds depth to the palimpsestuous methodological reading beyond the singular and suggests more broad implications for the ways in which Mladost, as the ultimate exhibition, has been transformed multiple times over. Perhaps the clearest way of reiterating this process of change and resistance to the structural sameness of the rigid panelki architecture is how individual inhabitants dealt with a major obstacle – the original electrical wiring and sockets. Because the panels are made of reinforced concrete, they are difficult to drill into and therefore difficult to put wires through them. As such, when the Mladost panelki were erected and the electrical wires subsequently installed, each flat was fitted with special black sockets that stuck out of the wall.29

Tracing the lives of these sockets, the problems they caused and the ingenious solutions inhabitants created to try and hide them, reveals different tactics inside individual flats, but the same overall strategy – manipulate the space in order to change it. From forcefully drilling holes into walls to add new, flat, sockets to some nostalgic decisions to protect these “sturdy” contraptions, each flat in

29 The wires tended to be hidden under the parquet, linoleum or carpet.
Blocks 45 and 52, is faced with the same design problem. Put differently, it is by tracing similarly small marks, their current absence compared with an abundance of past presences, that the notion of the palimpsest gives a clear expression to the ways individuals performatively resisted against the assumed banality of panelki and carved out distinct domestic spaces as works of art and DIY design.

2.7 Galileo and the Power of Persuasion

In this chapter, I have discussed some of the difficulties relating to my role as researcher in the neighbourhood I grew up in, of building on some research carried out by my father, and of reconciling some of the complex boundaries of insider/outside that I faced over the last few years. It is important to also critically engage with some of the obstacles created by official institutions in Sofia, municipal institutions in Mladost, as well as public archives and libraries. Let me begin with a story involving Galileo, the former director of photographic archives at the Archives State Agency in Sofia. After many months looking for archival photographs of the construction of Mladost, how the first panelki were built and what they looked like, I was repeatedly told that those archives were either unavailable, lost, or were held by other agencies – the Bulgarian News Agency archives, for e.g. One day, after sharing my troubles with a fellow panelki enthusiast, I was introduced to Galileo, a man with a vivid personality in his late 60s, who, in 2016, was about to be “forced into retirement,” as he would say. Galileo said he knew where “all the negatives” that the engineers took during the building of Mladost were and that he would “smuggle me in” the storage unit in Ilienci (a distant Sofia neighbourhood) one day if I was ready to drive him there and bring along a “litre of vodka.”

When the day came, Galileo guided me through the various levels of security and I was able to take a sneak peek at thousands of photos that showed the rich green fields that would later populate over 100,000 people. Those negatives were crucial because the backed up what the architects and engineers would tell me about the building process – there were no roads, no infrastructure, no electricity. The panelki were built in the middle of nowhere first and then, gradually, all the other urban perks were channelled through – transportation, hot water, phone lines, schools, leisure centres, etc.. It was important evidence in a field of research where very little official data is accessible. If it hadn’t been for Galileo, I would never have been able to add that crucial bit into the genealogical puzzle of panelki. It required barter and risk and after our journey back, which Galileo spent drinking the prized vodka, I never saw him again. Subsequently, despite my repeated attempts at accessing those precious visuals via the official channels, I was never granted access.

The same goes for my repeated attempts to see floor plans of Blocks 45 and Block 52 – I had heard rumours that Block 52 was one of the very few of its kind in Mladost 1 because it contained flats with four bedrooms – this will be discussed at length. However, in order to be sure, I wanted to see the original
architectural plans. After being tossed around between the Mladost municipality to the Architecture and Urban Development Service and back, I was told that those blueprints were confidential and required special privileges and a legal notice to be accessed – the reason being is that they offered confidential information about individual private property. Eventually, however, I found out, by coincidence, that all the prefabricated residential buildings are accessible online, as part of the stalled national panelki renovation program, by region and typology and I was able to pull the exact blueprints for all the panelki in Mladost. I was then able to verify that Block 52, for example, was indeed unique in the sense of being the only three-entrance six-floor building that included four-bedroom flats.

Lastly, my search for secondary literature, historical data and archives about the architects responsible for the spread of panelki in Bulgaria, followed the same route. The most interesting example is my quest for more information about Bogdan Tomalevski, Mladost’s chief architect, one of the main subjects of the following chapters, and one of the most decorated and famous socialist architects in Bulgaria. Almost everything about his time planning Mladost has been erased or removed. All that remains are his original contest-winning blueprint and a few snippets and interviews. All I could gather from various institutions, including the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy archive, the Union of Architects in Bulgaria, the national and state archives, were scraps of old articles, one biography, and a few obituaries. It was as if Tomalevski had never had anything to do with panelki. As if his architectural oeuvre had primarily showcased public buildings and monuments. This silencing is common amongst many aspects of the recent past in Bulgaria with so much lost, buried, or inaccessible due to a Kafkaesque system of bureaucracy and an unofficial policy of neglect. Being Bulgarian was an immense advantage, but it was almost entirely counteracted by my inexperience in working the system. What would take my academic colleagues a few hours to find in the national library, took me days because of the antiquated system of requesting and receiving documents. Due to my limited time in Bulgaria and the time I could dedicate to archival research as opposed to fieldwork, this proved perhaps the most complex research aspect in the preparation for this dissertation. It meant that while I was able to carry on with other parts of the project, I had to go back and revisit these same sites in order to double- and triple-check the archives and make sure that all my data was triangulated and historically contextualised. It also meant having to make vital changes to the design of the research in critically late stages. Just to give an indication of the time crunch, I only discovered the online sources for all the floor plans in 2018, mere months before the final dissertation was submitted.

Perhaps this research can provide the groundwork for further interest in the area among native Bulgarian academics, as well as scholars abroad. It was a necessary deep dive into that which is seemingly everywhere, but whose history is practically nowhere to be found. The obstacles in gathering the data proved incredibly beneficial in the end because it spurred me on to continue investigating, asking questions, and making connections. The unintended consequences were that – just like the bottle of vodka I gave Galileo – the rate of return, after all, was far greater than the risk and time invested at the start.
2.8 Conclusion: Mladost, Rejuvenation and the Cracks in the Concrete

Philosophers, historians, and anthropologists have all grappled with the concept of contemporaneity and how to approach research that seeks to provide a protracted history or diagnosis of the present. Contemplating his own oeuvre towards the end of his life, Foucault sought, in a series of lectures, interviews, and essays, to define the cosmology (the three axes of truth, power, ethics) that all his earlier work revolved around. In his essay, ‘The Subject and Power’, Foucault acknowledges that the “goal of my work during the last twenty years... has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects” (1982: 777). And the central task in creating that history is a critical analysis of our contemporaneity and us. Foucault writes, “[m]aybe the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time and of what we are in this very moment” (1982: 785).

This notion of temporality and the necessarily self-reflexive critique required by anthropologists conducting methodological research that seeks to answer questions relating to the present has been the purpose of this chapter. More precisely, it has been attempted to extend the question of temporality to the field of urban life, which is complex, protean, and ephemeral. The juxtaposition of ethnographic, artistic, discursive, and archival tools that were used during my extensive fieldwork were designed to help triangulate and map the infinitesimal ways in which everyday life materialises itself inside panelki. By tracing these routes in two distinct buildings, Blocks 45 and 52, showing how they lead to the same process – people carve out lives for themselves by resisting their rigid walls and manipulating their domestic space as an extreme form of self-expression – it has been possible to piece together a larger conceptual ethnographic portrait of Mladost as that overarching exhibition within which these processes were played out and displayed.

I would like to further argue that this introduction of methodological palimpsestuousness could be tested in other contexts, outside Bulgaria, because the legacy of panelki remains so prevalent in so many post-socialist states. It would constitute a particularly productive follow-up research question to this thesis – does this experimental methodology withstand the larger spatial and temporal tests and can it be used to read and understand everyday life in panelki in multiple cross-cultural contexts? My intention is not to totalise or universalise this research methodology and its relationship to the complexity of post-socialist life and the role prefabricated concrete has there. Instead, what I want to propose is a more open-ended and productive approach towards the ubiquitous institution of prefabricated housing in the former socialist bloc and how it is continues to undergo constant, if invisible, transformations according to its changing relationship with the people who live inside. Can we still talk about a
prefab civilisation overall, when the lessons from Bulgaria show an incredible
diversity underneath the homogeneity blanketing cityscapes? If Mladost is now
home to second-generation citizens, to people born a decade or so after the fall of
socialism, how do we discern the impact a powerful institution from a seemingly
dead past has on the still-to-be-shaped future? These are the broader questions
that will be approached in subsequent chapters. Their answers can only be
framed and analysed using the diagnostic tools outlined in this methodological
section.
Figure 1: A map of Mladost typologies. The circle shows where Block 52 is located – right in the heart of the body.
Figure 2: Rear view of flats in Entrances B and C, Block 52

Figure 3: Closed-in living room balconies in Entrance C, Block 52

Figure 4: Block 45, as seen from my flat in Block 52
Figure 5: The colourful Entrance 1, Block 45, two decades apart

Figures 6–9: A collage of first-floor façades that showcase the extent of transformations that some balconies undergo.
Chapter Three: The ‘Disappearance of the Village’ and the Birth of the Concrete City (1945-1962)

3.1 Introduction

“Look here now... do I call you Mister, or is it Comrade? The [Communist] Party owns everything! There is no wife, no husband, no children... She [the Party] built my house... and raised me on to the bed – before September 9, 1944, I used to sleep on the floor.”

The panelka, as the predominant form of mass housing across the socialist bloc, and possibly socialism’s most lasting legacy, serves as a vantage point into ways daily lives were transformed by the socialist regimes. But, more importantly, the panelka also embodies the myriad ways individuals adapted, sculpted, and manipulated their surrounding concrete ecumene. Moreover, and this is a point where many works on Soviet material culture fall short, it is argued here that by focusing on this institution, by paying attention to that which is thought to be mundane, unoriginal, banal, that one can trace some of the most curious changes in daily life leftover, or under, the overarching transitional changes after 1989. Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, this research is relevant to our understanding of the post-socialism as a palimpsest that mirrors the explosion of colour on the panelki façades once marked by homogeneity and uniformity. Each balcony has a story with layers of personal histories that are unstable and prone to change. To be able to diagnose the whole, you need to be able to interpret and to read the markings of these individual parts. This chapter aims to set the scene for these processes by showing how the institutionalisation of panelki in Bulgaria is more than just a concrete box (enchanted island in Fehérváry’s terminology) within which inhabitants could express themselves; the panelka is a blank slate in terms of erasing the history and domestic traditions of the Bulgarian home, and introducing new roles and functionalities that were said to correspond to ‘modern life’ in the concrete city. The quote at the start of the chapter is the most drastic embodiment of this process – panelki were the (prefab) civilisational forces coming to the rescue of uncultured rural Bulgarians.

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30 From a conversation with a villager from Mustarak in Bulgaria recorded by Ivan Nikolov (I. Nikolov, 1999: 120). The research was part of a rare anthropological investigation of the vestiges of pre-socialist life and tradition was conducted by the Bulgarian Ethnographic Institute in Sofia. The aim was to examine what was left of the traditional customs and rituals, specifically revolving around the notion of the home following the coming of socialism.
This civilisational discourse is based on a dichotomy of the city and the village. Concrete was the modernising factor, the social condenser in the city. In the countryside, it was technology – machinery, electricity, and infrastructure. All things Deema Kaneff (2004) records as reasons why villagers looked back to the socialist regime with nostalgia. It also reflects the quote at the start of this chapter – the socialist regime was giving, i.e. gifting, homes to all in need. Panelki in the city, houses and villas in the village. Of course, these so-called civilisational forces came at a price. The waves of industrialisation and collectivisation transformed Bulgaria from a rural to an urban country, uprooting an entire generation of people coming into adulthood. Interestingly, panelki were not as successful as intended, in terms of realising the socialist social condensation normatives. Instead, their peculiar and brittle material form opened up new meanings and ways of being, creating ways of being vnye, as argued by Yurchak. It was the emptiness, both literally and normatively, of the panelki flat that allowed inhabitants the space to create new traditions and carve out spaces independent from the all-consuming socialist regime. In order to examine the latter in detail, it is important to discuss the former. In a word, constructing socialism in Bulgaria resulted in the ‘disappearance of the village’ in the literal sense of the word, but also as cultural origin and way of life. This stands in stark contrast to the research conducted by Deema Kaneff throughout the years, focusing on a Bulgarian ‘model’ village of Talpa and the peasant roots that make up much of the power structures of the Communist Party, all the way up to Todor Zhivkov 31.

Kaneff purports that modern Bulgarian culture is socialist “because it was defined in opposition to an oppressor – be it the Ottoman empire or fascism” (2004: 159). She follows Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria’s communist leader and one of the longest-lasting dictators of the 20th century, in distinguishing two other sources of ‘socialist culture’ that complement the notion of socialist struggle against oppression – “folklore and Political songs/poetry” (ibid.) Kaneff goes as far as to argue that these processes of ‘enlightenment’ and cultural education that were guided by the Communist Party helped reconcile vernacular identities in rural areas and consolidate a one-dimensional ‘Bulgarian’ culture. When discussing the disappearance of the village, I hold a very different view, one that does not follow the official Party line and does not consider the primary role of

31 Zhivkov was the longest-lasting communist leader, taking control in 1954 up until 1989. According to Kaneff, he had resided in Talpa, participated in local theatre productions and was involved in organising ‘anti-fascist’ resistance before WWII. I contend that this is an inversion of history – to suggest that socialism was in some way a natural response to an already existing dictatorship, a homegrown socialist opposition to some form of fascist oppression. This is untrue and, as has been argued in Chapter One, is one of the main sources of legitimisation used by the socialist regime in its struggle to retain power after 1944. Labelling ‘fascism’ as the enemy resulted in the persecution of tens of thousands of people and helped a regime, established under the guidance of the Soviet Union, assume power that would later be described as a domestic, homegrown movement.
the socialist regime as a civilising force. Effectively, drawing a strong contrast with Kaneff's gaze into Bulgarian history, I argue that it is not historically sound, or politically neutral, to deem the regime prior to socialism as 'fascism'.

Furthermore, Kaneff's ethnographic work, rather bold claims about the 'new' Bulgarian village, and the consolidation of identity stand in stark contrast from much of the native ethnography carried out in the 1990s by scholars, most notably the Ethnographic Institute in Sofia. There is compelling evidence showing how the socialist regime severed kinship ties, forced religion and pagan rituals into hiding, and established entirely new hierarchies in every single village. To talk about a consolidated identity through socialism is to erase that cultural heritage – Kaneff specifically notes the destructive role of the Ottoman period, but what about the period following Bulgaria's liberation? Why was the village left out of the nation-building projects that would follow, protractedly, until WWII? That also counts for the alleged strength of the 'anti-fascist' partisan movement in the village, which I am not convinced was as representative of village culture and identification, as argued by Kaneff. There were marginal groups, rather than entire populations, that joined in illegal activities. For the socialist culture to have such resilience in the village, it would require a majority of those people to engage in some sort of 'anti-fascist' resistance. This, in light of official statistics about such rebellion in those years, was not the case. I argue that the real period of consolidation, of normalisation, begins in the 1960s and the panelki is the central institution that is entrusted to carry it out on a national scale.

As mentioned above, the last camp closed in 1962, when the first residential block in Sofia was being constructed. In more ways than one, Bulgaria domesticated socialism to a greater extent than other European countries – its leadership remained the most obedient to the Soviet Union out of all the satellites, its people the most docile – with no protest movements or significant opposition even when the regime collapsed. Bulgaria today is still undergoing a complicated process of political reconciliation and debate about how to deal with the destructive impact of one of the most brutal totalitarian regimes in Europe. After all, Bulgaria, unlike any other socialist regime in eastern and Central Europe, did not transition towards democracy due to popular demand or unrest, but followed the path of a palace coup scenario under intense external pressure for change. Bulgaria is the prime example, outside the Soviet Union, of a society in which socialism was domesticated and normalised, where the new social contract, as most clearly inaugurated by the juridical right of personal property, between citizen and state seems to have had the deepest and longest lasting impact. To demonstrate that, I would like to begin with the way the socialist regime cut ties with the traditional Bulgarian house – a cornerstone of Bulgarian culture and identity (see Parusheva and Marcheva, 2010).
3.2 Zhivelishte and the Traditional Bulgarian House

The fact that Bulgaria’s industrialisation was lagging behind meant that the early years of Soviet-style modernisation had a profound impact on its social fabric. What was almost entirely an agrarian society was transformed in decades to become almost entirely reliant upon cities, especially the capital city of Sofia. In Bulgaria, the panelka played an incredibly important role, especially compared to other Eastern and Central European countries, because it was ushered in to solve the problematic housing question caused by the collectivisation and forced industrialisation of the land. The draining of the Bulgarian village, which no longer required large numbers of working hands on the field following collectivisation, meant that the youngest and most active members of the traditional family home were encouraged to migrate to urban areas to start their own families. Few would retain the ties, customs, and kinship upon moving to the city, instead opting for or being pressured to conform to new, more modern, ways of city life. My grandparents on my mother’s side are interesting examples of this – both come from small villages and big families. Both would tell us stories about their livestock and closeness to nature. Both would eventually move to bigger cities – first Plovdiv, then Sofia – and pursue academic careers. In Sofia, they settled down in a large flat near the centre, while their only link to their old way of life was a small villa in the outskirts, where my grandmother would grow a small number of fruits and vegetables. Their siblings, too, would find their way to Sofia, eventually bringing their mothers as well, to be taken care of in their final days.

And so, at first glance, it seems true in Bulgaria, more than anywhere else in Europe, that there was indeed a positive relationship between ideology, power, and architecture, which transformed the ‘backward’ and agrarian social fabric into the desired, proletarian modern socialist society. As purported by some historians of the recent Bulgarian past, perhaps most notably by Ivaylo Znepolski, the panelka, as a prime social condenser, had a profound impact on individuals, erasing memories and altering manners, practices, and behaviours to varying degrees (Znepolski, 2008: 91-100). I would like to discuss the notion of this totalising aesthetic and force as reflected in the “astonishing and perhaps admirable uniformity in material life” (Humphrey, 1998: 17) of the prefabricated concrete housing across the socialist bloc. This is akin to the processes of ‘deculturation’ and ‘reculturation’ discussed in Chapter One, to which Bourdieu pays so much attention. That ‘hidden pedagogy’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 94) constructed through the concrete ecumene was, in essence, designed to instil a new cosmology onto human subjects transitioning from a house to a panelka flat. It is possible to argue that a particular culture and way of life was omitted in
favour of the modern *byt* in the flats in the city. The quote used at the start of this section suggests a certain sense of amnesia about social customs and etiquette inscribed by a new and all-encompassing force, reflecting a common tale of the extent of the penetration of socialism into the Bulgarian social fabric. The Party, the villager in Mustarar notes, “built my house ... *before September 9, 1944, I slept on the floor.”

This, in more ways than one, returns the current argument to the vestiges of Soviet Constructivism. Then, through the powerful role played by architects within the state, architecture, as a disciplining apparatus and social condenser, became the most important tool in the ‘reconstruction of the way of life’ (*perestroika byta*). *Byt*, as was the case in the Soviet Union, became politically and ideologically significant because it led the way towards the realisation of utopian life. In Bulgaria, as well as in the Soviet Union, *perestroika byta* meant a complete overhaul of a backward and predominantly agrarian social fabric – the *konstruktsia* of a new proletariat. But *byt* translates as much more than the English word for ‘a way of life’. *Byt* meant the reinstitutionalisation of both the vertical state-citizen relations and the horizontal relations among people. It is the building of a profoundly new community, disconnected from past practices and customs; a ‘collective consciousness’ grounded in material culture. In Bulgaria, that process began after the gradual disappearance of the village, as identity and custom, and its replacement by a new social contract within the socialist regime, realised by and within the *panelka*. The development of the socialist regime was inherently driven by a substantial push towards the ‘proletarisation’ of the nation. As one famous party slogan from the late 1940s states: ‘we build the factory, and the factory builds us’. This reflects the development of a significant dialectical relationship between the instituted path towards modernisation through the construction of ‘a socialist way of life’, fuelled by the ideological postulates of the Soviet model, and the underlying renegotiation of the traditional Bulgarian society.

Up until the first half of the twentieth century, the home remains the core of both family and community custom and tradition. The land was still under private ownership, and so, the main forms of livelihood, crafts, and skills followed a strict division of age and gender, and the younger generations do not face a migration alternative. It is within the household that the centralised and patriarchal relations and customs were upheld, as well as the tight-knit and intimate family relations and community-based life, which dominated quotidian life in Bulgaria pre-1944. The traditional housing customs, which are classified as Thracian by Hristo Vakarelski, remain most preserved and widespread in

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32 Months after the official date of the transition of powers to the Communist Party on September 9, 1944, no more than 28% of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) members are classified as ‘proletariats’ (Znepolski, 2008: 62)
southeastern Bulgaria. According to Vakarelski, one of the forefathers of the anthropological tradition in Bulgaria, this form of Thracian housing retained several important characteristics:

Single-floored, long horizontal axis of the outside architecture, two to three types of planning composition with predominantly open-space and transitional internal space, the centrality of the fire-place, etc.” (Vakarelski in I. Nikolov, 1999: 118)

After 1944, the domestic space, becomes a hiding place for all that is forbidden under socialism – especially religious artefacts. It transforms into a kind of private monastery, where a majority of the Orthodox rituals and preceding pagan rituals and superstitions were upheld:

When we were baptising the child, we called the priest inside... Before that, we sanctified the house without much noise... It was like that during all the Christian holidays, we followed all the rituals (adeti). And to the Party Secretary and the Mayor, we gave out eggs and kozunak33, for good health – and they look and then take... we are all humans after all.” (I. Nikolov, 1999: 117)

This is taken from an interview with a respondent in Branica, a village in the southeastern Bulgaria. From what I have gathered from the collected anthropological fieldwork by the Ethnographic Institute34 in southeastern (the region of Sakar) and central (in Loveshko) Bulgaria, the traditional house is much more than an architectural frame of the nuclear family – it is a cosmology, ethic, and space of politics. In it, the family reflects the larger cultural heritage at hand, as well as the particular communal relationships developing with time. It is within the house that tradition – in terms of language, norms, customs, and behaviour – is perpetuated through the most mundane physical injunctions.

According to custom, preparations for the construction of a new house begin with the selection of its location. The location is key to the successful start and completion of the construction process, as well as directly link to the long-term health and general wellbeing of the inhabitants. This selection is key and takes time. There are various taboos and restrictions to be acknowledged, which are both very reflexive of the rigidity and longevity of the cultural impact of the village traditions in Bulgaria. With a location already in place, it is customary that the father splits or shares some of his land around the house with his first-born son. This form of ‘neighbourhood-by-blood’ has a “long lasting effect on the

33 A large, bread-like pastry with raisins.
34 My father, Ivan Nikolov, was an associate professor in Ethnography at the Institute until 2003.
urban and structural development and on the deep-seated notions of affiliations based on territory and kinship” (I. Nikolov, 1999: 121). The role and identity of ‘the neighbour’, therefore, is also very important in the social hierarchy of the Bulgarian village. Neighbours have a role to play in the construction of the new house – gathering of materials, preparation of the slot intended, construction and plumbing work inside. The principle is very important and highly distributed – saying “no” means social isolation in areas, in which co-dependency is key for prosperity. Friendly relations, trust, and honour are valued extremely highly and reflect some central customs: “the windows should always face charshiata [the main street], not komshiata [the neighbour]” (ibid.), or the rainwater, which is being drained from the roof, should not fall into the neighbour’s property. Moreover, establishing healthy relations within the neighbourhood are key to the longevity of a given household and the community at large.

This well-established relationship is among the first to break down within the socialist city. Community is replaced by anonymity, kinship replaced by party affiliation and ‘networking’. As one respondent from the village of Sladun, recollecting the financing of a panel apartment ‘for the young in city’, put it,

I came to the city [Sofia] to be with my son and my daughter-in-law. A block in Mladost – as they call it. I asked, “Are there no old people here, that they should name it Mladost?” And then the building – the whole village can fit inside – with space to spare! They live on the twelfth floor. In the clouds, more or less.. But there is a bathroom in the building... So what if there is, when you can’t even ask your neighbour for a pinch of salt? “We are new,” they say, “we don’t know our neighbours.” And if this is a zhivelishte35, then I’ll be damned! (I. Nikolov, 2002: 131)

Zhivelishte refers to the community and physical space that is reflexive of and through the traditional house. It is constitutive of communal relations and culture, which places the reference to salt in context. The village is community and kinship – it is a shared history and language. The concrete, on the other hand, is a fresh start, a look to the future, a forced adaptation. Accordingly, following his logic, the panel apartment is everything that the hearth isn’t – it’s new, modernising, but also isolating and lonely. So, the panel is juxtaposed as a kind of non-home, nedom, where a certain tradition, a way of speaking, is discontinued and where a new kind of human subjectivity is to be disciplined. After the fall of the regime, a process resembling a return to the village of sorts begins. There, the regime had infiltrated and transformed society the least and the notion of zhivelishte was most preserved. In the words of some respondents

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35 Zhivelishte can mean both byt and hearth, but it also has a deeper religious meaning. In the Bible’s Philippians 3:20, zhivelishte is used as translation for ‘citizenship’ in “our citizenship is in heaven.” Therefore it has both a spatial and spiritual connotation.
from the village of Dripchevo (Sakar), recalling an early failed attempt to build a panelka in their village – “a lovely house, you say? The workers were so quick to get it done that they forgot to build the staircases!” (I. Nikolov, 1999: 129).

This bifurcation of identity, this generational and spatial fissure, is quite powerful among the population that retained their way of life outside the city under socialism. From the fieldwork studies recorded in the Sakar region, it is notable that even among the older inhabitants – memory, ideology, and myth form a strange and intertwined discourse about the place the totalitarian regime holds in their lives. This constitutes a deep identity crisis, which generates a long-lasting and deeply rooted discursive negation of the village as cultural origin. More than that, even until today, selyanin is a derogatory term for someone lacking manners, someone who is uncultured (or ‘decultured’ in Goffman’s terms) and uneducated. That discursive transformation of selyanin reveals the deep power struggle between tradition (as past) and socialism (as present), between the rural and the urban, between backwardness and modernity. The same process of discursive transformation occurs with zhivelishte, which becomes uprooted within the new urban context. The bare, cold panelka, as experienced by those with a sense of zhivelishte is therefore seen as isolating, alienating, and disciplinary. It is ahistorical and strictly impersonal. The language surrounding the traditional home is silenced under socialism alongside the physical disappearance of the village as cultural heritage and community. The panelka, as will be analysed in the subsequent chapters, has the physical capacity to accommodate these uprooted communities, to enclose as many in its walls as humanly possible, but it remains incapable of fully enforcing its cosmology and concrete ecumene. That crucial detail leaves spaces for individuals to experiment with ways of filling the blank prefab canvases and covering the gaping holes – both in literal and literally terms – left open in the newly built panelki.

3.3 The Move to the Socialist City

The start of the process to ‘disappear the village’ dates back to 1946, when two crucial policies were enforced: The Law for the Sanitation of Villages and the Law for the Education and Betterment of Village Life. These laws set the tone for the systematic displacement off the land and the forced reorganisation of the Labour Cooperate Agricultural Economy (TKZS) initiative, which, by 1950, had already appropriated somewhere between 50-70 percent of all land-related labour (Vachkov, D., et. al., 2011: 151). The most effective psychological weapon used on villagers, the “opening sealed doors and secret passages” (ibid.), was the link made between their joining of the agro-communities and the future of their children, who could be disallowed from continuing their studies. By the end of
the 1950s, nearly half of Bulgaria's rural community became members of some form of agro-coop. According to two American sociologists, Irwin Sanders and Roger Whitaker, studying the Bulgarian village between the 1930s and 1980s, there is a process of disappearance of the traditional villager and their metamorphosis into a 'co-operator' and 'state wageworker' over his own land (1982: 62-70).

What is often understated is the resulting existential crisis caused by this uprooting and change in identity. According to Zneposki, “the ‘new’ society, by definition, is neither rural, nor fully urbanised (Znepolski, 1980: 153). The Bulgarian individual is caught up within the complexities of being ‘a selyanin in the city’ and a ‘grazhdanin of a village’. It is no wonder then that, specifically in Sofia, some of the first panelka inhabitants who migrated to the cities in the 1960s retained aspects of their ‘old’ lifestyles – like the extreme examples of growing tomatoes on the balcony, or keeping farm animals in the bathroom. The traditional home, as zhivelište and byt, was replaced by grey and empty concrete walls. As such, the city became a kind of transitory space – neither a city, nor a village; neither selyani, nor grazhdani. The transformations in tradition and daily life routine were often the main plot device in the era’s most popular films.

Early socialist-era film classics such as “Posledno Lyato” (The Last Summer), or “Dyrvo bez Koren” (A Rootless Tree), both directed by Hristo Hristov, dramatise the deep feeling of nostalgia for the lost paradise of the village felt by a large segment of the migrant population. In “Dyrvo bez Koren,” the main character is a selyanin, cut off from his rural environment and shown to be incapable of adapting to the materialities of modern city life. Other films, such as “Selianin s Kolelo” (Peasant with a Bicycle) pursue the process of adaptation a step further – the main character is shown breeding pigs outside of his newly built panelka. These films illustrate the panelka flat as the prime space of the difficulty of adapting to the new way of life by a large and amorphous mass, uprooted from a place of tradition and familiarity.

It is interesting here to note something rather odd I've noticed in several panelki flats in Mladost. A few people with strong ties to the village – some of whom even having grown up in a traditional house setting outside Sofia – make extensive and innovative use of wood inside their flats (Figures 2-4). Beyond the procurement of particular kinds of wood to create furniture or traditional floorboards, wooden panels are used to cover walls. The wood has several functions here – most importantly, it covers the crooked concrete walls and allows for the nailing of paintings, calendars, clocks, and other artefacts; then, the extra wooden layer serves as heat, but more importantly noise, insulation. Panelki flats are tragically thin in terms of acoustics and you can hear even the
slightest sounds from the flats above and below – I have struggled with early morning flute sessions by my upstairs neighbour for years now. But to get back to the wooden panels – once I noticed the recurring aesthetic, I asked the inhabitants about it and the connection to the village popped up immediately. These people wanted to be reminded of living in a house, of having trees from their hometown or village in the panelka, of retaining tradition. Curiously, nearly three decades since the end of socialism, the paradoxical selyanin in a city identity retains relevance, and those flats exists as small islands reminiscent of the zhivelishte of the past.

3.4 Before the Concrete

It is important to quantify the actual size of the influx of people into the large urban centres of the country. In Sofia, the population rose from more than 360,000 people in 1946 to a little under one million in 1975. The rise in numbers is similar in the second biggest city of Plovdiv: from over 125,000 in 1946 to almost 230,000 in 1965 and almost 300,000 in 1975; similar trends are recorded in other large urban centres (see Figure 1). Consequently, according to official Party statistics, by the end of 1985, there are 3.16 million homes/housing arrangements, of which around 75 percent (or more than 2.3 million) were constructed after 9 September 1944. Around a million of these, half of which panelki, were constructed after 1970. (Trichkov, et. al., 1988: 3). Before experimenting with concrete, however, the Party prioritised low-rising microrayoni comprised of monolithic dwellings made with brick. The neighbourhood in Central Sofia called Lenin36 (Figure 5) is representative of this period, where all residential buildings are three to four floors high and contain two- and three-bedroom apartments (Arhitektura, 1956: 205). These neighbourhoods are generally very highly regarded today and are among the most expensive real estate in Sofia. Another conclusion drawn from the “Lenin” experience is that the flats were too large and that the minimal normative living space ought to be reduced and universalised at “nine square meters per person”37 (ibid.: 210). It is in 1956 that this individual space appears in official party documents as the new normative ideal for the first time. Despite that, the rhetoric regarding the social construction of the ‘new socialist life/individual' still features strongly in the official architectural journal in 1957, where architect Stefan Minev warns against “always favouring utilitarianism – always drastically

36 Renamed to Yavorov after a famed Bulgarian writer following the collapse of the regime. This is where I spent my first years, living with my grandparents who have a spacious flat there. My grandfather was a respected neurologist and that flat, just like the one we have in Mladost, was obtained with vruzki, i.e. connections.

37 Bulgarian architecture journals from the 1950s all suggest the number of nine square meters as a normative benchmark derives from the architectural tradition in the Soviet Union. It is also said to be the minimal space needed for each human being to fulfil their basic needs.
reducing the needed measurements and functional requirements and removing given aesthetic prerequisites” (Minev, 1957: 23). The residential building ought to still be liveable, ought to still create a sense of belonging and a sense of joy for each resident. In a word, the individual subject and their private space are still prioritised. This is quite literally the opposite of the prefabricated panel construction, which enters the Bulgarian cityscape as a ‘box cart’ or a ‘set of drawers’ (Atanasov, et. al., 1968) or ‘vertical sleeping-bags’ (Znepolski, 2008: 210). Accordingly, with the introduction of concrete panels in Bulgaria comes the architectural discontinuation of the rhetoric relating to the social construction of the ‘new socialist way of life’. Instead, that ideal is substituted by a technical language of the engineer, focusing on a practical, rational, and cheap way of solving the growing housing crisis. The architect, as planner and ideologue, is replaced by technicians and engineers in these early years of socialist construction in Bulgaria.

The Lenin neighbourhood, a high point of socialist housing construction and city planning, remains one of the most prestigious socialist-built neighbourhoods. There, even today, you find elderly inhabitants, who had important connections within the Party – one block of flats may comprise of doctors, another of artists, a third of Politburo family members, etc. The luxury and centrality of Lenin was a reflection of the promise for the socialist future. Of course, the first ones offered a chance to inhabit this future were the members of the socialist elite. As is still the case, having a flat is a gift, a right, and a reflection of one’s social status. The different between Lenin and Mladost is the difference between konstruktsiia and stroitel’stvo. However, as will be discussed in the following chapter, Mladost was designed to resemble the complexity of Lenin. Its architect, Bogdan Tomalevski, proposed diversity over homogenisation, a combination of building methods, rather than concrete domination, but his vision and dream were cut short by utilitarian requirements for, in a word, huge numbers of flats, built fast. It is this falling short of the ideal in Mladost, but with panelki everywhere, that affects the relationship between the structure and the inhabitant. This is where the notion of nedom comes in – a coldness and greyness increasingly criticised by architects in Bulgaria themselves. In fact, Mladost’s architect resigned from the construction project, saying his project was ‘unrecognisable’ from what was built. Mladost would be Tomalevski final involvement in residential architecture under socialism.

3.5 The Panelka Flat as the Ultimate Compromise

The idea and technology for prefabrication were neither new, nor exceptionally Soviet – prefabrication and the obsession with concrete were key components in the visualisations of future cities by the International Congress of Modern
Architecture (CIAM). The big dreams of the architects in that collective, including Le Corbusier, were outlined in *The Athens Charter* – a how-to guide to building concrete utopias. The Bijlmermeer neighbourhood in Amsterdam is an early alternative to the Soviet-style *panelki*. The so-called ‘Bijlmer’ is a constellation of hexagonal concrete towers, built in the shape of a huge honeycomb and designed for the needs of a growing Dutch middle class. During its construction in the late 1960s, the neighbourhood was advertised as a concrete paradise, a discourse familiar to the way Constructivists depicted their futuristic projects in the 1920s. However, just like *panelki*, the reality cataclysmically failed to match the dream and the Bijlmer was criticised for its uniformity, the difficulty in its upkeep, its lack of community (Dekker, 2016). There are even more direct comparisons to *panelki* as remedies for housing shortages. In Sweden, the *Miljonprogrammet* (Million Programme) – an affordable mass housing program between 1965-74 – succeeded in creating a million new homes. According to Thomas Hall and Sonja Vidén, writing about the legacy of the Million Programme, a housing surplus was achieved barely halfway through the construction process (2005: 1). Despite the fast pace, “criticism began to be heard about what some people perceived as uniform and poor architecture and, since then, the Million Homes Programme has never ceased to engage people and provoke debate” (ibid.)

After 1945, the destruction of the war, economic stagnation, and the disruption of construction saw multiple European countries urgently trying to resolve the short supply of affordable housing. The most drastic approach was undertaken in Soviet Union under Khrushchev. According to Adrian Forty, “the *Plattenbauten* apartment blocks made of reinforced concrete panels became symbols of the Soviet Union and of its dominance throughout Easter Europe” (Forty, 2012: 15). The decision to “make concrete panels the exclusive mode of construction” (ibid.) came as early as 1954 – an overarching rebuke of Socialist Realist neoclassicism and a new celebration of the relationship between technology and architects, which, as such, was another sign of approval for the methods of Constructivism and a reinvigoration of the Leninist vision for the construction of Communism. Cement was symbolic for Lenin, resembling the formation of a ‘indissoluble unity’ between otherwise isolated and alienated human subjects. In the 1925 novel *Cement*, the lead character describes the constitution of the bond like this: “We produce cement... Cement is us, comrades – the working class” (Gladkov, 1925: 103).

Khrushchev ended the period of Stalinism and ushered a new era of a ‘Thaw’ with a famous speech in 1956 marking the end of the personality cult. However, two years earlier, in what was his first public criticism of the recently deceased (March, 1953) Joseph Stalin, Khrushchev focused on the material of concrete and its role in architecture. It was a firm new vision for the future, one looking forward to the Concrete City, but seeking its legitimacy in history, during the
years of Lenin and Constructivism. The renouncement of Socialist Realism had a strictly physical impact on the materiality of concrete. The required ornamentation and decoration of façades meant extra attention, detail, and skill to the prefabricated panels. According to an article in the Arhitektura SSSR journal from 1955, Vrangel argued for the impossible coexistence between neoclassical design and prefabrication because it was “essential to design smooth panels, without profiles, and to construct prefabricated buildings in large panels with exposed joints” (in Forty, 2012: 151).

In that 1954 speech, Khrushchev also argues for the substitution of (the valued and expensive material) metal with the ubiquitous concrete: “Only what is essential should be built in metal. Everything in building which can be replaced by concrete or reinforced concrete should be replaced” (Khrushchev in Whitney, 1963: 161). That was the inauguration of the concrete ecumene in socialism, the beginning of the ‘prefab civilisation’. According to Forty, this led to “doctrinaire absurdities” (Forty, 2012: 151), where materials in abundance, or materials related to tradition in some countries, were simply discarded – wood in the Baltics38, the traditional house in Bulgaria. In the villages, panelki were enforced en masse, too. As noted earlier, the irony of this misplaced architecture resulted in panelki being left unfinished or unused, as the case in Dripchevo noted above – “The workers were so quick to get it done that they forgot to build the staircases!” (I. Nikolov, 1999: 129). In Sofia, and the other big cities, brick-built neighbourhoods were also criticised for being time-consuming, labour-intensive, and expensive. Everywhere, across the board of city planning, infrastructure, and industry, the panacea for the future of socialism was concrete.

The ideological drive and normative dream Khrushchev infuses into concrete are immediately contained by a much more pressing practicality – cost. He makes clear in that monumental first speech that prefabrication in the Soviet Union “will have a tremendous effort on economising, speeding up and improving construction work” (Khrushchev in Whitney, 1963: 166-7). The prefabrication system would undergo extensive standardisation to reduce the cost of production – “We must select a limited number of standardised designs for apartment houses, schools, hospitals, buildings for kindergartens and nurseries” (ibid.). In turn, with standardisation, prefabrication would also have a significant effect on the Soviet labour force. I discussed the ideological goal of changing the aesthetics of socialism by getting rid of decoration and handicraft. The practical side of it involved using prefabrication to turn an undifferentiated mass of collective farms and unskilled workers into technicians, or stroitel’i. According to Khrushchev,

38 Forty describes how the wooden electricity and telephone line poles in Estonia and other Baltic countries were replaced by cement ones by order of the Communist party, disregarding past practice and weather conditions.
A collective farmer arrives at the construction site without any skills, qualifications, and he is put down, as is well known, as an unskilled worker... He begins to look around, and then a comrade comes up to him and says. ‘Look here, give up this work and go into a factory. There you will have a trade within six months, you will receive a rating and perhaps even a place to live’... If every builder were helped to master some trade well and helped to become a skilled worker who could use machinery proficiently, he would then love his work and say with pride: ‘I am a builder!’ (ibid.: 185)

The prescriptive power of this speech cannot be underestimated. The overwhelming conflict between the normative goal and the practical requirements set forth by Khrushchev underscores the protracted way in which panelki across the socialist bloc would come condense society. The institution inaugurated a two-way social contract of co-dependence: the state required workers in the prefabrication factories and construction industry, and in return for offering them new skills, higher wages, they would get a panelka out of it. However, and this has been confirmed by all the engineers I spoke with in Bulgaria, the set of skills gained in the prefabrication factories deteriorated rapidly over the years, as demand quantity and speed in production resulted in lower quality and high labour turnover. It is no wonder, then, that so many panelki were handed over in a dire state – holes in the walls covered up with leftover cement bags and newspapers. The clash between the dream of the concrete city and the reality of mass produced housing had deep effects on the smallest details of the ‘new’ flats.

In terms of the actual process of prefabrication, Bulgaria copied the Soviet model with only a few years delay. In 1957, a decree established,

Building cooperatives, called DSK, to manufacture the standardised components; the first of these was set up in Leningrad in 1959; by 1967, there were 300, and by 1982, 482 DSK in the USSR with a combined output of 58.4 million square metres of housing per year. (Forty, 2012: 158).

The process was mirrored in Bulgaria, down to the name of the building cooperatives, DSK – Domostroitelen Kombinat39 or DK in Bulgaria. However, unlike the Soviet Union, Bulgaria begins improving its prefabrication methods early on, outgrowing the Soviet-imported typologies and working to create more luxurious and spacious flats. The prototype design, called khrushcheby (a

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39 Literally translated as the 'Homebuilding Plant'.
combination of Khrushchev’s name and the word for slum, *trashchoby*) was not extensively implemented in Bulgaria. Instead, Bulgaria’s DK began a 30-year quest to manufacture larger panels, extend the normative living space afforded to individuals and make standards as high as the system would allow. Unlike the Soviet Union, where DSK remained intact after 1990 – “the DSK-1 plant in Moscow was still producing 1.2 million square metres of housing per year in 2003” (Forty, 2012: 158) – in Bulgaria, they were closed, partitioned, and privatised in parts. Today, only remnants remain of what was the most influential housing construction system in the country’s history. According to Forty,

> While making use of a product that had, initially, been designed in the West, the Soviet Union developed production of its notoriously inflexible system on a scale that exceeded even the imagination of anyone in the West, producing identical buildings, from Vladivostok to the Elbe, under the control of one organisation, which at its height employed some thirteen million people. (ibid.)

The socialist regime in Bulgaria was particularly determined to follow in the footsteps of the Soviet Union, importing the names, typologies and production methods directly. A discursive examination of the professional journals in the years following Khrushchev’s ascent to power shows the wholehearted attempts by the architectural community in Bulgaria to justify the dominance of concrete. However, the focus was always on progress – technological progress in building cities, the progress on the home front, from the traditional house to the functional flat, etc.

In 1958, on the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution, Khrushchev’s speech at the Union Gathering of Construction from 12 April was translated fully in the third edition of the Bulgarian journal *Arhitektura* of that year:

> One of the most progressive new practices introduced to the sphere of construction is the production and application of steel-concrete thin-wall panels, produced via *vibropressing*. A group of specialists from *Glawmosstroi*, under the direction of engineer N. Y. Kozlov, constructed a machine and a technology for the preparation of steel-concrete panels though incessant *vibropressing*. Vibropressing during the creation of

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40 As noted in Chapter Two, I experienced some difficulties in gaining access to documentation. Access to DK archives was one of them – after its dissolution and disrepute in the 1990s, no one could tell me where to find documents about the practices, numbers, and people that built the *panelki*. Some information, mostly academic records, was subsequently collected by libraries, but very little remains of the internal documents from the DK factories themselves.

41 A process in which individual, pre-fitted, and durable concrete blocks are constructed in high quantities.
Steel-concrete elements has several benefits: the elements have precise measurements, which makes the implementation easier, reduces cost of concrete and cement. (Khrushchev in Arhitektura, 1958: 4).

Accordingly to him, Kozlov’s industrialised approach to the housing arrangement is the most efficient and economic that the Soviet Union had and that “we must, in the shortest period possible, switch towards the outright capitalisation of construction using vibropressed panels” (ibid.). His speech marks an overarching transformation of the discourse represented in the official Bulgarian party papers until then. As early as 1959 in Arhitektura, we see a direct reconstitution of the housing arrangement, and by extension of the everyday life, of the ideal socialist citizen. Whereas in the former brick flats, the kitchen was so large that it was often used as a guest room, dining room, and sleeping area, in the new panel construction, it is all but erased. According to Aleksandar Dorosiev, one of the first architects in socialist Bulgaria to dwell on the problems of mass housing, “our mass housing tradition is moving towards the future reduction of the kitchen area” (Dorosiev, 1959: 2) so as to only fulfil its direct functional needs, i.e. making and preserving of food.

By 1960, the population of Sofia doubled, with estimates of reaching a million inhabitants by 1975. The rate of growth far outnumbered the construction of housing and many families were forced to share accommodation. According to Konstantin Dzangozov, who first praises the enormous strides made to satisfy the individual housing needs, “the norm of nine square metres per inhabitant, according to the statistical data for 1956, has to catch up by 30 percent in Sofia, 42 percent in Haskovo, 37 percent in Gabrovo, etc” (Dzangozov, 1960: 11). The failure to reach the norm seemingly justified a new housing strategy and the Communist Party authorises a series of scientific enquiries and experimental realisations of prefabricated housing. Again we see, as in Khrushchev’s speech, the negation of the role of the architect as ideologue and figure of power. Instead, it is the discourse of science, the actions of industry and the role of the engineer, which are prioritised. Dzangozov says it is in 1960 that the first experimental panelka 42 begins construction in Sofia.

Before we continue, it is important to say a word about the debate relating to the height of these buildings. The early experiments with four- and five- floor khrushcheby were quickly scrapped in the Soviet Union because they were more expensive to build that panelki with more flats. Just like in the cases in Sweden and the Netherlands, the decision in the Soviet Union was to create a new standardisation system to build higher and on a larger scale. In Bulgaria, the

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42 Here a definition for “panel” is provided: “a panel is every ready wall, floor or roof tile, whose size corresponds usually to an entire constructive axis of the building. The reinforced parts with smaller size are called elements (Dzangozov, 1960: 31)
urban planning requirements in 1960 suggested that the “panelka construction move beyond the traditional four floors and go up to eight floors and be constituted by a wide variety of schemes and forms” (Belkovski, 1960: 2). Accordingly, we see a small jump in the average living space per inhabitant since 1950: from 5.7 to 6.3 square metres. This rate is seen as insufficient and unable to meet the expected normative housing needs by 1980 (Grekov and Anastasov, 1961: 15). Grekov and Anastasov argue that up to 1961, the number of homes built averaged around 16,000 (45 percent of the required 35,000), which leads them to the conclusion that a radical renegotiation of the housing construction process must be established. These two authors are the first to directly juxtapose the question of normativity with the question of utility – should we focus on more panelki so everyone has a home, or should we focus on quality, so that those homes that are built are at least of a high standard.

With the debate over the realisation of nine square meters, both the panelka and byt are reproblematised and a new and lasting battle for the constitution of the socialist subject ensues. According to Konstantin Dzangozov, “due to all these reasons, the constructive forces are leaning towards faster investigation and implementation of the industrialised production, more specifically towards the heavy-panel prefabricated construction, as the most progressive way of contemporary industrial methods and architectural construction” (Dzangozov, 1961: 8, emphasis added). In fact, this new idea of building higher panelki is even inscribed in the Central Committee urban development plan for Sofia in 1961: “so as to avoid the spread-out of the city territory, low-rising housing construction to be reduced to around five per cent of newly built housing territory” (1961: 4). What is important to note is that diversity in size, height, form, colour, and façade is preferable – in theory. At the time, the aim was to avoid monotonous and homogenous structures spreading throughout the urban environment. Instead, a variety of colour, materials, and sizes reflected the somewhat overambitious dreams of the Bulgarian architects.

So, in Arhitektura and other official publications such as Stroitelstvo, the new panelka projects discussed (though never realised) all focused on heterogeneity and plurality. Once the actual process of building and installing panelki began to take shape in Bulgaria, around 1962, that benchmark for aesthetics was scrapped. The rationale was very straightforward: to respond to the rising needs for housing – such that it is both efficient and cheap, the case is made for a full transition to industrialisation and homogenisation – of both resources and output. This also followed the overarching ideological direction set forward in the Soviet Union through Nikita Khrushchev – progress towards the realisation of a socialist future through scientific innovation and technology. According to the Bulgarian Party leader Todor Zhivkov, “without standardisation, unification and homogenisation – there is no technological progress” (1963: i).
This has its most visible impact on the neighbourhood of Mladost, the first large-scale prefabricated project in Bulgaria. The architect who was awarded the project, Bogdan Tomalevski, imagined a concrete city marked by a harmony of scale and height, surrounded and interrupted by green spaces. The blueprint featured a variety of construction methods to be used and a number of large-scale public spaces, libraries, swimming pools, bazaars, to be introduced around the neighbourhood. By the time construction began, panelki were prioritised over everything else, a small number of typologies were to be built, according to the limited capacity and output of the DK. Eventually, Tomalevski would resign from his post, calling the concrete city of Mladost unrecognisable. In the decades that follow, Tomalevski would develop a deep sense of guilt for his complicity in the construction of Mladost. The interesting relationship between Tomalevski and Mladost will be studied further in Chapter Four.

3.6 The Evolution of the Prefabricated Concrete Panel System

Four years separate the transition from the experiments of isolated, single-standing prefabricated panelki constructed between 1955-1958 and the building of the first series of housing blocks completed in 1962 in Sofia. These blocks were drawn up and constructed by the Scientific Research Institute in Bulgaria (NISI), with the direct involvement of the Institute of Typisation and Industrialisation in Construction (ITIS) under the supervision of engineer Georgi Brankov. The first three blocks (built according to the experimental nomenclatures (blueprints) Tolstoy 1, Tolstoy 2, and Tolstoy 3 were built in the neighbourhood of the same name in Sofia. Consequently, the housing complex was extended to nine buildings, two-, three- and four-sectioned, which contain 216 apartments. The buildings were created according to the skeleton-less system, which is made up of carrying (pivoting) wall panels filled with sgurobeton – a kind of reinforced concrete – and floor panels, matching the size of the rooms. From the three examples, there were 142 blocks built in Bulgaria: 35 according to Tolstoy 1, 22 from Tolstoy 2, 85 – Tolstoy 3 (Sofia Municipality Records, 2015a). However, whereas the initial Tolstoy buildings were erected using materials manufactured in a polygon near the construction site, with the extension of the panel mass-housing construction came the creation of the specialised production factories – DK. After initial evaluation of the Tolstoy typology, the average cost per flat was exceeded, as had happened once Lenin was complete.

Thus, due to the average cost of over 5,500 leva per flat and the unsuitable material of sgurobeton, the Tolstoy panelka was discontinued. Consequently, a wide array of different sized buildings, with various axis formations and
manipulations of room sizes, were experimented with. According to architect Liuba Takieva, between 1960 and 1963 in Sofia, Ruse, Plovdiv, and Burgas, 4,000 flats were built using the “skeletonless heavy-panel constructive system, the ready elements for which were constructed in the several factories for heavy-panel buildings” (Takieva, 1964: 40). With the creation of the DKs came the extension of new typologies/blueprints for higher-rising buildings. For example, in 1963, construction commenced for a housing complex in Vrazhdebna, Sofia that was designed for 10,000 people. Its panels were prefabricated at a width of 6.30 metres and height of 5.10 metres, as “suggested by the production requirements of the building constructions in Kremikovci” (Klisurska-Tanova and Takieva-Peneva, 1963a: 6). Kremikovci was Bulgaria’s largest metalworking company, whose production extended beyond cast iron and coke after 1963. It became the central factory for the construction of prefabricated concrete panels.

Of these early panelki, one of the very first nomenclatures, Bs-2-63, drawn up to comply with this typified industrial construction was a joint project by Sofproekt and NiproITIS43 (see Figures 2-3). Their construction began in 1963, shortly after the initial Tolstoy typology was deemed both inefficient and expensive. The panels were produced Domostroitelen Kombinat 1 (DK 1) in Voenna Rampa, which was one of the first factories solely configured for the purposes of prefabricated mass housing. DK 1 had a capacity for the production of 6,000 homes per annum, according to the Sofia Municipality records (see 2015a). The height of these buildings was between 4-6 floors with the most standardised spatial design: 3.6 metres wide (nadlyzhno mezduosie), 5.1 metres high (naprechno mezduosie). Blocks of this kind exist in Sofia in neighbourhoods Druzhba, Svoboda, Suhata Reka, and were built until 1968, when production towards this typology was discontinued. An optimized version of this typology, under the name of Bs-VIII-Sf, has the same characteristics as its predecessor, yet it is designed for eight-storey buildings and has a slightly different façade (see Figures 5-6). Building according to this typology began in 1966. After that, the series continued to be built until 1972 in Mladost, Svetata Troica, Druzhba, Ilinden, and others.

In 1964, a novel constructive design was introduced into the production line: Bs-2-64. This time, the factory was the Domostroitelen Kombinat (DK) 2 in Zemliane, which used a system, imported from the USSR with the capacity for the production of 6,000 homes per annum. The imported technology meant it had capacity for the construction of high-rising six- to eight-floor buildings (Stoychev, 1976: 8) (see Figures 3-4 of Block 45 in Mladost). Buildings were constructed according to this typology until 1977. 700 building sections of varying sizes were constructed. The first eight-floor building was begun in 1966.

43 NISI and ITIS were combined into one entity.
During the construction of the Bs-2-64 nomenclature, it was noted (see Antova, 1968) that the width of 3.2 metres fell below the minimal required space per inhabitant. It is important to remember that with the introduction of the *panelka*, a width of 3.6 metres was considered the bare minimum. Accordingly, in 1969, NiprolTIS created another optimisation, resulting in the so-called Bs-2-69 series. Not unsurprisingly, there is virtually no external difference between it and its predecessor, yet internally, this series returns to a width of 3.6 metres, making some rooms larger. This is one of the most popular *panelki* designs in Sofia and it came into the production cycle of DK 2 in 1971. It was officially discontinued in 1980. During this time, with some variations of it also constructed after 1980, a total of 709 buildings were constructed (Sofia Municipality Records, 2015b: 2). For example, most of the *Liulin* neighborhood (*Liulin* 1, 2, 3, not really 4) and *Mladost* 2 are almost exclusively filled with this kind of *panelka* (see Figures 7-8).

The progress in the system of prefabricated panel housing construction across the socialist bloc reflected a similar pattern. The standardisation of the housing system, as discussed in the previous chapter, was profound, and even today, one can find resemblance in cityscapes from Berlin to Moscow. What has been shown in this section is how the internal debate among the architects and party officials, as well as the process of technological development affected the development of panel housing in Sofia specifically and Bulgaria in general. More importantly, underneath the discussion of efficiency, quality and cost lay a number of other questions, which have a direct bearing on the lives of the hundreds of thousands of people who inhabited these structures. This brief genealogy of the conflicting visions of the *panelka* show how the synthesis of *konstruktsiya* and *stroitel'stvo* were actually realised; how the on-going conflict between ideology and the norm for the future were offset by notions of technological efficacy and economic cost; yet, also how the fast-built and faulty early developments were improved by new ones, focusing more on community-building and city planning (*mikroraiion*-like); how the early negation of the normative nine square meters is continuously renegotiated and maintained as benchmark. The development of the typology show the complicated institution that the *panelka* becomes in the long-term across the Soviet system, way beyond its immediate application as a fast ‘cure’ to an urban housing problem.

### 3.7 Conclusion: The Ubiquity of Panelki

There are 350,000 panel flats in the four major cities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, Varna, which is over 50 percent of the entire panel construction legacy in Bulgaria (see National Programme for the Restoration of Housing Complexes in Bulgaria, 2005). Panel construction accounts for over 33 percent of the housing
market in cities across Bulgaria and the average size of an apartment is about 75 square metres, with an average of four inhabitants. As of 2001, there are 1,779,086 inhabitants of panelki flats in Bulgaria (ibid.: 31). The contrast between cities and rural areas is stark – just 20,000 inhabitants in villages. This is an institution that really got under way halfway through the 1960s and was discontinued by 1992, yet still offers housing to one quarter of the Bulgarian population. It must be reiterated that more than 80 percent of the population still lived in rural areas by 1950s. This extraordinary shift and rate of urbanisation conceals a profound cultural, political, and social metamorphosis – both collectively and individually.

The anonymous ubiquity of the panelka is the most powerful legacy of the past. The panelki, having surpassed their expiry date, continues to shape the notion of byt for a new generation of post-socialist citizens. Not only those born around 1989, but now their children as well are being brought up inside the panelka, initially constructed, perpetually reduced and modified, to fit the utilitarian goal of “curing” the housing crisis in the 1960s. Of course, after 1989, the panelka becomes a much more dynamic institution, a kind of ‘microcosm’ of society, externally and internally reflexive of the forming everyday life post-socialisms in Bulgaria. What happens inside the panelka after 1990 is a particularly interesting question and one, which will be addressed at length in this dissertation. How the institution continues to shape everyday life, how inhabitants adapt to it and at the same time mould it according to their (new) preferences is essential in coming to terms with the social and cultural formations following the end of socialism. The panelka in the last 30 years is one of the most important diagnostic sites, allowing researchers to peak inside the actual life and identity of the people living the change in regime. Both the exterior and interior of the panelka, its malleability, make it the material and canvas upon which a kind of Foucaultian diagnosis of the present is possible.
## Plates

### Figure 1: Population growth in major urban centres 1946-2001

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Chapter Four: The architect of *Mladost* and the Inauguration of Personal Property (1962-1974)

PART I

4.1 Introducing the Planners

The period of prefabrication corresponded with the symbolic end of forced collectivisation, the purging of Bulgaria’s pre-WWII cultural roots and economic classes. Prefabrication ushered in a new social contract between a seemingly more conciliatory regime reaching back to the ideological roots of Soviet-style socialism, and an uprooted population in need of accommodation and work. The *panelka* was the chosen panacea to the unprecedented housing crisis affecting hundreds of thousands of people. *Mladost*, the first large-scale prefabricated neighbourhood, one of many to come, is a potent example of the power *panelki* had in transforming the social fabric, but in ways that often directly contradicted the normative ideals of socialist architecture.

*Mladost* was the first social condenser of its kind in Bulgaria, paving the way for the homogenisation of housing that blankets its cityscapes to this day. The intent, from its approval as an architectural plan in 1965, was literally to condense an enormous amount of diverse people (from different cities, age groups, cultures, classes, etc.) within its walls. To say that *Mladost*, like all *panelki* neighbourhoods, failed to produce a new form of social life, a *perestroika byta*, is no understatement, both from the perspective of the past and the present. First, before construction was complete, *Mladost’s* head architect, Bogdan Tomalevski, distanced himself from what he would later call ‘a monstrosity’. Then, looked at from a contemporary perspective, the *panelki* are utterly unrecognisable in their old age today.\footnote{As noted at the start of this dissertation, *Mladost* means youth in Bulgarian and it was a symbolic name for a neighbourhood that was primarily populated by young families when it was constructed.} But the *panelki* have endured after their expiry date, fostering ingenious, if centred and individual, attempts at rejuvenation by inhabitants. Therefore, while failing in their normative aims, it is still worth demonstrating their enormous, if often unintended, impact on the nearly one-third of the Bulgarian population that calls *panelki* their home (Andersen, et al, 2013: 112). The aim of this chapter is to show how this ‘productive failure’ (Buchli, 2017: 288) of the *panelki* social condenser came to be – how it was constructed, where the first cracks between the normative and the realised started to open, and how we can identify the type of power relationship that flowed between inhabitants...
and their flats. In other words, it attempts a working genealogy of the productive ‘unintentionality’ of the panelki palimpsest.

The chapter, split in two parts, focuses on the period between the approval of the Mladost blueprint and the introduction of ‘personal property’ in the Bulgarian Constitution of 1971. In this period, two major processes create the boundaries that come to defy the rather unusual, in comparison to other socialist countries, relationship between Party-panelki-inhabitants. The first one is an underlying battle, one that has discursive and spatial representations, between the architects following the Soviet avant-garde tradition (konstruktsiia) and the planners and engineers, who disregarded ideology and focused simply on construction (as in the process of building – stroitel’stvo). It will be shown how this conflict results in the erection of panelki duplicates that stray away from their original architectural plan. This, in turn, leaves them bare and blank and offers individual inhabitants the chance to begin engraving themselves onto those panels. The second process, which concerns individuals more directly, is how panelki inaugurated new rights for homeowners – first a normative right to a minimum personal space (growing from 9 square metres to the optimal, and never achieved, 15 square metres), then a juridical right after 1971 to own personal property. These changes necessarily strengthened the relationship between the home and the inhabitant and produced a new site, underneath the regime, where everyday life became a space of microresistance and limited freedom – a space of vnye. These two processes were essential to the kind of productive failure that transformed panelki into the colourful palimpsests of change and rejuvenation over the last three decades. They also offer some guidance as to why the fears of architects, like Mladost’s Tomalevski, that panelki will be ultimately destructive to individuality were in fact completely overturned, resulting in explicit individual eccentricities most visible in the post-socialist years.

Part I will demonstrate how the conflict between the normative architectural for Mladost and its actual construction unravelled into a grey, homogenising, and decaying built form. Part II will demonstrate how that unravelling affected the way individuals embodied their flats – spaces over which they suddenly possessed a juridical power of ownership and self-expression.

The remaining chapters of this dissertation create a sort of diagnosis of the present by reading the panelki palimpsest to trace and analyse how today is different from yesterday when it comes to their material culture and social life. For example, the way in which colourful renovations of façades after the fall of the regime gave these buildings a sort of second-lease of life. The traces of the past, in terms of byt, will be juxtaposed with the larger socio-economic changes
to demonstrate the extent that micropowers exist underneath the totalising frames of (post) socialist “prefab civilisations” (Kotkin, 2007: 520).

The brief genealogy presented here relies on a number of archival sources, particularly looking at the evolving critique of panelki by socialist architects in the state magazine *Arhitektura* (with a particular focus on editions between 1962-1975). It also examines the few available interviews with Bogdan Tomalevski, whose involvement in *Mladost* was almost entirely erased from his architectural oeuvre. Therefore, to fill in the historical gaps, the chapter draws on interviews I conducted with Tomalevski’s nephew, architect Damian Tomalevski, his long-time collaborator, architect Lozan Lozangov, as well as interviews with key planners of panelki – Stavri Stavrev, Kalin Kosturski, and architects, Silviya Sokerova and Dimitar Mladenov, who were commissioned to realise Tomalevski’s unfinished *Mladost* master plan in 2008.

Bogdan Tomalevski, one of the most renowned architects in socialist Bulgaria, resigned from the *Mladost* project and removed his name from the authorship of the city-plan 15 years after its realisation. It was a considerable act of protest, according to his fellow architects, but it was an act largely unacknowledged by official narrative at the time. Later, in one candid interview published in *Narodna Kultura* in 1986, Tomalevski spoke out publicly for the first and only time about his *Mladost* legacy. When Tomalevski died in 2012, his presence was symbolically reinstated in *Mladost* with a street named after him on the outskirts of one of the outermost parts of the neighbourhood – *Mladost* 4. That is potentially the most potent metaphor for how far the reality has strayed from his original architectural plan and normative goal of social condenser. This chapter will demonstrate how this discrepancy unfolded.

Dating back to the time of his work on *Mladost*, and leading all the way up to 2012, Tomalevski’s family and colleagues shared notable memories about his work ethic. Architect Lilo Popov – whose work in the late 1970s was seen as a bold attempt at a reintroduction of post-modernism in the Bulgarian socialist built form – in his obituary of Tomalevski describes Tomalevski’s name as having been associated with the highest order of architectural class (Popov, 2012). So much so that “a project by Tomalevski” was one of the key ingredients determining the value of a property (ibid.). Tomalevski’s work on housing complexes is given particular attention. The first realised project by Tomalevski’s collective was the *Vladimir Zaimov* (1956-1957) neighbourhood. Zaimov, built on army barracks land, was highly regarded as a major shift away from Socialist

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45 Personal conversation and interview conducted in March 2018.
46 Multiple conversations and interviews over the period of 2017-2018.
47 Personal conversation and interview conducted in May 2018.
Realism, in favour of light and simplified architecture that prioritised “sunlight, air, greenery” (ibid.).

This was an important stepping-stone for Tomalevski, who embarked on his biggest housing project in 1965 with his winning proposal for *Mladost* (Tomalevski, et al, 1965; see Figures 1-4). However, as Popov writes, “there Tomalevski experiences a sharp conflict, which he deems essential to the architectural art form. It’s a conflict that still holds true today – the compromise between the vision of the architect and that of the client, between the idea and the realisation” (ibid., emphasis added). With his eventual resignation and, rare in those times, outspoken protest over what had become of *Mladost*, Tomalevski’s work departed from the planning of housing construction and entered a new phase, embarking on what was to be a long-term collaboration with architect Lozan Lozanov.

It is impossible to understand why *Mladost* in particular, and *panelki* as an institution, failed so spectacularly in their normative goal, but were so unexpectedly productive as they aged, without reference to the political context surrounding Tomalevski’s colossal impact on Bulgaria’s built environment. In the pages that follow, I will portray a brief history of the making of *Mladost* as it was reflected through the persona and actions of Bogdan Tomalevski. While himself not a party member, which was a rarity for any figure elevated in public life and awarded that degree of freedom, Tomalevski was, of course, a willing participant in the socialist regime that had gripped Bulgaria under the strict and direct guidance of the USSR – a grip much stronger in Bulgaria than anywhere else in the socialist bloc. This is not intended as personal criticism, but as necessary historical context to help contextualise Tomalevski’s actions and the party response to those actions.

Tomalevski’s father, a well-known Bulgarian revolutionary, educated abroad, was murdered in front of him. Tomalevski’s was strongly influenced by his mother, who was a philologist and musician. In fact, Tomalevski was a talented pianist and would refer to his work in architecture as “music turned into stone” (Tomalevski, 1986: 4). In that *Narodna Kultura* interview, Tomalevski is recorded criticising *Mladost* in deeply philosophical terms that signify that schism between *konstruktsiia* and *stroitel’stvo*, which underlines that crucial conflict between reality and plan. The conflict also mirrors the violent discontinuities in the progression of Soviet architecture from the early 1920s avant-garde, through Socialist Realism, and finally to Khrushchev’s return to constructivist ideals in the 1960s. Tomalevski’s own musings here are important evidence and personal testimony that confirm how he saw the utopian dream of *Mladost* becoming the latest socialist nightmare.
I will dedicate significant space to this interview, for lack of other materials, because it serves as one of the only ethnographic records of Tomalevski’s personal observations of his contemporaneity. However, this testimony is far from extensive or exhaustive, which is why I rely on the multiple interviews I conducted with people close to him to add context and fill in the gaps. One of the aims here, and of the thesis as a whole, is to demonstrate how much of Tomalevski’s Mladost was fulfilled, where it fell short from its normative goals, and as will be explored subsequently, what were the unintended consequences of that.

4.2 Tomalevski: The ‘Unforgivable Sin’ of Concrete

Of the many trips I took to libraries and archives, I was only able to find snippets from pre-1989 articles that mention Tomalevski’s work on Mladost. According to his nephew Damian, who is also an architect, Tomalevski’s break from panelki was a very emotional and distressing one, which he never talked about ‘at the dinner table.’ This is something Lozan Lozanov confirmed: “he even resigned via letter, he didn’t like talking about it, but his decision was interpreted by our colleagues as a sign of protecting the ethics of our practice” (emphasis added). For Tomalevski, it seems, there could be no such thing as Mladost (as youth) without the freedom of artistic expression – there could be no compromise between vision and construction. The very idea of his initial proposal rests upon the Constructivist notion that architecture is about organising life. It is intended to catalyse social change, as envisioned by the early Soviet avant-garde architects. In the words of Moisei Ginzburg, “in the habits and attitudes of the mass population, low-voltage activity and a weak consciousness would be focused through the circuits of these ‘social condenser’ into high-voltage catalysts of change” (in Clark, 1995: 251). That notion of electrification, as the driving force for modernisation, is clearly reflected in Tomalevski’s own recollections about why he resigned from Mladost.

In his candid 1986 interview with journalist Georgi Stoychev, Tomalevski speaks of an unforgivable sin that relates to the realisation of Mladost,

When my grandmother, Rayna, was on her deathbed at 97, she suddenly got up and asked me, “Would you pour me a glass of wine?” I was startled by this and grabbed the first thing I saw and poured her a glass. She said, “Son, why in this cup?” And she passed away. I gave her the wine in a teacup. I will never forgive myself for this sin. Sometimes, as I pass by a building where I had a role in, I say to myself, “Bogdane, why in this cup?” (Tomalevski, 1986: 4, emphasis added)
Mladost, as it was intended (‘the wine glass’) would be a new town, offering people new ways of socialising with each other inside the microraiioni – new possibilities of personhood for them individually and collectively. But, what was realised was instead so far from the initial project (the ‘teacup’) that it seems Tomalevski held a deep sense of personal responsibility for all the potentially negative impacts this panelki neighbourhood would have on the tens of thousands of people about to begin their lives there. Furthermore, because Mladost was the first neighbourhood of such scale and magnitude that, to a degree of certainty up to the centimetre, it is possible to demonstrate how the normative shortcomings of Mladost were duplicated and repurposed for subsequent panelki neighbourhoods across Bulgaria. This resulted, of course, in the ‘prefab civilisation’ of near universal homogenisation and uniformity of this type of built form, which for all intents and purposes, was at least designed to be different than it was.

For Tomalevski, the failed promise of the panelki social condenser to electrify its social fabric is threefold. First, the housing shortages and demand for panelki were so high that flats, regardless how similar, were prioritised over everything else. In Tomalevski’s words,

The Mladost Complex – look at the original plan and how well it all started – of course it included a town centre and a cinema and post office, the big park with the tennis courts and the swimming pools. How can we talk about something that was never realised? We declined to redo our plan – now there are goats on pasture in the town centre and the Vartopo Park has been overcome with construction. (ibid.)

This is the first concrete failure of the social condenser. Mladost was envisioned as a living organism, not just a number of prefabricated blocks that pack diverse subjectivities into the same concrete boxes. It was what was between the panelki that sparked the circuits of these “social condensers” into high-voltage catalysts of change (Ginzburg in Clark, 1995: 251). It is there, in the inner-block circuits, that individuals would have been transformed into modern socialist citizens through their social interactions in their joint everyday life. Or, in the words of Katarina Clark, “through its byt, that is, through the ordinary and everyday, society would, paradoxically, attain the extraordinary” (Clark, 1995: 251). Instead, lamented Tomalevski, the reality has been one in which the exclusion of these public spaces has reduced everyday life to the interiors of flats, where tens of thousands stare at the same grey walls.

This shortcoming of the Mladost project has a second unintended consequence unfolding within itself. The deprioritisation of building communal facilities and green spaces resulted in an active battle between Tomalevski’s normative vision
and the actual built form that continues to this day. This is also why the focus in subsequent chapters falls on Block 52 in Mladost – a building not present in Tomalevski’s plan. In fact, it was actually built upon land that was a playground before 1985. To build Block 52, Mladost’s municipality created a cooperative and worked directly with the factory producing the concrete panels (Domostroiteilen Kombinat) to provide the materials for this unorthodox 3-entrance, 6-floor panelka. According to multiple testimonies by inhabitants who recall the day of Block 52 construction, there were protests attempting to protect the playground. To avoid further conflict, the concrete base of the building was laid out during the night. It is an incredibly symbolic moment that would prescribe how Mladost would be suffocated by new construction projects in the post-socialist period. It is exactly this distinction – between the ideal and real – that Tomalevski thought was the unforgivable sin of his work.

According to Silvia Sokerova and Dimitar Mladenov, the two architects who were tasked in 2008 with completing what was left unfinished in Tomalevski’s Mladost master plan, the neglect and misuse of valued communal spaces spread after the fall of the regime. Some of the unused land – whether it was intended for green spaces or communal facilities – was returned to citizens under new laws of restitution, which, more often than not, resulted in its sale and immediate reappropriation for new housing construction. Today, more than 30 years after Tomalevski’s interview, there are not one, but two ‘teacup’ scenarios: the insufficient realisation of his blueprint during the socialist regime, followed by the additional construction of dozens of new, monolithic, housing complexes in those would-be “social condenser” circuits of inner-block areas and green spaces. Furthermore, Sokerova and Mladenov point to another interesting aspect of Tomalevski’s plan that I have not encountered anywhere else in my research. It is to do with the shape of panelki, the majority of which are simple rectangular forms of up to eight floors – with perhaps the one major exception being in the unique Trakiya neighbourhood in Plovdiv, where the panelki design, attempting to break the prefabricated mould, resulted in a very different built form (Toleva, 2016). In Mladost, the last part of the neighbourhood constructed before 1990 was Mladost 1a (Figure 5). There, unlike anywhere else, blocks, conjoined by monolithic corner sections, transform two dislocated blocks into one large, V-shaped building. According to Sokerova and Mladenov, Tomalevski’s original plan was far from solely dependent on panelki as housing blocks – there were high-rising monolithic buildings that would create diversity in the volume and height of Mladost housing options. He even planned corner sections and had spread out dozens of blocks to be built individually and later joined together to improve the aesthetics and reduce the gaping holes that remain in between some dwellings. These so-called corner sections were only partially carried out in Mladost 1a in the 1980s, the youngest microrайon (Figure 5). They were to be built onsite and were intended to unite the singular panelki and create a flowing
and wholesome aesthetic to Mladost. However, monolithic dwellings were not a priority in the early years and there was an incessant lack of qualified construction workers, so the Tomalevski plan was all about prefabricated concrete. Mladost 1a is the part in Mladost that achieved the most semblance with the original vision after Tomalevski’s departure.

Tomalevski’s second concern with regards to the failure of Mladost is that not only were the circuits cut, in terms of the communal spaces surrounding the panelki, but the actual supposed “high-voltage” catalysts were reduced to a number of very limited prefabrication typologies, resulting in the unforgiving enforcement of sameness and homogeneity. So, not only is social interaction outside the home stifled due to an underdeveloped public space, but the promised vibrancy and colour of the planned neighbourhood was reduced to a reality of concrete uniformity. Once again, it was a lasting victory for efficiency and prudence in engineering over the focus on aesthetics and the architectural art form. In light of this, Tomalevski says,

Do you know when a home also becomes dear to me? When, through it, you understand that I understand you better than you understand yourself. I rely on you to see that. The same way I rely on everyone who, like me, is protesting the homogeneity of panelki. Don't you see that the problem is communal! It’s a problem of the organisation of production! We lack, from the start, organisation. If we aren’t changing them, then we deserve them! It’s cruel, yes. As an architect I think about the opposite dependency: a person can start to resemble his home. Can you imagine: from Kalotino to Kapitan Andreevo – the same people in the same homes? (Tomalevski, 1986: 4, emphasis added)

It is striking how critical his tone is and how deeply problematic Tomalevski seems to consider the disciplining power of panelki. This is precisely the argument made by Kotkin with regards to “prefab civilisations” (Kotkin, 2007: 520) and by so many other scholars regarding the konstruktsiiia/stroitel’stvo of the socialist city (see French and Hamilton, 1979). But more importantly, Tomalevski notes, Mladost was not just a failed social condenser, i.e. it did not live up to its promise of perestroika byta; he argues, in fact, that it actively contributed to a lasting domination by the built environment over its inhabitants: “can you imagine … the same people in the same homes” across southwest Bulgaria? The disdain for repetition is not solely aesthetic. Tomalevski saw a clear connection between the normative idea and material culture and considered it indefensible by the client (the socialist regime) to insist (upon the architect) on building more of the same (“If we aren’t changing them, then we deserve them!”) without acknowledging the consequences (“a person can start to resemble his home”). This is perhaps the clearest sign and acknowledgment that
Bulgarian architects, following the Soviet avant-garde tradition, were designing buildings in order to transform, or at least in the hope of transforming, the social fabric. When it came to huge projects like Mladost, the largest ever at that time in Bulgaria, the potential for accommodating a young and urbanising society in flux was immense. For Tomalevski, to squander that potential (his cup/glass duality) on an economically, architecturally, and technologically limited mass housing institution was a destructive policy.

Coincidentally, just like the first failure discussed above, this shortcoming vocalised by Tomalevski was, counter intuitively, transformed into something entirely new in the decades following the fall of the regime. Rather than a person resembling a home, what is clearly noticeable across post-socialist Bulgaria is the home’s external façades resembling, to varying degrees, the aesthetics and lives of its inhabitants. Despite the weight of external uniformity, Mladost is a colourful palimpsest of ever-changing inhabitant ‘profile pictures’ in the form of individual wall and window façades. For Sokerova and Mladenov, whose work in Mladost made an attempt at introducing restorative work to entire blocks, following the example in Central Europe, the individual façade restoration and closing-in of balconies were what took the “genie out of the bottle” in the last decades. According to Sokerova,

We are unique in our approach. It was an awful practice to extend whichever space by closing in the balcony. You can’t recognise the façade. Patches, renovation, it all started with the glazing before 1989. There was at least uniformity to the outer layer. That became a mass practice, mass ugliness. It’s because the spaces are small and people extended their balconies. (Personal conversations)

It is therefore curious to look deeper, by opening up those walls, and trace where and when this discrepancy, between the feared domination of concrete over inhabitant and an inverted and counter-intuitive microresistance became prevalent in socialist Bulgaria. Because, as noted in the previous chapter, it is often accepted by scholars of socialist material culture (e.g. Molnar, 2010) that the internal transformation of panelki began during the 1990s and, to a large extent, mirrored cultural changes and affiliations with the return to Europe and Western values.

Finally, the ultimate failure of Mladost, according to Tomalevski, the thing that drove him to tender his resignation, was the decisive victory of stroitel’stvo over konstruktsiya in the socialist discourse of architecture in Bulgaria. It reflects the ultimate victory of the ‘teacup’ over the ‘wine glass’; of the client (the regime) over the architect. This wholesome disregard for aesthetics is mirrored across the socialist bloc and also reflects a developing contemporary discourse of
hatred towards the legacy of panelki coming from the Russian state and municipal administrations. However, in Bulgaria, the reason panelki were allowed to fail productively as social condensers and reinvent themselves is because they were the remnants of what was left from a deep battle between (social) ‘Construction’ as konstruktisiia, meaning the intellectual and inherently ideological process of planning the role between architecture and social change, and stroitel’stvo, as building construction, a material practice grounded in real time and space. Consequently, this also marks the beginning of the overwhelmingly dominant role of the engineer/builder. But coming back to the dichotomisation of construction, architecture in the 1920s was regarded as a harmonious relationship between science and art, yet one predicated entirely upon the intellectual category of ‘Constructivism’, as pronounced by the domineering architectural tradition then (Cooke, Papadakis and Benjamin, 1989: 11). The key premise of the early Bolshevik state, which was directly reflected in architecture, was the conventional Marxist wisdom that ‘bytie opredelaet soznanie’. Building construction, stroitel’stvo, on the other hand, was the necessary apparatus through which the ‘building of socialism’ was to be depicted and actually carried out. The stroitel’, or builder, works on a “real site with muddy boots” (Cooke, 1995: 101) and is concerned entirely with the existing material reality of the physical world.

According to Tomalevski, this battle was so vicious that it oftentimes resulted in open humiliation,

We’ve experienced so many shameful situations. When we were building the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we found that from 700 people working on the site, the three worst paid were young architects from the authorship collective. The stroitel’i bought things for them and degraded them: “Stay out of this, we know you’re no good.” And they, in turn, turned on us: “boss, this is the public opinion of your profession. (Tomalevski, 1986: 4, emphasis added)

Architects, to be sure, were not entirely sidelined and Tomalevski remained a revered figure in his work with Lozanov, which focused on monuments reflecting the power over public spaces by the socialist state. However, with regards to the housing market, panelki were the death of the architectural vision in Bulgaria.

This shift is reflected in the changing ways architects wrote about and critiqued the concrete legacy in the official state magazine – Arhitektura. Up until 1974, when panelki became completely widespread, it is possible to trace a growing disavowal of this once celebrated ‘modern’ system of construction imported from the USSR. As Lozanov said above, the conflict about Mladost and Tomalevski’s resignation was about protecting the ethics of the architectural
tradition. That conflict spilled over onto the pages of the magazine, which was used as the last bastion of expression by a group of people who were witnessing the demise of the role of architecture in the construction of a new socialist society. And it was not just about Mladost – the prefabrication processes was duplicated en masse across the country. The pattern is similar outside Bulgaria, too, where similar problems of constraining typologies, limited technological progress and limited finances resulted in the mass construction of panelki dwellings that in turn underwent widespread renovation – from Bratislava to Berlin. But this policy was not implemented in Bulgaria, where individuals prioritised protracted renovations rather than implementing full-scale dwelling renovation. According to some scholars, like Iskra Dandolova (2002), this strong personal connection has juridical roots introduced by the socialist regime, but which were only strengthened culturally in post-socialism
Part II

4.3 ‘Standardisation, Unification, Homogenisation’

The gradual dismantling of Tomalevski’s grand Mladost plan and his eventual resignation reflect an overarching shift in the official discourse about panelki in the 1970s in Bulgaria. What was initially deemed a breakthrough in the industrialisation of housing, the future of the Soviet home, and the answer to the overarching socialist housing problem was gradually peeled apart and criticised for its external uniformity and internal claustrophobia. Up until the mid 1970s, which is the time period this chapter is concerned with, there is a gradually increasing critical voice by architects looking at panelki as a whole that is directly juxtaposed by the growing technical sophistication and role of planners and engineers in the process of construction.

In 1963, directly mirroring speeches made by Khrushchev about the new ‘technology of concrete housing’, (Khrushchev, 1958: 4), the magazine Arhitektura lends space to Bulgaria’s own socialist leader, Todor Zhivkov, and his domestication of panelki – “without standardisation, unification and homogenisation – there is no technological progress” (Zhivkov, 1963a: i). In that same edition of Arhitektura, an article about one of the first experimental four-floor buildings in the Sofia neighbourhood of Traen Mir states,

Alongside the planning decisions that correspond to the contemporary byt and the fulfilment of the economic needs … important improvements have been made to overcome the stiffness of industrialised construction in the external façades of the buildings. (Klisurska-Tanova and Takieva-Peneva, 1963b: 9)

These improvements include aesthetic changes using flexible new façades, different sized buildings, colour shades, and the retention of freedom of artistic expression. In the following year, an article dedicated to the experimental panelki reassigns the focus of the exterior shortcomings to internal ones – the primary concern is the size of the flats (Takieva, 1964: 40-50). The article continues to discuss the reduction in the value of individual flats due to the limited sizes of the panels made using the earliest prefabrication systems. As Takieva writes,
Following the plans, the prefabrication typology (nomenklatura) of I-61 and the experimental six-floor dwelling built by ITIS\(^4\), there were 1000 dwellings finalised or under construction in 1963 in Sofia, and a large number in Plovdiv and Burgas. The completed plans and construction so far has not reflected the potential of this system. Even though it forces certain limitations in the quest for more diverse architectural solutions, the projects so far have not utilized all the possibilities for the achievement of the optimal architectural impact. (Takieva, 1963: 40)

At a time when *panelki* were still experimental and built in small batches, there was still a sense of progress and a desire for improvement, i.e. there is still direction. Yet, before Tomalevski and *Mladost*, it is still protracted and not applied on the scale of the years to come. This is also why, before 1964, the discourse remains hopeful and prescriptive about the potential of prefabrication. It is really once *Mladost* is planned and the project started that it becomes clear to many architects, particularly Tomalevski, that the desired effect and widespread application of prefabrication in Bulgaria, the promise of a different way of life, of social condensing through architecture, are impossible to implement.

By 1965, with Tomalevski’s proposal (Tomalevski, et al., 1965: 28-9), *panelki* play a central role in a new grand plan for nothing less than a new socialist city – *Mladost*. It is presented as a multitude of *microraióni*, a beacon of socialist architecture, featuring high-rise and low buildings where 48,000 people are to live with 15 sq. m. allocated to each one\(^4\). Within two years, however, the dream is already significantly altered and architects begin scrambling for answers and suggestions about the unintended consequences of concrete. Those years show the first signs of failure described above by Tomalevski, but also introduce a new kind of problem – the individual flat and the inauguration of the normative right to personal space in *panelki*. According to Lefebvre, “space is never empty – it always embodies a meaning” (1991: 154). The notion of normative space and its incessant increase – from 9 sq. m. per person to the final 15 sq. m. – impacted Tomalevski’s plan, but not its realisation, because it simply was not possible with the available concrete panels. However, the flat was no longer a combination of its walls, but a constantly evolving ‘property’ and ‘instrument’ of new types of social relationships (Corsín Jiménez, 2003: 140). The social relationships, reaching the most extreme representation in the last two decades, in terms of how far inhabitants alter the materiality of *panelki*, begin to unfold (and are

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\(^4\) Institute of Typisation and Industrialisation in Construction (ITIS).

\(^4\) There was an established norm by the regime whereby it was determined that to satisfy the individual housing needs, “9 square metre per inhabitant” were optimal (Arhitektura, 1960: 11). However, in 1961, the Law for the approval and application of the wholesome city plan for Sofia almost doubles the norm to 15 square metres.
reflected on the walls of the flat) as individual inhabitants are faced with filling in the gaps and constructing everyday lives for themselves and their families. With this normative space, the socialist regime introduces a direct connection between the home and the construction of a modern socialist citizen, whose needs and proper socialisation in this new built environment, corresponded with a universalised measurement. So the panelki, before they are built en masse, had a strong foundation and ideological connection – both as individual flats inaugurating new socialist citizens and as housing systems introducing new ways of life. As will be demonstrated below, these rights will be further strengthened in the 1970s with the introduction of personal property in the Constitution.

In 1967 and 1968, Arhitektura dedicates several pages to a Q&A format where respected architects offer opinions on three questions, two of which directly concerned the life of panelki:

**Question 1.** How do you understand the problem regarding the creation of industrial architectural-artistic aesthetic to settlements ... and what is the role of the architectural ensemble as the source of artistic principle?

**Question 3.** Are the new housing complexes being built in the right way, and do they meet all the criteria for the fulfilment of the cultural-byt needs of their inhabitants? (Arhitektura, 1967: 36; Arhitektura, 1968: 36)

The answers are overwhelmingly critical, with a focus on the homogeneity of the built form, the sizes of flats, and the lack of colour. According to one particularly negative opinion in 1968 by architect Petko Evrev,

The process of homogenisation and depersonalisation of the individual qualities of our towns and villages cannot but worry us and make us think about the fate of our towns and villages tomorrow and how we can preserve their individual differences. (Evrev, 1968: 38)

These arguments coincide almost identically with the grievances voiced by Tomalevski in 1986, albeit in far more personal terms. Throughout the coming years, the architectural community continues to highlight the growing disdain with panelki, the culmination of which is a direct take on Mladost in 1974 by architect Zdravko Genchev (Genchev, 1974: 32-34). Genchev underlines the unresolved problems with the scope and impact a project like Mladost has in Bulgaria. He writes,

The industrialised construction of the housing complexes introduces, with a high degree of urgency, the problem of the role of the architect in the period between vision and realisation. Despite the technological
limitations, the key role of the architect to organise the housing environment according to certain ideas is undeniable. But in the realisation period, the roles are flipped and the architect is left with the tragic role of a consultant without consequential voice, while the investors and especially the stroitel’i are granted extensive rights. ... The anonymity of architecture lowers the artistic requirements, turning itself into a barrier to the creation of high artistic material values, which leads to the unification of the surrounding built form. (Genchev, 1974: 34, emphasis added)

In little more than a decade, the panelki go from experimental four- and six-floor buildings to the universal solution to the housing problem. Within those years, the promise of architectural progress through industrialisation fades from view as it becomes clear that aesthetics and konstruktsiia would fall victim to the pressing needs to build hundreds of thousands of dwellings fast. In the section that follows, the architectural discourse will be contrasted with the growing power and influence of the planner and engineer in Bulgaria during those years. Because, as the belief in the overarching positive power of panelki fades, the hope in the expansion and optimisation of the internal spaces of flats gains significant ground. Perhaps, as the early writings of planners show, there could be a way to counteract the overarching limitations of dwellings by carving out maximum comfort and space for individuals in their flats.

In the chapters that follow, I examine how this decision is internalised by individuals and how, unintentionally, this decision to leave the panelki essentially as blank (or grey) canvases results in a unique process of patched rejuvenation in the last three decades. What is particularly important to note here is that architects were aware from the very beginning of the shortcomings of this institution, criticising the neglecting of architecture as a powerful social condenser. However, while Tomalevski and many of his peers seemed to express outright disgust at what was to be built from their plans, their predictions and fears were never fully played out. The panelki, for all their problems, turned out to be a lot more flexible and susceptible to the konstruktsiia of the individuals living inside. Whereas Tomalevski feared individuality would succumb under the homogenous grey concrete, what in fact has happened is quite the opposite – the brittle concrete being moulded to extremes by individuals seeking to distinguish themselves via their home.

During my interview with Lozanov, he said that Tomalevski’s revolt was wholeheartedly supported by his colleagues: “back then, our opinion of panelki was not flattering by any means. The way things were done went directly against the logic of architects, limiting our vision and imagination and forcing us to work
with a precise number of flats that needed to be built.\textsuperscript{50}\textsuperscript{50} This statement is so striking, particularly when juxtaposed with another one, made by Kalin Kosturski, an engineer and planner responsible for many of the early \textit{panelki} constructions. Kosturski was a planner working with SofProekt, which was the largest architecture firm before 1989 – and where Tomalevski worked, too. However, Kosturski was part of the ‘Typological Planning’ Department, which was responsible for the construction of each individual \textit{panelka}. Subsequently, in 2006, Kosturski was commissioned by Sofia’s chief architect, Petar Dikov, to map out all the \textit{panelki} and their typologies in \textit{Mladost} – Figure 5 was provided by Kosturski and was part of that project. In our conversation, Kosturski told me,

\textit{Mladost doesn’t have an author}. It’s a construction system. Everything is planned and decided before the building starts. To the smallest details – including where the holes for the sockets and switches in the wall panels would be. Everything was precise. In its best years, the \textit{Domostroitelen Kombinat} (DK) was building 12,000 flats per year. (Personal conversations, emphasis added)

The discrepancy here between \textit{konstruktsiia} and \textit{stroitel’stvo} is clear because the emphasis falls on anonymity in \textit{Mladost}. There is a clear distinction in what \textit{Mladost} was for the architects – an opportunity to experiment and transform the social life of tens of thousands coming to the big city; and what it was for the planners – “a construction system” without an author. According to Kosturski and another planner, Stavri Stavrev, who both worked on the creation and implementation of the prefabricated typologies, there was an on-going conflict between the architects and the DK. The DK resisted demands for flexibility and insisted on replicating \textit{panelki} because it was easier, faster, and the margin of error was lower. In other words, it was simply more efficient when it came to the incredibly high demand at the time. That high demand also required a huge workforce. The more complex the mechanisation and prefabrication, the more sophisticated and trained that workforce needed to be – and there simply were not enough highly trained individuals. So, the planners began to look at things from the inside out to try and make improvements to the individual flat, seeing that the technological challenges meant the overall logic of \textit{stroitel’stvo} would remain permanently unchanged. According to Kosturski,

\textit{We were all trying, painstakingly trying, to make the interior arrangements cosier. We were trying to connect the kitchen with the living room because it’s much better, but it created large gulfs within the \textit{panelka}. Its structure was too rigid and we couldn’t do anything about it.} (Personal conversations)

\textsuperscript{50} Interview conducted in May 2018.
And so, a new development began, where the primary focus inside panelki was the improvement and upgrades of typologies in order to make the flats and byt more spacious and comfortable for the people living there. Look closely at Figure 5 and you will see the different typologies colour-coded. Those colours roughly correspond to the ways in which Mladost was populated with panelki from 1965 onwards. In the top left, where Block 52 is in Mladost 1, you see the largest diversity in terms of prefabrication – starting with those marked in blue, built according to the ‘Zemliane’ typology (Bs-2-64, coloured blue in Figure 5) that was imported from the USSR. What distinguished this first prefabricated system is that the metal cases in which the concrete walls were cast were 3.20 metres wide, which, according to Kosturski, would turn out to “simply be too small for a living room.” What distinguishes Bs-2-64 panelki is they tend to be eight-floors with the elevator stopping in between floors. Construction according to this system began in 1964, meaning they were the very first ones to be built in Mladost. Block 45, which is adjacent to 52 and where I conducted a portion of my primary research, is an example of this panelka typology. Early on, architects noted that the size of these flats fell beneath the minimal required space per inhabitant (see Takieva, 1968) of 15 sq. m per inhabitant.

From this first typology onwards, it is a race to adapt the rigid panelki system to create better flats – flats that had living rooms made with panels 3.60 metres wide; flats that had two toilets and a bathroom; flats that had balconies. In fact, Kosturski and many other young planners were tasked with adding external balconies to existing typologies, because, as he told me, “people in the 1970s really started desiring balconies.” From the ‘Zemliane’ dwellings, you get the slightly upgraded Bs-VIII-Sf (orange in Map 1), which have more spacious living rooms and better balconies. Then, with the Bs-69-Sf and its upgraded Bs-69-Sf/UD/ (green), the prefabricated construction found its final form. Block 52 is a version of this typology, but is in many ways a bespoke panelka because it is only one section of three entrances and six floors, which is unique in Mladost. With 709 total blocks built according to this typology, it is by far the most widespread and optimised version in Mladost (Sofia Municipality Records, 2015: 2). In fact, if you look at Map 1, you can see that the entire Mladost 1a, much of which was constructed in the 1980s and contains those above-mentioned corner sections, is marked in green and was therefore entirely constructed according to the Bs-69/UD/ typology.

So, Mladost was built according to these three core typologies and it is therefore no wonder Tomalevski claimed he could no longer recognise his own project. There was an on-going discussion in the Arhitektura magazine that suggests the dethroning of the architect is a process only present in the construction of panelki – any other type of dwelling, both public and private, was held to a much
higher normative standard and followed a different set of aesthetic and artistic rules. But panelki, guided by the new Zhivkov principles of 'standardisation, unification, homogenisation,' simply could not live up to these promises. Therefore, according to the architects, it was these constant technological limitations faced by the regime, not industrialised construction per se, that resulted in the grey monstrosity. According to Genchev,

We are facing a paradoxical circumstance where the normative standards are only valid for cooperative housing construction or individual projects built according to different construction systems, while the panelki, which is the largest chunk of the housing stock in the capital, cannot measure up to these norms ... One of the key reasons for the sameness of panelki is the poor choice of typologies, which are created by the DKs. Reduced to two, three kinds, they are built in series and are only distinguished by their railings and some additional colourings. (Genchev, 1974: 33).

If the normative ideal for social condensation was the 'wine glass', to follow Tomalevski’s metaphor once again, what resulted could barely even classify as a ‘teacup’ from an architectural point of view. Mladost, as every prefabricated neighbourhood, was a compromise – between the needs for housing and the insufficient resources and technology. Curiously, despite all the fears of architects, primarily Tomalevski, that homogeneity in the built environment was destructive to human creativity, the end result counter-intuitively encouraged people to fill in the gaps themselves. Mladost became a personal mission and goal for each inhabitant looking to create a home (something) out of the bare grey walls (nothing).

4.4 ‘Zhivkov’s Face in a Newspaper, Covering a Hole in My Ceiling’

In these early panelki years, the negative outlook by architects and the wholehearted attempts by planners and engineers to make some quick “fixes” to the individual replicas they were responsible for resulted in a sort of incomplete scenario where it was up to inhabitants to turn the four walls into something with character. In many cases, the situation was so desperately poor, as some of the oldest inhabitants of Block 45 recall, that when they moved in in 1965-6, there were gaping holes in the corners of their floors and ceiling where the different panels were joined together. Another resident, in his early 40s, who recently suffered a large fire in his flat, saw the bare panels in the living room for the very first time as a result. Looking down at the corner gaps in the floor, he pulled out empty bags of cement, newspapers dating back to the 1960s, and other materials used by stroitel’i as filler when they were building the block. I’ve heard many stories like this – people move in, find holes with newspapers, and
begin scouting for neighbours or stroitel’i working on other blocks to lend them a hand, tools, or cement so they can fix up their flat. One resident in Block 52 always joked that communism ended the day he removed Todor Zhivkov’s prying face on a newspaper front page from his ceiling.

These introductory years of life in panelki were marked by incessant shortages of materials and skilled labour, so it was up to the inhabitants themselves to fix everything wrong they had inherited from the DK and their stroitel’i. According to Kosturski, one of the biggest problems was how the piping systems tended to actually be implemented, as opposed to how they were supposed to be implemented:

We would draw up the piping near the front door, then they would build them on the back of the bathroom wall, which was actually really inconvenient, and of course, caused incessant leaks. The DKs always looked to do it in the fastest and easiest way, without making any changes to the master plan. (Personal conversations)

Even within the engineering plan, there were eventual discrepancies and shortfalls, just like the overall architectural plan. So, the deeper one gets into the actual structure and history of each block, the clearer it becomes how far from its original intent it was, leaving it up to mostly non-professionals to literally step in and fill the gaps. This creates a new schism, one in which architects and planners take the same side. They are stuck in between the attempts of individuals to transform their byt from the inside out and the rigidity of the DK and their inability to adapt the prefabrication system and listen to the concerns of both architects and planners. As will be shown in later chapters, this scenario changes after the fall of the regime, when the professions of plumbers, mechanics, and construction workers multiply under new private initiatives and the inhabitants slowly become dependent on their expertise to find solutions to these original problems reach extreme levels.

In the years between 1964-1975, from this constant conflict between the DKs, architects and the engineers, a new subject of change is introduced – the participating inhabitant. Neither just a pawn in the overarching game of architecture and ideology, as originally feared by Tomalevski’s and ‘great concrete sin’, nor that ‘capricious’ homeowners, never satisfied with the built form of panelki, as described by Kosturski, the panelki inhabitant was forced from the very beginning to make lasting decisions about the organisation, aesthetics and functionality of the seemingly rigid and inflexible home.

This notion of everyday life, which has both social and spatial iterations, is where we find people, both during socialism and after, when they leave their place of
work and confront the emptiness of their room. It is possible to reconstruct their lived experiences, piecing memories together “through scars, marks, zones of uncertainty” (Gospodinov, 2016: 30, original emphasis). It is there that we can actually test the level of disciplinisation of the individual by the physical structure so feared by Tomalevski. It is also there that we can trace the individual and unique signature of everyday life within the overarching palimpsest of panelki. Because it is possible to show that, despite the obvious rupture in 1989 and the subsequent impact it has on institutions and everyday life, there are earlier signs of this gradual artistic oeuvre that begin to express themselves onto the conflicted and unfinished concrete walls from the day they were first erected.

The comparison in later chapters between practices in Blocks 45 and 52 shows similarities, but it also shows a clear progression in the ingenuity and boldness of these internal interventions as the years go by and the regime is nearing its demise. So, instead, what I would like to focus on here is something else that affected how inhabitants approached their flats in the first place and that thing is the changing notion of “home” and home ownership in the early 1970s, which, according to some Bulgarian scholars, bestowed a new juridical power to Bulgarian home owners and changed the way they would interact with their newly personal property.

4.5 The Introduction of Personal Property

Bulgaria's socialist history, in terms of the relationship between architecture and ideology, is classified by three overarching periods, corresponding to the changing visions about the ways in which the new socialist citizen is to be catalysed. The last period, with which this thesis is concerned, begins in 1971 with the so-called “Zhivkov Constitution” and its “program for the construction [meant here as stroitel’stvo] of an ‘advanced socialist society’” (Stanoeva, 2016: 13).

According to the Article 1 of the Citizens' Ownership Act of 1971, the citizens of Bulgaria can,

Own, in their personal capacity, real and mobile property to satisfy their own needs, and those of their families ... The State protects personal property obtained legally and with hard work and spurs on citizens in their attainment of homes and other property. (Constitution of People's Republic of Bulgaria, 1971)
The fact that this introduction of *de facto* private property, disguised in seemingly anti-capitalist language, is officially engrained in the Bulgarian Constitution is no coincidence. At the time it was conveniently conveyed by the Party that this law responds to the deep connections between the individual and their home in Bulgaria. I argue that the motives for these changes reflected a calculated economic policy. In the entire socialist bloc, the means of production were largely, to varying degrees, appropriated by the Party – particularly with regards to the construction of panelki. However, on the side of ownership, there were three main types of property that existed in different iterations across the bloc – publicly owned, cooperatively owned, personally owned. Some countries, like Hungary, had high rates of privately owned and cooperatively owned (Fehérváry, 2013) housing in the 1980s that resulted from the thawing of the regime and instituted reforms. In Bulgaria, by comparison, over 90% of Bulgarians were homeowners before the fall of the regime (Palacin and Shelburne, 2005; Andersen, et al. 2013).

Starting in the early 1970s, the Bulgarian regime differed from other socialist regimes, where cooperatives and rent-based system were predominant, by offering subsidies and low interest-rate loans to help individuals purchase homes. This is an ideological compromise coinciding with the deepening economic crisis of the exploding housing crisis. The lack of housing and the huge demand meant that thousands of young, working families were accumulating savings for real or mobile estate that were just sitting in the national bank. The large-scale accumulation of savings meant larger purchasing power without anything to spend them on. This created a huge bubble and an impending economic crisis. To alleviate this problem and align individuals to the new ‘advanced socialist society’ as participating citizens, the state once again turned to panelki as panacea. According to Parusheva and Marcheva, “buyers had to pay at least 40% of the total price, the money being stored in a special ‘Housing Construction Fund’ held by the Bulgarian Investment Bank (one of the two state banks that remained after the nationalisation in 1947)” (Parusheva and Marcheva, 2010: 206).

Before we continue, there is a small caveat that must be addressed. The notion of personal property is particularly important in the case of Bulgaria because it was a legitimate and key juridical transformation aimed specifically at the utilisation of savings and the entrance of passive individuals into a new social contract with the state. This stands in strict contradiction to the arguments made by Dandolova deeming the notion of ‘personal property’ a loophole,

*Found for producing, preserving and increasing private housing property under socialist conditions. The term “private” was replaced by “personal.” The explanation was that each individual needed certain personal items,*
including a personal living space, hence, the minimal size of the living space required by a person or family was defined as “personal,” not “private.” (2002: 241)

This is an important watershed moment marking a transition from the normative requirement of a minimum amount of personal space to the official juridical right to own that personal space. However, Dandolova’s analysis implies conscious altruism on the part of the regime, rather than simply anti-capitalist propaganda – the ultimate gift to the newly inaugurated juridical subjects, independent homeowners from the state. Her perspective is limited in its reach and applies a very one-sided view to a deeply complex issue. As argued above, there are issues, both economical and ideological, that justify this rather unusual prioritisation of personal property from such an early stage. In other countries, like Poland and Hungary, the loosening of property rights and the creation of small businesses was the result of the gradual delegitimisation of the socialist regime, not a calculated move by that regime, in fact, to further infiltrate and grip its society.

On the other hand, the argument made by Parusheva and Marcheva that there is a deep historical connection between the individual and the right to own land, which is also reflected from the early years of the socialist regime, is also something I do not fully agree with. According to them, citing Property Law Number 92, the term “personal property” first appears in a 1951 law back. Parusheva and Marcheva argue that this is the real start of a long process whereby the socialist regime was domesticated in Bulgaria more than in other countries, because the regime, from early on made “concerted efforts to meet the essential wishes of the people for their own home” (Parusheva and Marcheva, 2010: 197). Before panelki, it is impossible to argue about ‘meeting the wishes of people to own their home’ as the entire socialist regime in Bulgaria, with regards to the housing stock, is marked by incessant waiting times, often years, insufficient housing and oftentimes, particularly in the 1950s, outright abuse by the authorities.

It is key to note the introduction of personal property into the Constitution, the moment it becomes a juridical right of every citizen, as the historical moment when the social contract between regime and individual, made concrete via panelki, changes in Bulgaria. From that moment on, officially, there is a new game in town whereby citizens have a vested interest in the system – their home – that becomes their primary space for microresistance, or being vnye from the regime. Importantly, unlike other socialist regimes, primarily in Central Europe, these microresistances are never overtly intentional, political, anti-communists, or aimed at overthrowing the regime. Instead, as can be clearly shown by individual interventions by inhabitants, these practices are aimed at carving out
difference, a limited freedom within the already existing ideological frame. In other words, the failed productivity of the social condenser is so counter-active and unexpected because it is so personalised and heterogeneous. Each inhabitant, mostly independently of others, is trying to carve out a life for themselves, a byt, in their panelka. They are attempts to gain a semblance of control over the emptiness of daily life under socialism, creating a deterritorialised space that is both inside and outside the regime. That process continues – rather than starting – in post-socialism, reaching its critical mass after 2000, when the imagination and fantasy of what a panelka can become, physically, without folding onto itself, reaches new levels.

However, having the right to personal property is not the same as actually owning a flat. This is where the notion of the gift comes into play. Because the deficit was so drastic and the demand so high, not every citizen with the juridical right to personal property, the economic means, or the immediate requirement (there were several categories of need that placed candidates, like young families with several children, at the top), got a flat. Many had to wait years, some did not get the flat they wanted, and others never even got one. What I found from my research is that, just like the productive failure of the panelka social condenser, the normative power of personal property had little impact on the ground. What mattered was whom you knew (vruzki), what you could offer (blat), and how well you understood the bureaucratic system. The discrepancy in access meant some people had a better claim to personal property than others and it affected how they approached family planning, finances, and their entire social status. Those that received the flat they needed knew it was a gift – yes, they had to pay for it, like everyone else, but not everyone was given the chance to buy. This is a nuance that is often missed when discussing the notion of personal property and it is crucial when trying to understand why the social fabric of Mladost is diverse at first look, but shows clear patterns of the types of families that gained access.
Plates

Figures 1-4: Outtakes from the blueprint for Tomalevski vision for *Mladost*. (Tomalevski, et al., 1964: 28-29). Figure 1 shows the view from the neighbourhood of *Iztok*; Figures 2-4 show a large-scale look at the *mikroraiion*. 
Figure 5: *Mladost’s prefabrication typologies*
Chapter Five: Carving Out the Material Culture of Everyday Life

5.1 The New Panelki Flat Owners

Every panelka flat contains a myriad of stories – each of which opens up in multiple directions upon closer inspection. What has been shown in the previous chapter about the discursive conflict concerning the space, place, and aesthetics of panelki, both on a state level and within the academic circles, is that the normative backbone of the mass housing\textsuperscript{51} social condenser was abandoned from the offset. The main reasons were the overwhelming need for housing and the overarching scarcity of resources and expertise. By the 1970s, when the concept of personal property was introduced, panelki were stripped of their ideology and role as social condenser – in terms of reconstructing everyday life under socialism to be replicated \textit{en masse} by engineers and planners, tasked with packing as many people in as humanly possible. It was an industrialised solution to a huge urbanisation problem in a perpetual state of deficit. The hollowing out of panelki from normative meaning and the distancing of state power from life inside required inhabitants to take charge of the homemaking process – from painting the walls to levelling out the floors and hacking other inconsistencies in the interior design (like closing in a balcony). This process of remont – a paradox in itself because what is new should not require a repair – is how inhabitants tried to carve out lives for themselves, enforcing individual tastes and designs upon a space that was theirs, alter the material reality marked by absolute homogeneity, and test the malleability of concrete.

This chapter will contrast the social fabric of the original inhabitants in Blocks 45 and 52, analysing how they approached the reconstruction of their domestic spheres. This is the start of that palimpsestuous relationship between human subject and the built environment that underscores the way everyday life evolved and adapted in \textit{Mladost}. It is one that starts under socialism and reaches its pinnacle in the decades after socialism's demise. There is a silent continuity, rather than the often-assumed contrast, of how everyday life presented itself materially pre- and post-1989. This chapter will focus on the conflict and eventual consolidation between the original social fabrics of Blocks 45 and 52 and will therefore, loosely, only consider life under socialism. In the next and final chapter, the way these processes expand in the decades that follow will be analysed.

Panelki life is not a process – as \textit{Mladost}'s architect Bogdan Tomalevski had gravely feared – that results in 'people who start to resemble their home'. It is not it a structuralist process, as argued by Murawski, of a centralised

\textsuperscript{51} It is only fitting that the construction system was called a 'skeletonless' system (\textit{bezskeletna konstruktivna sistema}).
architecture exuding power over a city either. Nor is it a more fluid, albeit still structuralist, early Foucaultian disciplinary process, whereby a (professional) institution, always including a spatial iteration – be it a prison, army barracks, asylum, or school – excludes individuals from “a rather undifferentiated mass” (Rabinow, 1984: 7) and creates “personal and social identities and categories by a process of division” (Foucault, 1982: 208).

The social life of panelki is much more complex and bi-directional, where the architectural power and ideology are counteracted by the minutia of countless new homeowners working to create something out of nothing. Unlike Murawski’s dominanta, what is observed here is the anonymous dominance of concrete banality, within which inhabitants try, by being vnye, or outside socialist ideology and aesthetics, to carve out distinct spaces for themselves. It resembles Foucault’s later work, where the relations between the human subject and the overarching institutions are more intertwined and open-ended, more about micropowers than domination. Those processes concern the “way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject” (Foucault, 1982: 208). For the first time in Foucault’s work, with this introduction of “subjectification” (Rabinow, 1984: 11), the human subject is given a platform for spontaneous performance. They are active participants capable of self-formation. The operations affect not only the human body, in the way that a soldier is moulded through and within their barracks, but also their identity, because they take reflect their “thoughts” and “conduct” (Foucault, 1982: 208).

As in the case of the socialist regime and its various reiterations of censorship and self-censorship that regiment people’s public and private lives, Foucault’s work on operations of subjectification also entails figures of authority (for example, in the History of Sexuality, it is the medical professional or confessor). Within the panelki specifically, those figures include the domoupravitel, who corresponds with the Soviet domkom, the housing committees tasked with enforcing the “correct socialist use of space” (Buchli, 1999: 165), and the maistor. In panelki, the domoupravitel encouraged the everyday performance of state-approved socialist behaviour. And the maistor encourages the material

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52 Every tenth citizen of the active population had been a secret agent, collaborating with the state security apparatuses in Bulgaria (Lozanov, 2016: 14).
53 Everyday life determines conpanelka had a permanent caretaker, called domoupravitel – the literal translation of which is house-manager, but whose duties were far-reaching. The domoupravitel would concern themselves with the state of the building, the upkeep of common areas, as well as individual flats; they would resolve quarrels and pay the bills for the shared costs. But more than that, they were the instigators of what acceptable socialist behaviour was. According to writer and former minister Julian Popov, “if you have a dossier and you read it and find approving comments in it about your everyday life, it most likely means you have had a good neighbourly relationship with the domoupravitel” (2014, accessed online).
54 A mixture between a craftsman and a construction worker. The word originates from ‘maestro’ and it designates the wide-ranging skills (typically of a man) required to ‘fix up’ or repair a home.
reconstruction and permanent deviation from socialist norms of homogeneity and standardisation.

As noted in the last chapter, the lives individuals chose to lead inside the protected personal property was the most preciously kept secret of all the state secrets in socialist regimes. It is often argued, when it comes to the internal transformations inside the panelka that the biggest changes occurred after those flats, and states respectively, opened up and re-emerged in Europe once again (Fehérváry, 2011, 2013). That the renegotiation of what a panelka home was began with Western influences, like the ‘American kitchen’, or new gadgets, like air conditioners, etc. But this chapter will show that the processes of transformation of space, mirrored by processes of self-understanding (subjectification), in the Bulgarian panelka are visible after the introduction of personal property and the ultimate recusal of state ideology and architectural power from the domestic space. It will be shown what happens with the everyday subject after 5 pm (Gospodinov, 2016: 23), after they have finished work and have encapsulated themselves within their concrete walls. In the words of writer Georgi Gospodinov, this is the no-man’s-land between the overtly politised socialist day and the always unseen and underrepresented socialist night (ibid.). That time of limited freedom included weekends, when individuals could devote to themselves, to others, and to their home. That time, in fact, was a time of a very particular obsession – the remont, in part because the renovation of the panelka flat, from the start, was seen as holding the key to turning a flat into a home, to turning it into a hearth, a space of difference. That obsession is not a post-socialist phenomenon. It coincides with the inauguration of a new socialist subject – the homeowner, the person with a certain power over a material space that has lost its normativity. It is an obsession of living in a state of deficit, and a time of waiting – waiting for a flat, waiting for furniture, waiting for a fridge.

With that obsession, of course, comes a new, but hidden, authority figure – the maistor: the, typically male, subject coming, always after 5 pm or during the weekends, to fix the mistakes made by the engineers of the panelka, to fill the holes in the ceilings, to level the floors; or simply to add tiles or linoleum to the bare concrete slabs, to create a distinguishable space, where the homeowner counteracts the socialist regime by overcoming the bare (minimum) limits it has introduced in terms of what the domestic space ought to look like. The material world and individual identities are not fixed – they are dynamically ephemeral. According to Buchli, “by applying a little bit of paint, inserting a strategically placed thin wood partition, or simply rearranging the furniture of a room, one can assert and subvert entirely different and contradictory cosmologies of social being” (1999: 187).
With each remont, the subject is chipping away at the institution of panelki, at the entire prefab civilisation of sameness, at all that was deemed "essential, obligatory" and immovable in the original blueprint, and carving out a constantly changing space that is "singular, contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints." (Foucault, 1984a: 46). This sense of transgression is critical to the underlying philosophy of Foucault’s work – the historical ontology of ourselves, or, in other terms, the history of "different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects" (Foucault, 1982: 777). In my research, this translates into a concrete investigation not of formal structures, like the Palace of Culture in Warsaw or the Narkomfin in Moscow, but of the mitigating physical evidence and everyday life events that constitute people as “subjects of what we’re doing, thinking, saying” (Foucault, 1984a: 46).

It is the interactions between flat owner and panelka that will be examined here – not in coordination with the macro, overarching political and socio-economic changes, but on the micro level of that which is banal – the constant, often superfluous, transformations of the domestic space that loosely follow the introduction of personal property in the 1970s. The chapter will juxtapose and contrast the stories and photographs collected from inhabitants in Block 45 and Block 52 to showcase the incredibly different microcosms that flourished within the seemingly homogenous institution of panelki. More specifically, it will be shown how the individual histories and identities of inhabitants had profoundly different effects on which flat they would inhabit, how long they would have to wait for it, the means through which it was purchased, and lastly, as a result, how much that flat’s material reality would be imagined anew. These processes, which are dynamic and layered, yet leave permanent traces, scars and signs on the panels, can be read like palimpsests and used as visual cues that inhabitants can use to bridge the past with the present – to remember the minutiae of the banality of everyday life under socialism – from where the holes in the wall came from (were there paintings, icons?), to when the big remont happened and what has changed since then. The panelki social fabric is a microcosm of socialist life, and what happened inside those flats, after 5 pm, is, as such, a synecdoche for the kind of things – DIY in a state of deficit – that everyone, from party cadres to the party enemies, had to deal with in order to carve out lives for themselves. And the two blocks at the centre of this research, just feet away from one another, show the incredible extents of transformation in the domestic space that occurs because of generational, material and social differences.

Block 45 is an example of one of first mass produced concrete panel typologies – ‘Zemliane’, which was introduced in 1964 (it was discontinued in 1980) according to a Soviet manufacturing model. In Sofia, according to engineer Stavri Stavrev, 709 buildings were completed. The people who moved into these panelki, and in Block 45 specifically, had a very distinct background, in terms of
demographics, culture, and lifestyle; Block 52, on the other hand, was built according to the most widespread typology – Bs-69-Sf /UD/. One of the first and one of the last panelki, now existing in close proximity in Mladost. However, as will be shown, Block 52 is a unique building in terms of how, when, and why it was constructed, and by extension, who was fortunate enough to secure a flat there. There is literally no other panelka in Mladost like it. Built in 1986, the building was inhabited by a new generation of young families.

As was laid out in the Chapter Two, the focus on these two specific panelki is important to the overall argument. The two may seem almost identical in their external aesthetic and minimalist socialist interior design (that which was provided when inhabitants first moved in), but these blocks are two palimpsestuous iterations of the unstable, constantly changing totality of the everyday life in post-socialism. They are concrete examples of what makes this institution profoundly (counter) productive in its failure to condense society, because their transformations are unpredictable in their material form, which is symptomatic of the larger changes in the social fabric in Bulgaria in its transition to post-socialism. As a result, however, that bareness forced many people to get creative, to experiment with new tastes and aesthetics, to essentially approach their flat as a painter does a blank canvas, or a sculptor – a moulder of clay. The only thing that is certain is that inhabitants of panelki attempted to carve out lives for themselves as a process of self-expression and understanding. The transformation of the domestic space is what helps piece together a larger conceptual portrait of the changes in the social fabric of Mladost, of Sofia and to a larger extent Bulgaria as a whole.

5.2 The Construction of Block 45 and Block 52

These two panelki in Mladost, perpendicular to one another (see Map 1), are so close, you can peak into the rooms of one from the other (Figure 1). Yet the two could not be more different. Block 45 was built according to a Soviet construction typology, called Bs-2-64 ‘Zemliane’ (later upgraded and renamed to Bs-2-6955). It is named after the factory where the panels were manufactured, known as Domostroitelten Kombinat 2 (DK2). Completed in 1969, it has eight floors, 14 entrances, 12 of which have three flats per floor, and two have two flats per floor. In each entrance, the elevator doors are located at the platform between floors (Figure 2). This typology also includes an external extension – balconies, a small one outside the kitchen, another, much larger outside the living room, made from a separate floor panel welded onto the façade. One of the

55 64 and 69 at the end of the typology denote the year when these typologies were used to in construction – 1964 and 1969 respectively.
The most distinguishing marks of this panelka typology is that its staircases protrude outside the external façade (Figure 3).

Inside, the rooms are considerably smaller than subsequent typologies. The building is constructed using two floor panels that are 5.76 metres long and 3.2 metres wide (Figure 4). The width of the panels determines the width of the bedrooms and living room, while the toilets and bathrooms separated using additional, thinner, wall panels. The flats are of varying sizes and orientations according to the specific block entrance (Figure 5). The most spacious flats have three rooms, while the smallest ones are single-room studios. The majority in Block 45, however, are one-bedroom flats. The biggest flats are 84 sq. m. Another important thing one can see from the floor plan in Figure 5 is that the bathroom and toilet are separate in some two-bedroom and all three-room flats. There is an individual toilet that shares the same panel wall and piping system as the kitchen sink. Then there is a separate bathroom with only a shower and sink (Figures 6-7). This internal plan, which I have experienced in many new-built constructions across Europe, would come to create major contentions for many families and would lead to some very interesting internal rearrangements.

Block 52 (Figure 8), on the other hand, was constructed in 1986 on a piece of land that used to be a playground in proximity to a kindergarten, according to Tomalevski’s original plan (see Map 1). It is one of the last panelki constructed in Mladost and remains a unique structure, because it is only six floors high and consists of three entrances with three flats per floor. It was built (loosely) according to the Bs-69-Sf /UD/ typology, whereby the /UD/ denotes an improvement on the original Bs-69-Sf. This was also the most widespread typology for constructing residential prefabricated buildings in Sofia, comprising 3,567 panelki (NISI, 1998). Bs-69-Sf /UD/ is also the rarest typology in Mladost 1, but the most widespread in Mladost 1a, 2, 3, and 4 (Map 1). That is due to the fact that the construction of Mladost 1 had begun before that improved typology was put into mass production in 1972 and Block 52 was added to Mladost 1 when construction there had already ceased.

What distinguishes it from other typologies is the introduction of the loggia – an internal balcony (Figure 9). Even more interestingly, Block 52 is the only panelka in Mladost 1 to include four-room flats (Figure 10). The block was built by an

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56 According to several engineers working on the construction of panelki, the USSR-imported metal kasi (moulds) used to pour the reinforced concrete in and shape the panels were limited in their size.

57 With the exceptions of Blocks 33, 34A and 34B, which were also custom-built projects realised by DK in Mladost 1 (but, crucially, were not made with prefabricated panels, have garages, and are five floors high).

58 The four-room flat was the Holy Grail of panelki, and upon close inspection, it seems that there are only a handful of them in the entire Mladost neighbourhood.
owner-occupied cooperative organised by the main factory responsible for prefabricated residential buildings, *Domostrotelelen Kombinat*, and the urban planning sector of the Municipality of Sofia. The two partners took over the land and manufactured the required prefabricated concrete parts in order to provide swift housing for the immediate relatives, primarily sons and daughters, of some of the higher echelons of power in Bulgaria. The building came with a number of perks, like repetitive and easy to remember phone numbers – which according to one inhabitant was because one of the neighbours given the chance to buy into the co-op was “high up” in the Post Office. Otherwise, the wait for a phone line was up to 5-6 years.

Here is how the cooperative worked. In return for the physical construction – *stroitel’stvo* – of Block 52, a number of the flats were reserved for the DK management and its employees. Another portion was reserved for employees of the municipality. Entrance A was predominantly reserved for the DK, while Entrance C – for the municipality. Entrance A is also where the only 4-room flats are located, where the total space is a very generous 111.7 sq. m. (Figure 10). Not only that, but the 3-room flats are more spacious (100.9 sq. m.) in Entrance A than the three-room flats in the other two sections of Block 52 (88.5 and 91.3 sq. m. respectively). Compared to Block 45, where the largest flat is 84 sq. m., and compared to the entire stock of *panelki* where the average sizes falls well below each of those, Block 52 is simply luxurious. This, in accordance with its distinct social fabric, creates a radical relationship between inhabitant and flat that, to a large extent, presupposes the more widespread heterogeneity that spread in the post-socialist period.

In many ways, these two blocks, standing side by side, embody the first and last remnants of the socialist housing experiment in the first large-scale neighbourhood, symbolically named *Youth*. What will be shown here, through a focus on these two structures, is how and why new iterations and self-reflexivities arise from the “newly visible fissures and cracks of the former system” (Alexander, Buchli, & Humphrey, 2007: 25).

### 5.3 A Social Profile of Socialist Inhabitants

In the last chapter, the question of personal property was discussed as a watershed moment, which changed the social contract between the socialist state and citizens in Bulgaria. The juridical right to own a piece of (personal) property was indeed incredibly important in terms of inaugurating a new, active, human subject whose flat was, to varying degrees, a space for carrying out microresistances against the regime; for resisting homogeneity and carving out alternative ways of living there.
For many people, as the case of Block 45’s first inhabitants shows, the right to own your flat was not a straightforward process. Due to a constant shortage of flats and widespread corruption at all levels, it was not enough to just have the money, or be high on the housing priority list, in order to get the keys to a panelka. There was an extensive hierarchy and those closest to the party apparatuses received the best flats first. This resulted in quite unexpected and diverse panelki microcosms – like in Block 45. In Block 52, where the makeup was more homogenous (it was build for relatives of those in power), it resulted in a very distinctive relationship between inhabitants and their flats. Again, just like the inauguration of the panelka as social condenser and its gradual productive failure, the juridical right of personal property was not applied equally to everyone and, in fact, cause incredible divisions. As I found out through my fieldwork, while everyone had a right to own, only the lucky ones got a panelka. Many had to wait for years, live with relatives, or rent smaller spaces until, finally, they could get their own flat. The panelki real estate business, like much under socialism, was a business of barter and vruzki, and it mattered greatly where you stood in the social hierarchy. If you were out of favour with the Party, the system was stacked against you; if you were in favour, you played by different rules. This was true across all aspects of life in Bulgaria. Personal property may have been guaranteed, but there were always immediate winners and loser under socialism. This was particularly visible on the panelki front because so many families were desperate for a home. It is one of the key reasons Block 52 was built – to provide luxury housing to relatives of those in power whose rights to personal property had not been inaugurated in practices.

Block 45 was ready in 1969, so some of its inhabitants have now lived there for nearly fifty years. More specifically, some of them had lived there for 27 years before Block 52 was built – some had even played football as kids on the green space, which preceded Block 52. The fact that it was constructed in 1969 meant that some inhabitants moved in as tenants, not homeowners. A couple in their 70s (Figure 11), who live on the eighth floor of Entrance 12, were only allowed to purchase that flat in 1980. According to Dimitar, the husband, he was paying rent until then,

The party forced us out from our house on Tsar Simeon Street, where we had a yard and there was a fence that separated our house from that of Georgi Dimitrov. They knocked our house to make him a museum. So they moved us here.\(^{59}\)

\(^{59}\) Personal conversation, April, 2017.
Balkantourist was the organisation in charge of the expropriation of his family’s house, so it was also in charge of arranging his move into Block 45. They had purchased it and Dimitar was paying them rent. But when they moved in in 1971, the flat they were supposed to move into already had tenants – the family of an “army man, a Colonel.” So they moved into the other one on the floor, which was much smaller. Dimitar was moving in with his wife, 40-day old daughter and his parents, while, the Colonel had a three-person family. “But you couldn’t go talk to him then,” Dimitar says.

And Dimitar Vuzlev’s family was by no means the only one relocated to Mladost after a home was expropriated by the state. Dragomir and Ivan Ivanovi, two brothers, who I met in front of Block 45, shared a similar story. They live in Block 31, an older typology, Bs-VIII-Sf,

They tore our house in Krasno Selo and gave us a flat there. One bedroom, a living room and a kitchen. 67 sq. m. Our mother died in 2013 and now it’s just my brother and me. It’s a poor man’s tale inside.

A neighbour of theirs, Mrs. Stefanova, an elderly woman and former teacher, was also relocated to that block after her family house was seized. The story is a very common one, particularly in Mladost 1 because it was among the first panelki neighbourhoods where flats could be offered to newly made homeless people.

Over the next ten years, Dimitar sought permission from Balkantourist to buy the flat. The loan-based homeowner subsidy system was the predominant way many families with lower incomes were able to purchase flats. This was briefly touched upon in the last chapter, but is beneficial to discuss further here, in light of Dimitar’s story,

Here’s how we did it. The system was called the loan-points system. If you deposit 1,200 leva, that sum is then multiplied by the number of years it stays in the bank. So, let’s say you get 10 points over the course of the year. Your 1,200 leva become 12,000. Then the ranking system looks at those that have the most points. If there are 16 flats and 30 applicants, the people with the most points are the first to receive a flat. The greatest advantage was given to the so-called ‘fighters against fascism and

60 The oldest tour operator in Bulgaria established in 1948, right after the socialist take over power.
capitalism.’ Block 50\textsuperscript{63} – to the trade union. The active fighters are on the other side of the market, Blocks 63, 64 – they even have garages\textsuperscript{64}.

Curiously, according to Dimitar, because he was allotted the ‘Colonel’s’ flat, when he was finally offered a chance to buy it, the records still showed him as the owner of “flat 208”. “Here I’ve lived in 207 for 10 years, and the clerk told me, ‘that’s great, live wherever you want, but, on paper, you own 208,’ Dimitar says. Eventually, in 1980 Dimitar bought the flat for 12,500 lv. A sum that was significantly higher than the original price of the flats ten years prior.

Dimitar and his family’s story is a particularly interesting one because none of them were party members. In fact, according to him, they had always been against the regime and it had caused them problems – including the difficult journey to buy the flat. A case in point is a story his wife told me about a confrontation with a neighbour that occurred sometime in the late 1970s, when their daughter was about ten,

Our daughter was sitting in front of Block 50 and was telling jokes she heard at home. Some first-floor mother overheard her and she then told us, ‘Your daughter was telling jokes, you must be more careful with her.’

Like many other families in Block 45, the Vuzlevi have had several generations cohabit their flat, and as the case of their daughter shows, the deep generational divide that begins to arise in the later years is jarring here. The notion of the flat as a haven, a safe space from the party evoked by the neighbour and the hint of the panopticon-like surveillance in Mladost is not specific to the Bulgarian context. It has been noted across the region, and as discussed in the first chapter, according to Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic (1992: 91-92), “an apartment, however small, however crowded with people and things, kids and animals, is ‘ours’... everything beyond the door was considered ‘theirs’.”

This bifurcation is essential in the context of Mladost, and the context of personal property, because the inauguration of the homeowner was not a process in a vacuum – it was orchestrated by a socialist state seeking a new playing field where citizens were ordained a more active role and had a stake in the system. What the context of Block 45 offers that Block 52 does not is the actual value a flat can have for a family, particularly a family without connections. That value is not simply translated in terms of monetary value – its value in terms of

\textsuperscript{63} Block 50 (see Map 1) is parallel to Block 45 – Block 52 is in between the two.

\textsuperscript{64} Some of the few high-rising, monolithic in-situ cast concrete buildings in Mladost were constructed according to a system called edroploshten kofraz. These buildings are always higher than panelki and there are fewer of them, and therefore the flats were regarded to be more luxurious.
protection from the regime, a space of autonomy and air where, after 5 pm, inhabitants can be otherwise than they are during the daily performance of socialism. In the words of Dimitar, "our generation was a scared generation. Even when Zhivkov fell, the block was silent. We didn’t react. We didn’t dare."

In some ways, that attitude is reflected in the kinds of interventions people like Dimitar have undertaken in their flat. A flat of extreme hygiene and minimalist furniture (Figures 12-3), mimicking the early Soviet guidebooks about homemaking and uiut. According to Buchli, citing a 1924 guide for Sovety Proletarskoi Khoziaike [Advice for Proletariat Housewives], “let the proletariat house be light, spacious, decorated with flowers and only with those objects that preserve the health of the body” (1999:44). There are variables that underlie this particular relationship between inhabitant and flat, including a family’s earnings, the constant deficit of utilities like furniture, and more complex, generational concerns, all of which will be discussed below. For now, it is important to juxtapose the social life of a family like the Vuzlevi, who have lived in a panelka for 50 years, with the experiences of some of their neighbours.

5.4 The Secret Child of Socialism

Dodo and Mitko (Figures 14-15), as they are known in Mladost, are about the same age as Vuzlevi’s daughter. They have been neighbours since they were born and have since spent their whole lives living in entrance 12 of Block 45. Now they have families of their own, while also sharing the flats with their parents – after all, both flats belong to their parents. As such, how they reflect on their childhood years, as well as how they interact with their flats today, is incredibly different from the lived experience of the Vuzlevi family.

Dodo, Mitko, as well as Vuzlevi’s daughter, are different subjects than the ones this dissertation is primarily concerned with – adults and homeowners. The child in socialism is the smallest and most silent member of society. Yet, the performance of socialism beyond the panelki walls is powerfully enforced upon it. The child of socialism is forgotten while its parents “push and shove” against totalitarian life, writes Georgi Gospodinov (2016: 35-36). Interestingly, the silencing of the adolescent voice and the attempts to surveil and punish it are of predominant interest in Foucault’s later work on subjectification. His work is among the first to turn to the invisible life of the child and, in fact, is only slightly preceded by the inaugural book on the issue, Philip Aries’ Centuries of Childhood from 1960.

In Bulgaria, and more precisely in the context of the panelka, “the frail, innocent, yet also guilty figure in a melancholic resistance” (Gospodinov, 2016: 38) is
immediately reminiscent of a story concerning Vuzlevi’s daughter. A neighbour told them she had overheard their daughter make an ‘anti-communist’ joke on the street and scolded them for a politicised upbringing. There are, of course, countless other stories like that. Memories of childhood change with time and, if you ask Dodo and Mitko, their childhood was one of freely roaming the – then-unsaturated with panelki – Mladost, an idyllic childhood of open doors and late nights, to be juxtaposed explicitly with the dangers their own children face today. But, once demystified from the nostalgia of the past, grounded in specificity with relation to the flat they grew up in – where the marks on the doorframe showing their completion in growth rates remain – the memory of socialist childhood becomes more concrete.

It is, in its essence, a visual memory of the “socialist child/adolescent, its visual identity, the way in which it sees itself, as a collage of missing objects of desire, their wrappers, the dreamt up colours and the available black and white” (Gospodinov, 2011: 88-89). As will be shown below, there is a profound difference in the visual storytelling between the kids that grew up in the 1970s and those that grew up in the 1980s. There is also a significant difference in how their rooms were decorated, what furniture was even available, and how receptive they were to the hints of Western mass culture. Those rooms, the rarely talked about or seen by adults kids’ rooms, are valuable in the special self-representation of a new human subject. According to Gospodinov, who focuses on the history of leksikon65, “notebook is valuable because it, unlike the Pioneer or Komsomol66 organisations, is interested in you, not as part of a larger collected, but asks you personally and subjectively” (ibid.: 94). This, categorically, is true for the children’s room, too, yet, unlike the book, which is only periodically in the possession of a given individual, the room is either theirs entirely, or not at all, as in the case of Dodo, who shared his room with different members of his family.

For Dodo, the 1970s were years of neglect and deficit. He initially shared a room with his parents, but when they got divorced – with his mother only. His grandfather, on his mother’s side, had bought the flat and slept in the living room. Dodo’s uncle, his mom’s brother, lived in the second bedroom. “I never had my own room,”67 he says, as we sit in the living room where he and his wife now sleep. His sons – Alex (18) and Martin (15) – have now taken over his room. “When Alex’s girlfriend sleeps over – she comes once or twice a week – Martin comes to the living room and sleeps on the foldout couch,” Dodo says. It’s a

65 Makeshift notebooks which teenagers share with each other and write profiles about one another – a bit like the first conception of a Facebook wall.
66 The pioneer movement was one of the stages in the socialist youth movements in Bulgaria Komsomol, the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, was another.
67 Personal conversation, April 2017.
For Mitko, that story is a familiar one. Unlike Dodo, he had a room of his own and remembers how he would painstakingly look for “anything” to cover up the crooked walls. There were not a lot of options in terms of toys and clothes and “you just had to make the best of it and it was alright, because all the kids, me, Dodo, Vesko Maimunata, Petela, Naso, Yuri, were in the same boat.” Similar to Dodo, that childhood of deficit has had a profound impact on how Mitko remembers his youth and how he has approached the interior design of the room, now his young son’s room (Figures 16-18). There is a Thomas the Tank Engine bed, Spider-Man posters, and boxes overflowing with toys. Mitko says that his wife gets mad at him for constantly buying new toys and getting side-tracked with chores and duties, instead spending time playing with Lego or puzzles with his son. “I can’t help it – he asks me to help him build a ship and I get so into it, I can’t leave the room. These toys are incredible.” The kid’s room plays such an important role in the upbringing of children and what Mitko shows here is what he lacked when he was young still impacts him today. He recognises his “unhealthy” obsession with toys and it is notable how much time and money he spends turning his room into a children’s room that is beyond his wildest dreams as a child.

There are also a number of people, now in their late 30s and early 40s, who still live in their old rooms with their parents and oftentimes – in the same beds. The classic ‘triangle’ solution to a rectangular panelka room that is 3.60m wide places one bed along the window panel and another perpendicularly across the inner wall. That design solution remains in tact in dozens of flats that I have been in – very few of which allowed me to take photographs, oftentimes with apologies for the rooms being “too messy.” One family, in entrance 13 of Block 45, had both sons, who are slightly younger than Dodo and Mitko living together in the room, on single beds until 2017, even though the older brother was already a father in his own right. He has since moved out and lives in a building nearby, but the younger brother still lives in 45.

The visual histories and the role of the kid’s room changes between those born in the 1970s and 1980s. Here the example of Block 52 is valuable because it coincided with the ripple effects of Perestroika in the USSR, of liberalisation and the easing of the totalitarian grip. More importantly, the kids in 52 were, in some

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69 A nickname meaning monkey.
70 The rooster.
cases, a very strategic decision made in accordance with the purchase of the flat. Take the example of Margarita and Georgi Binevi\textsuperscript{71} and how they planned their family so that they can buy the flat. In the words of Margarita,

We took a housing credit – 20,000 leva. At the time, the law stated that if you had two kids, who were born less than four years apart, you get half of the remaining credit cancelled by the state. So I calculated my pregnancy with Ilyana so that we could get the deduction. I can’t explain to you how hard it was to buy a flat. It was not easy like saying, “we are a young family in need.” Not even a bit. There was a point-based system, but we would have had to wait another decade to qualify there.

Essentially, what would eventually become the kids’ room was simply a reward for their daughters, without whom the flat would never have been theirs. By then, around 1986, there was a growing youth culture with more choice about fashion, western music and film. Margarita remembers how her older daughter, Nadya, was quick to decorate her room as colourfully as was humanly possible.

This newfound glorification of childhood in the 1980s, the care and investment in the children’s room cannot be overstated. One example is the proliferation of pianos in Block 52 before 1990 – at least three on my count, one in Entrance A and two in Entrance C. First of all, finding and then buying a piano (that fits) was a rare luxury; then transporting that piano and carrying it up stairs, across S-shaped corridors into the room was another obstacle. But most of all, having a room both big enough for two beds and isolated enough from the rest of the house to permit piano practice is massive advantage Block 52 has in comparison to the panelki around it. The piano, and the supplementary policy of investing in and prioritizing your child, of expanding their worldviews and culture, is a striking contrast with some of the stories described in Block 45. The kid’s room was an ever-present space and haven for children’s independence.

These spaces – the children’s rooms of those that grew up in the 1970s and 1980s – are the spaces that belong to what is now the most active demographic in Bulgarian society. Yet they are also the spaces that stopped being kids’ rooms at the same time that Bulgaria stopped being a socialist regime – because the children growing up and becoming adults coincided almost exactly with the fall of socialism. In the words of Gospodinov, “their biographies are severed between their life under socialism and now, the time of the Transition. The end of their education coincides with the end of that about which they were being educated” (Gospodinov, 2011: 103).

\textsuperscript{71} Personal conversation March 2018.
5.5 DIY in a Perpetual State of Deficit

The interior design of the children’s room is a good starting point for a much broader and more complex discussion about the interventions inhabitants undertook to reimagine their cold, bare panelki flats. Approaches in Block 45 and Block 52 are similar in their intent, but vastly different in their extent. Block 52 has some astonishing cases whereby the supposedly immovable, brittle, and rigid concrete panel structure is opened up, moulded, and reshaped in innovative ways. But before we consider the extremes, let us begin with Block 45 and the earlier years of panelki life.

The debate which exposed the shortcomings of prefabrication in the previous chapter was not limited to mass housing. Bulgarian socialism followed its fellow totalitarian regimes closely in terms of its incessant labour and material shortages. To paraphrase János Kornai, deficit is the underlying connecting factor of the Soviet-style totalitarian system (1992: 10). This orthodoxy of the society of “shortage” has been explored in-depth by a multitude of scholars interested in the Soviet Bloc (see Kornai, 1980; Feher, Heller, Márkus, 1984; Landsman, 2005; Verdery, 2003), who all attribute a causal link between creating a dictatorship over the needs and wants of a society and the subsequent demise of that regime. However, as rightly pointed out by Ina Merkel, shortage is not an overtly limiting and destabilising thing, particularly in the context of the socialist societies. In fact, it is precisely in shortage economies or in times of shortage that individual consumer behaviour is often “marked by a remarkable ability to improvise” (Merkel, 2008: 326-7). For de Certeau, such spurts of spontaneous and improvised movements are tactical processes that “exploit loopholes and occupy the gaps in the fence left by the state” (1984: 32).

I argue that the life of deficit does not translate into a muse for creativity – that is too simplistic and a narrative propelled by the official regime discourses, particularly when looking at the changing social structure of panelki. Inhabitants often describe the deficit economy as a deficit of happiness – of lacking options, choices about how to lead your life, even privately. As shown by Gospodinov, in his comparison between written statements from when people were young and responses to them years later, “they even managed to find good in the fact that the system encloses you in a frame, ‘A system which encloses you in a frame … makes you more creative.’” (Gospodinov, 2011: 98). Such statements are only correctional ones, attempting to sanitise the will of the speaker in hindsight.

I follow Gospodinov in his assessment of socialism as a time in lieu – “it is one huge waiting-line towards communism. So what do we do while we wait, how do we kill the boredom before the ever-present promise of a new system?” (Gospodinov, 2016: 30, my italics). This is a far better assessment of the DIY
environment because it was not the shortage economy that got people creative; the creativity blossomed *in spite of it*. The push to leave a mark on your flat, to do things differently and reject the mass-produced and prefabricated material environment, was a process of subjectification. The shortage economy was a paradox in itself, a non-state of being because it was a broken system when even if people had money saved up, there was nowhere to spend it – this was the case for everything from a flat to a fridge. As Gospodinov writes – creativity doesn’t blossom in a system, which aims to mould you and ‘enclose you in a frame.’ Creativity, especially with regards to *remont* in *panelki*, is a microresistance by newly empowered homeowners to be different and to live differently within the protection of their isolated home.

Let’s use the example of how Dimitar Vuzlev bought the family TV in 1981 – “I took a vacation to wait in line for a month.” And then their car,

I put down a deposit of 1,500 *leva* and waited for 15 years for my number to come up. So I can buy a car. 1989, my number came up. It was a Friday afternoon. The options were Zhigul, Wartburg, Moskwitch, Skoda, that’s it. I was there at 4 pm. They told me come Monday. I sold my Zhigula on Saturday. Then Zhivkov came down. After 15 years of waiting for a soc car, I only ended up selling the one I already had.

According to Yurchak, without living in that paradox, without knowing its moral and material iterations, “without understanding the creative and positive meanings with which [citizens] endowed their socialist lives,” no one can comprehend how the ‘really existing socialism’ actually was (Yurchak, 2006: 9).

In the USSR in particular, the paradox of the productive and creative deficit, in relation to *panelki* reached its pinnacle. According to Susan Reid,

DIY advice literature and “handy hints” were published in household encyclopaedias, manuals for the “new settler,” and in popular magazines such as *Rabotnitsa* (Woman Worker), *Nauka i zhizn’* (Science and Life), *Poleznye sovety* (Helpful Hints), and *Sdelai sam* (Do It Yourself). Even the more specialist design journal *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR* (Decorative Art of the USSR), which focused largely on promoting the new discipline of industrial design, introduced a “Do-It-Yourself” rubric (“Svoimi rukami”: lit. “With your own hands”) in 1961, printing articles and diagrams on how to make bookshelves or “how to fit a kitchen. (2014: 98-99)

DIY practices were seen as a sort of remedy to further consumption and petit-bourgeois practices – and this is something studied in other contexts, too.
Perhaps most relevant is Kenedi’s 1981 study into the informal economy of DIY in Hungary during the socialist regime and how it was used to cope with shortages and deficit. Like in Bulgaria, DIY was used, out of necessity, to save time and improve comfort. In Hungary, Kenedi notes a specific phrase, “to throw oneself into building” (Belevágni az építkezésbe) when it came to home-making under socialism (Kenedi, 1981). Instead of buying, it was all about making it yourself, or in the words of Galina Orlova, “only someone who has been involved in the production of an object can rightfully take pleasure from that object” (2009: 84). Again, another paradox is revealed here, whereby value is granted to objects that have been produced by the subject – value is never external, which, with regards to art would make almost all output obsolete. Unlike the USSR, however, the presence of DIY was not as widespread in publications and media outlets. It was simply a personal necessity.

“There was nothing when we moved in,” is a sentence that every single panelka inhabitant that I have spoken with over the past years has uttered. Blocks 45 and 52 were “ready” for people to move in, but the flats were not liveable. As one inhabitant, Mihail Vladov, who is a former engineer residing a flat in Entrance A of Block 52, put it72,

This block is, as they say, do-it-yourself. They hand it over in a rough cut. Bare wall panels, no paint, some doors and windows and that’s it. I didn’t even take the toilets they were offering.

And Mihail, after all, moved in nearly twenty years after the Vuzlevi family, who remember going through the exact same process. According to Dimitar Vuzlev,

When we moved in, the block was in a dire state (laughs). There were gaps, leaks everywhere. I called maistori to at least put tiles – there were no tiles. Just concrete underneath and the rooms with linoleum and only the living room had parquet.

The story is the same in every flat – the only difference is the level of skill and the amount of social or financial capital. Some inhabitants, like Mihail, claim they made their home themselves, spare for some expert work required – like tiling. Others, like a large portion of his neighbours, required maistori and favours to get the process going. From then on, the process of homemaking was a slow and piecemeal attempt to put the puzzle together.

The role of blat economics (Ledeneva, 2006), or favours (vruzki) plays a substantial role in the transformation of the material culture of panelki in a

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72 Personal conversation May 2018.
world of deficit. Not just in terms of furnishing it or renovating it. The entire housing market in Bulgaria was based on a system of corrupt practices. Personal networks, the exchange of favours, and to some extent various forms of bribery are what stood between some inhabitants getting a flat and others not. The most extreme example is again Block 52, which was not state-owned, but a cooperative, therefore making transaction rules far looser. I already noted the story of one family, who were able to skip the official points system and the category rankings, and moved right in. The woman’s father, a doctor, had helped the director of DK’s daughter manage an illness. To repay him, the director offered the doctor a chance to buy in. Another example noted previously is the immense informal purchasing power of a former truck driver working for one of the only furniture houses in Sofia, called Yavorov. He was able to secure his flat by exchanging furniture and was even able to extend further favours for his neighbours, several of whom had furnished their living rooms with identical furniture smuggled in the building by him.

The list in Block 52 goes on and on, and it is because the *panelka* was built for, and by, those close to power. This means that everything inside and out worked according to slightly different, more preferential rules. Like the fact that it was primarily workers of the DK that were allocated the four-room flats. At times, preferences caused clashes where people’s power was tested – like an argument that erupted between inhabitants on the first floor and the inhabitants on the third, whose flat was bought thanks to the woman’s doctor. The first-floor inhabitants were enraged they were not offered a chance to live higher up even though the man worked at the urban planning sector of the Municipality of Sofia. This is very similar to what happened to the Vuzlevi and how they were forced to purchase a flat they were never physically allowed to live in.

Just like the unfinished *panelki* people were moving into, the entire system surrounding the mass housing market, especially after the 1970s, was based on imperfections, cracks, and fissures. According to Gerasimova and Chuikina, this paradoxical state of deficit and DIY was symptomatic of the entire Soviet-style society, a society with a “repair culture” (in Reid, 2014: 108). Nothing manufactured, from a table to a *panelka*, was ever in its final, ideal state. It always required work, a fix. In every single case, this resulted in the need – not creative desire – but a *requirement* to explore individualised responses to the constant and oftentimes nearly impossible problems of daily life. According to Susan Reid, the “homemaking in the new flats, the lapses of state provision and monitoring represented a major nuisance in people’s lives. But they were also the mother of invention and an inducement to creative agency, which could sometimes engender a sense of belonging” (Reid, 2014: 109).
5.6 The **Maistor**, the Artist, the Exhibition

The bare panel boxes did indeed solicit creative homemaking solutions. The deficit of materials with which to cover up the cement made furnishing and interior design a prolonged and complex process resembling a search for a needle in a haystack. Then, after all that, there was always the danger of turning your flat into an exact copy of that neighbour, who also managed to smuggle in that particular furniture set.

From these ubiquitous attempts at moulding bespoke *panelki* flats arises an essential authority figure – the *maistor*. The *maistor*, the *maestro* of homemaking, was tested on an *ad hoc* basis during socialism. He was someone coming in to *repair* the “new” flat, to fill the gaps between panels, to even out floors, to add tiles and mosaics. But, particularly in the last 20 years, the *maistor* most literally expanded his role by pushing the *panelki* flat design to the very limit of the imaginable. This is an important distinction because there is a visible difference in terms of the extent of the interventions after the fall of the regime. This will be discussed further in the following chapter. What is described here is how this power relationship, between inhabitant and flat, an attempt by people to carve out lives for themselves, to mould the generic into something that reflected their identities, began years before post-socialism. Oftentimes, this is an external figure, a hired hand with a day job, doing it as something extra on the side. Other times, however, the *maistor* is a title that has to be earned by the man of the flat himself.

In most cases, like the flats I visited in Block 45, the original *remont* and repair of the new flat has been subsumed and covered up by subsequent layers and signatures of new *maistori*. But there are other cases in Block 52, where the first *remont* was so extensive that it rendered the flat unrecognisable compared to other flats in the building. Take the middle flat on the first floor of Entrance C in Block 52 (Figures 19-22) – an artistic masterpiece of DIY *panelka* reconfiguration. The flat is unusual in another way – in terms of who got to live in it. I mentioned above the case of a third floor flat that was reserved for the family of a doctor who treated the daughter of the DK director. Similarly, this flat, initially intended for the daughter of another cadre from the DK, ended up in the hands of a young man and his pregnant wife. As it turns out, the flat was offered to them, through connections, after the daughter of the DK cadre was diagnosed with a form of schizophrenia and could no longer move in. The family in question was only given the option of a middle flat, the smallest in size, because they were two people. If the woman had given birth, they would have been able to choose a bigger flat.

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73 A section about the question of mental health in Block 52 can be found in the next chapter.
The husband was a civil engineer who wanted to make extensive alterations to the flat before it was even built. So, after seeing the blueprint, he hired a few of the maistori working in the block and began transforming the space. In the words of Doryana Drenski, the man’s sister-in-law, who moved into the flat in the mid-1990s, “it wasn’t just a remont – it was imagined anew.”

He went in with 100 leva and two bottles of vodka and by the time he was done, the flat was unrecognisable. A work of art. First they turned the living room into the kids’ room (Figure 24). Then they turned the kitchen into the parents’ bedroom (Figure 25). The eastern room, formerly a bedroom, now became the living room with a kitchenette (Figures 21-22) on what used to be the balcony. They kept the panel wall, which was where the door and windows to the balcony were, and cut it down so it became a bar between the living room and kitchenette. Finally, they split the bathroom into two rooms – a shower room and a separate toilet (Figure 26). In the place of the built-in wardrobes that came with the flat in the corridor, they put the washing machine because there was no space in the balcony kitchenette. They used the pipes from the basement below to connect all the water to the new kitchen and washing machine. It was only possible because it’s on the ground floor.

Then, to add insulation to the flat, the walls were covered with cork tiles (Figure 27) – what Doryana says was “a genius solution, never seen or done before.”

The kitchen-turned-bedroom, which originally had a balcony, was sealed using bricks, “which weren’t laid in the regular way, but the rectangular way, so that the wall is not seven or eight centimetres thick, but three. To appropriate space.” That meant that traditional panel window frames did not fit, so custom ones, appropriated from old wooden ones Doryana’s brother-in-law had found. The most striking intervention of all is the extension of a phone cable to the bathroom, bedroom, kitchen, and basement. The bathroom phone was ingeniously hidden in the toothbrush cabinet.

Then came a new round of recycling and remaking of furniture. According to Susan Reid, this was the case in the USSR, too, where the novosely filled their flats with a combination of new, old and made-new materials. These vernacular practices emphasised “repurposing, improvisation, and prolonging the life of things, adapting, mending, recycling parts of things that could no longer be salvaged” (Reid, 2014: 112). In our case, Doryana’s brother-in-law found and

74 The family would move to Germany immediately after the first democratic elections in Bulgaria. The flat was bought by the man’s sister-in-law, whom I interviewed in April 2017.
75 Personal conversations, May 2017.
chopped wood, creating traditional Bulgarian floorboards, called *dyusheme* (Figure 28). Then, using broken brown tainted glass found outside the Palace of Culture (NDK), two tables were made (Figure 29). Old parquet was found, polished and laid out in fishbone-like patterns (Figure 30).

According to Doryana, her brother-in-law wanted a modern *European* flat and he was fixed upon creating those amenities for himself. “He was thinking in a European way, even though he was brought up in a small house. And that’s why I think he was able to create this *uiut* for himself.” The narrative here is reminiscent of Fehérváry’s work regarding the heterotopic space of the American kitchen inside the Hungarian *panelka*. There is a connection here – the attempt and an open-floor plan for the living room that is, in its essence strictly against the functional separation of rooms dictated by socialist aesthetics.

Doryana says the design was lauded by everyone who stepped inside – “it’s just so different from the other flats” – but perhaps the biggest praise came from one *maistor*, who years later, was simply astonished at its ingenuity. Doryana was the one he spoke with and she implies his opinion is important because he “worked on all the rich flats so he knows what’s what.” According to her, the *maistor* asked how old her brother-in-law was when he “imagined” the space. The significance here is that experience comes with age when an inhabitant comes up with such bold and outlandish design solutions. In many ways, the *panelka remont* is a process of trial and error because concrete is rigid and there is little space for manoeuvre or mistakes. Many inhabitants embark on renovations on the advice of neighbours or friends, or *maistori* who have already done something similar. In the case of Doryana’s brother-in-law, however, the question of age is an acknowledgement and compliment of his flat being ahead of its time, of offering solutions that no one had thought of trying at the time.

The example is so striking because there was so much pride when Doryana told me the history of the flat, explaining each artefact as if she was a curator in a museum. In some ways, it is exceptional how a man was able to manipulate the rigid construct of a *panelka* almost single-handedly. This DIY flat and the process of merging inhabitant and *maistor* is the most eccentric and extreme example of an underlying process happening across *Mladost* – people, with whatever means and skills necessary, trying to take ownership of this new personal space, trying to carve out a life for themselves.

However, being a DIY pioneer has significant consequences, because oftentimes being the first means you are entering uncharted territory. And in the case of *remonti*, the results can be painful. To name a few examples – the kitchen is the smallest room, by design, and turning it into a bedroom was a Tetris-like game of
precision. The remaining space is not big enough for two people, so when I took photos, Doryana was narrating from the corridor,

You’re quite tall like my brother-in-law. I always wondered how that massive man slept in the kitchen-bedroom, where only one can be upright while the other remains in bed.

The inconveniences intensify as you start to deconstruct all the introduced changes – the thin-sided brick-laying approach made the bedroom a lot colder during the winter; the phone in the bathroom became a nuisance and was eventually removed; the kitchenette on the balcony is so small, only one person at a time can use the oven and the sink.

To understand the rationale behind the extensive footprint this man left on the concrete, it is important to contextualise the living situation of his family prior to them moving in. According to Doryana,

My brother-in-law was in a rush to move in and said on November 7, 1986, 'we are moving in!' There was no hot water, no radiators. They were the very first ones to move into the building. It was so cold that my sister developed an allergy towards the cold. But my brother-in-law put his foot down and said that he can’t live with his in-laws anymore. And we all lived there together – my sister and I, her husband and our parents. In a two-bedroom panelka flat!

So most of the ideas for change had been inspired by years of inconvenience – waiting in line for the bathroom in a flat of five was the biggest one. That is why there is the separation here: the crowded flat experience and the solution to utilise every centimetre of panels and save space. As noted above, the creativity here, in its extreme form, was a form of microresistance to the socialist regime and its constant state of deficit.

Despite the man’s creative attempts, there was only so much that could be done to a panelka. With time, the extremities of flat interventions would increase, making his re–imagination seem modest in its approach. And yet, there is only pride with the remont and much of it remains intact today. However, five floors up, one of Doryana’s neighbours openly admits the “immense regret” about his attempt to manipulate space. That regret is a bit of an inside joke among residents in Entrance C and everyone slyly winks at the mention of it, admitting that they are happy he tested it, so they did not have to.

The case in question is a fifth floor flat that comes with a single toilet and a bathroom with a second toilet. The single toilet is right next to the kitchen, with
the sinks in both rooms sharing a wall where the pipes run. However, the owner of this flat immediately tore down the wall and removed the toilet, thus extending the kitchen. Now, the whole family admits it was a mistake because four people have to share a single bathroom and toilet.

Oftentimes, the remont choices come directly from the maistor brought in by those male inhabitants that do not have the skills to do it themselves. Interestingly, even if the man of the house is not the maistor in charge, it is almost always he who makes the calls regarding the interior design. From the dozens of flats I visited, no more than a handful have had a female touch. The gendered nature of homemaking in this Mladost panelka is not strictly related to the “heaviness” of the workload and the rigidity of concrete itself. Because, and this is true for the years of post-socialism, too, the strong bond between man and house does not stop with remonti. Most men in Block 52 are also the ones taking the lead in activities like cooking and cleaning. To a large extent, it has to do with the overarching way socialist society functioned in Bulgaria, where presumably both men and women had jobs. In Blocks 45 and 52 this is predominantly the case – even for the Vuzlevi family, who are part of a slightly older generation. However, in 45, both the older and younger men have reserved the more traditional role of sitting down in the kitchen speaking with me while their wives prepare drinks and food. It is a curious comparison about the fluid role that gender plays with regards to different panelki. The kitchen, a functional space and the only predisposed space for women, as housewives, is a hidden room where the preparation of food occurs before it is brought out. However, most families share the cooking duties, and oftentimes it is the men that prepare the larger meals. Even in the case of the Vuzlevi, who retain more conservative values, the man is not excluded from the kitchen, even though he doesn’t cook. In fact, the kitchen is the space filled with most ujud, where people are invited for a cup of coffee. Unlike the original functional plan, it is the kitchen that is opened up to strangers, while the living room is the most private of spaces – because oftentimes it becomes an extra bedroom.

5.7 Home, Hearth, Haven

Chapter Two introduced the notion of zhiviselishte, or hearth, as articulated by the respondent visiting his children in Mladost. For him, the panel walls were isolating and cold, creating a kind of nedom, or anti-home – the antithesis of the traditional Bulgarian family house. But by the time Block 52 opened its doors to new homeowners, things had changed significantly – panelki were the ultimate prize possession.
Once the initial struggle to buy a flat and repair it is over, there comes a consolidation period – a time of familiarity with the neighbours, with the neighbourhood and with the building itself. In the years prior to the fall of the regime, respondents from both Block 45 and 52 remember visiting each other and having dinner together; men reminisce about watching football, women about drinking their coffee in the yard outside. There were a number of years when doors were unlocked, and as Margarita Bineva put it, “we were all the same.” This is particularly true for Block 52, where most families were also the same generation – because it was precisely constructed to provide homes for them. Margarita said her core group of friends was a few families in Entrance C and one in Entrance B, with whom they would not only share evenings together, but public holidays and weekends, too. According to Ivan Nikolov76, the bond was so strong in the late 1980s that people would immediately ring the bell after five p.m., “because everyone was a clerk in the building.” One time he remembers getting so angry at being interrupted – he was a researcher at the Institute of Ethnography at the time – that, assuming it was one of his male friends, he opened the door and screamed at what turned out to be his downstairs neighbour. “She looked mortified,” he says, laughing. “The neighbours never bothered us again.”

These stories of panelki bonds are quite common – as noted before, Dodo and Mitko grew up together and, until today, get together in Mitko’s kitchen to watch football – Dodo says he does not have the necessary cable channels. Because Block 45 is older, there is a generational difference – the children of the first inhabitants are older than those in 52 and, by the late 1980s, were young adults themselves, who had established lifelong friends and acquaintances all around them. Block 45, and the various benches in front of its entrances, were the meeting points for the younger inhabitants for years – they used to play cards and games there every night. However, in the past decade, have they been over by senior citizens looking to socialise or simply rest up briefly.

Sharing the late stages of socialism, as adults, homemakers, and parents, was something special. It was, just like the case of remont, about finding creative ways to stay entertained in a constant state of deficit and absurdity. According to I. Nikolov,

There was an electricity ration when we moved in. We would go to a swimming pool in Mladost and rush back before 8 pm, when the electricity would stop for a couple of hours. The ration worked on the principle of: you have one hour of electricity, then you go the next two without. We were younger and there was a spirit of sharing these

76 Personal conversation June 2017.
absurdities. This tragedy. We didn’t think of it as a tragedy back then, but as “fuck it, let’s have a drink together and joke about it”. We were nice to each other. We sat at our table and prepared things swiftly, get the table ready. The electricity stops and we would clap and laugh. We turn the candles on, have a drink. The kids were young still, we were young.

Inconveniences, like electricity blackouts, were shared inconveniences– that is what life in the late 1980s was like in Mladost panelki. Then things started to change, particularly in the mid- to late 1990s. People got older, particularly in Block 45, as generations started to swap out in flats – the original homeowners would either move out their children would take over after they die. Some, like Doryana’s brother-in-law, moved. In both Block 45 and 52, the first decade after the transition still saw a certain stability remain in the social fabric of Mladost. Both 52 and 45 lost very few of their original inhabitants. That process has exacerbated in the last two decades and “strangers” inhabit more and more flats.

The tectonic shifts in the overarching political landscape in Bulgaria affected the relationship between inhabitant and panelka. The changes started in the 1980s, when panelki balconies began to disappear and more and more flats became encapsulated – first by glazed windows, then by entirely sealed off walls that extended the rooms inside and removed the balcony entirely. According to William Walters, whose concept of domopolitics was used to analyse post-9/11 processes, the domestic space is transformed into a “refuge or sanctuary in a heartless world; the home as our place, where we belong naturally, and where, by definition others do not … home as a place we must protect” (Walters, 2004: 241). This is, to a large extent, also true for panelki in Bulgaria at large. In Mladost, according to Stavri Stavrev’s research, around 75% of all balconies were sealed by 1998. Most of that occurred in the 1990s when control over the external aesthetics was lax clashed with a moment of peacock-like efforts to find the most extreme external remont. But, as the case of Block 52 shows, the process of encapsulation was imagined and started earlier. In fact, several flats were immediately shut in in accordance with the first remont. Georgi Kostov, an inhabitant of a flat on the fifth floor of Entrance C (Figure 31), and one of the first to move in, says he closed in his window balcony, transferring his kitchen there back in 1987 (Figure 32). On the side of the former balcony stands the oven and the fridge, while the rest of the kitchen is repurposed as a dining area.

According to Georgi and his wife Vili, they received a fine for closing in their balcony and, until they signed and paid it, Block 52 could not be recognised as officially finished. “Act number 16,” Georgi says, “a 200 leva fine. After that, every neighbour came to see how and what I did, so they can do it too. Eventually they allowed balconies to be closed in.” This is not actually true and, until today, a flat owner must apply for a permit from the head architect of Sofia to make changes
to the external façade of his dwelling. However, Georgi is right in saying that no one else was penalised after him, as just months later, the neighbour on the floor below closed his in and that started a bit of a movement across the block. Today, almost all kitchen balconies in all three entrances are closed in.

The process is similar in Block 45, where even today many of the original glass glazed balconies remain in tact. However, because the balconies there are external and far less sturdy, in those years, there was little more than could be done than adding windows to them. After 1990, anyone could try anything. That was a very different process – having a better, more colourful closed-in balcony than the next panelka. What I am concerned with here is the shutting off from the outside world at the end of the regime and the battle struck the balcony first, the weakest point and the most easily transformable part of the panelka. The transformation of the kitchen into a kitchenette and dining room, or as in the case with Doryana, kitchenette and living room, differs in form and purpose from the ‘American kitchens’ in Hungary researched by Fehérváry. There, the remont was an intentional appeal for modernity by flat owners, longing to return to Europe, to normality, and to western cultural values. Here, the balcony being turned into a kitchenette is one of the first stages in the fortification of the flat, of creating a hearth in terms of a safe space with clear borders between in and out.

The next chapter will specifically discuss how the transformations of panelki mirrored the adaptations to post-socialist life, but what is important to note here is the move towards closure and isolation. It is therefore no surprise that the fraternity groups dissipated in Block 52, the youth gatherings moved from indoors, to in front of 45, to further away – on sports pitches and computer game centres. Panelki got “hollowed out” as Sasho and Reni Trizlincevi say, who also live on the fifth floor of Entrance C, Block 52. With the changes came new homeowners, unknown to the others. According to Sasho, the social fabric became unstable:

After 1989, many people became barovci77 (elites) and moved out – bought better flats in nicer neighbourhoods. The first to leave was Reni on the second floor, then Toshko on the third. Ljubo on the first, Zdravka on the sixth. Then the neighbours under us. At some point, there was no one you can sit down and have a rakiya with78.

With that, more closures appeared almost identically in both blocks. First, a second, most often steel, front door in front of the original wooden one. Then, as years went by, a larger door and/or a subscription to security services (Figure

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77 Barovec literally means someone who frequents bars, but the connotation is of someone who thinks highly of himself and lives lavishly.
78 Conversation from February 2018.
33). With that, the history of the subject changes – the subject at home after five. The relationship between the now-fixed flat and the now-isolated inhabitant would undergo further reconstruction in the years of post-socialist democratic consolidation. In the following chapter, the focus will be on uncovering these lived experiences through the new cracks and fissures that open up inside panelki in Mladost.
Plates

Figure 1: A photo of Block 45 taken from a room in Block 52

Figure 2: The elevator in Block 45
Figure 3: A view of Block 45 showing its protruding elevator shafts
Figures 4-5: Internal floor plans of an entrance in Block 45
Figure 6: Toilet in Vuzlevi’s flat  
Figure 7: Bathroom in Vuzlevi’s flat

Figure 8: View of Block 52 from the back
Figure 9: Back view of Block 52, Entrance A

Figure 10: Internal floor plan of Block 52, Entrance A
Figure 11: Vuzlevi in their kitchen

Figures 12-3: The large bedroom in Vuzlevi’s flat
Figure 14: Dodo in living room

Figure 15: Mitko in living room
Figures 16-18: Mitko’s son’s room
Figure 19: Doryana’s kitchenette-living room

Figure 20: Doryana’s front door
Figure 21-22: Doryana’s kitchennete

Figure 23: Doryana in her living room
Figure 24: The children’s room in Doryana’s flat

Figure 25: Doryana’s bedroom
Figure 26: Doryana’s bathroom

Figure 27: Doryana’s cork insulation  Figure 28: The dyusheme
Figure 29: Doryana’s DIY table

Figure 30: Doryana’s parquet

Figure 31: The Kostovi family
Figure 32: Kostovi’s kitchenette

Figure 33: A steel metal front door, Entrance A, Block 52
Chapter Six: The Panelka Palimpsest and the History of the Present

6.1 A New Social Fabric

The panelka contains the physical and normative boundaries of everyday life for millions of people across the former socialist bloc. The previous chapter was concerned with the first cracks and fissures, inside and out, which traced how the panelka’s productive failures were embodied and sustained as microresistances and ways of being vnye. This chapter extends the analysis, following the extreme ways in which panelki have been taken apart – akin to ‘total’ art installations – and put back together over the last three decades, creating complex palimpsests of material culture which have endured under the uncertain and changing relationship between power, ideology, and architecture. Whereas the last chapter concluded on a process of fortification and isolation, what will be described here is a gradual process of opening up the panelka flat to the world. That process is a rejuvenating one, whereby Mladost itself undergoes a patched and colourful intervention by an array of inhabitants seeking to distinguish themselves through their flats.

As Mladost ages, so do most of its inhabitants, which changes how they interact with their flats and surroundings. Some inhabitants, like Georgi Kostov and the Trizlincevi, negotiate and transform their material culture multiple times to match an idealised vision of what a panelka home ought to be today; others, like Dodo, are faced with optimising a two-bedroom flat for a peaceful coexistence of three generations at once. To trace these transformations in the internal and external material culture of Mladost is to read and decipher the panelka palimpsest, uncovering the changes in the social fabric and showing, concretely, how today is different from yesterday. This diagnosis of the present is predicated on the multiple layers of personal histories and interventions into the material culture that uncover the contradictory and confusing ways people carve out lives and construct various versions of their ‘selves’. This reading of panelki as palimpsests attempts to use the banality of everyday life to link the hidden continuities of the past with how they continue to function today.

The flat is a space where past and present are negotiated and reconciled, where new social and economic identities that reflect the protracted path Bulgaria has undertaken in terms of its alignment to Europe. With that, all the processes observed under socialism are exploded and tested to the extreme – particularly the obsession with remont. Each remont indicates how much value inhabitants place on their flats and, by extension, on themselves. What is more, a new conflict
between state and inhabitant forms, as new rules about insulation and energy efficiency seek to enforce a new, more European, homogeneity on the external aesthetic of panelki, following the examples of Germany, Slovakia, and Hungary. In fact, there are some attempts at self-organisation to carry out internal and external remonti of the entire entrance, covering up old individualised attempts and striving for a new, wholesome, and sanitised aesthetic. The value of the prefabricated flat also changes after socialism with new narratives of the ‘home’ – a house in the suburbs, a ‘modern’ flat, or life abroad – entering the discourse. In fact, some of the ‘green terrain’ in the Tomalevski plan was returned as private property under restitution laws in the 1990s, resulting in new dwellings in Mladost constructed “an arm’s length,” in the words of Sokerova and Mladenov, away from the balconies of panelki. Now Mladost, a symbol of prefabrication and socialist mass housing, is rejuvenating as a closely packed neighbourhood with a new middle class of citizens whose aim is to live luxuriously alongside people whose lives have barely changed since they moved in.

This process of change is gradual, even though it may not often appear so. If you compare a photograph of Block 45 or Block 52 taken in 1990 with one taken today, the transformation is stark. But the 1990s were a sort of transition period between the first extensive experiments at DIY in the 1980s and the explosion of individualised approaches in the 2000s. This is why the first ethnographic study of Block 52 from 2003 adds such valuable context. What is visible from those interviews is the consolidation of the process of encapsulation and the creation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in every entrance of the panelka. The most extreme separation occurred in Entrance C, which underwent the biggest change in its social fabric. Doryana’s family moved in in 1996, followed by the Hristovi family on floor 6 the following year. Since then, flats on each floor have been vacated, sold, or rented out and even I find it difficult to keep track of all the changing faces I met over the past four years living there. The other two entrances, however, have largely retained their social fabric and it has significantly impacted internal relations between inhabitants. It is there, in Entrance C, that I trace some of the wildest attempts to privatisate the flats now vacated by the constraints of the deficit economy and socialist regime oversight.

There is a certain consistency that was preserved in Block 52 through the 1990s – several flats were still furnished with the heavy black wooden living room sets originally smuggled in by the truck driver neighbour (I. Nikolov, 2003: 113-118). By 2003, only a few of the bedroom balconies were sealed off; the connection with the past way of life was closer than with the way things are today. Today, Block 52 is home to its third generation of inhabitants and the first post-socialist generation, with the flat beneath mine on floor 2 constantly reminding me of the presence of a newborn baby. The daughter of the original owners and her partner currently inhabit the flat, while her parents have moved into a house in
the suburbs. The two flats on my floor also have young children living there, which again is corroborated by the occasional noise pollution. The heavy black furniture remains in just two of the flats, the others have opted for lighter colours and more minimalistic designs – some have even requested the assistance of interior design studios to create bespoke furniture for their *panelka*. Today, most of the bedroom balconies are sealed off, and quite astonishingly, a living room balcony was opened up again, using French windows, after decades of being closed in. It is a truly unique approach that exists nowhere else in *Mladost* and it reflects a little anticipated change in the relationship between a flat and its owner – reconciliation with one’s life and surroundings and a gradual opening up to the immediate world outside. This stands in stark contrast to the 1990s, which were marked by widespread attempts to shield and protect the flat from the abnormalities of public life outside.

What this shows, more than anything else, is that the *tsimtsum* of Communism does indeed leave an entirely new space, in terms of the domestic realm, for reinterpretation and renegotiation – a deterritorialised space. However, that negotiation process is neither linear, in the sense of progress, nor causal. *Panelki* today are continuously being transformed with each individual flat palimpsest adding its own layers to the overall story. Some stories are quite paradoxical, like the Trizlincevi family, who drilled through their floor panels to carry through pipes from the bathroom to the living room so they could transform it into a modern open plan kitchen, but kept the original protruding black electrical sockets from the day they moved in because they felt slightly nostalgic. In all cases, the factors that govern the transformations of everyday life *panelki* in post-socialism are complex and require an in-depth reading and diagnosis of its fluid social fabric and its resilient concrete structure.

### 6.2 The Restoration of Private Property and the *Domoupravitel*

After the fall of the Bulgarian socialist regime, a new set of laws was introduced to deal with land ownership issues – dismantling state farms, decollectivisation, privatisation of nationally-held businesses, and restitution of land (Verdery, 2003: 88). The Bulgarian case is a complex one because the 1990s were a decade of political turmoil and infighting between “reformist and neocommunist forces” (ibid.), where one of the main battlegrounds was privatisation. According to Verdery, statistics for 1995 show just 53% of land was farmed privately (ibid.). Property rights remained a contentious issue for much of that decade, except for one crucial part – *panelki*. Because of the introduction of personal property in 1971, Bulgaria had an incredibly high number of privately owned homes after 1989, compared with other former socialist regimes. According to Georgiev,
private ownership accounted for 97 percent of dwellings in 2014 (2014: 1). This creates a very different and protracted approach to the panelki housing stock in post-socialism, because other European countries handled the privatisation efforts “with imposing certain conditions for collective management and payment of running costs of newly emerged condominiums” (ibid.). Meanwhile, in Bulgaria, the socialist regime transferred ownership of flats without the application of similar rules. Now Bulgaria is faced with a paradoxical situation where these rules had to be enforced after “the ownership has been acquired and not at the moment of property acquisition.” (ibid.: 2). The incredibly high rate of privately owned and owner-occupied panelki, as well as the fact that around 25% of the entire Bulgarian population reside in such dwellings (Lueneburg, 2016: 25), results in a lack of support by a majority of panelki owners for large-scale renovation efforts. The reasons vary, but it essentially comes down to one thing – disdain for external control over one’s own flat. In various neighbour council meetings, both in Mladost and in my grandmother’s neighbourhood of Yavorov, I’ve heard an array of complaints – from the most common one where inhabitants suggest they’ve already made their desired remonti and want no outside to ‘meddle’ any more to more elderly people feeling discomfort at any change and disruption.

There have been several national programmes to spur the renovation and improvement of the energy efficiency of the Bulgarian housing stock. In 2005, the Bulgarian government approved a national housing strategy to offer financing for the improvement of approximately 42,000 panelki (Mediapool, 2018). According to that programme, 100 percent of the costs for renovation were to be covered by Bulgarian Ministry for Regional Development and Public Works79. The resistance to this policy is exceptionally high80 – in Sofia, in particular, only 61 dwellings are currently being financed for renovation (Ministry for Regional Development and Public Works, 2018: accessed online). As a result, panelki and their upkeep are almost entirely left to the decisions made by inhabitants and the domoupravitel.

The domoupravitel survived after socialism on a rotational and volunteer basis until it was signed into law in 200981, which required that each entrance of a panelka vote on who will be in charge. There is also the subsidiary role of

79 As of May 28, 2018, the Ministry announced that the full subsidy programme is changing to a “differentiated” prioritisation of certain climate regions, demographics, and purchasing power of individuals. Until now, only 2022 panelki have been financed with full subsidy (Mediapool, 2018).
80 Elderly people I spoke with cited distrust in authorities and fear of letting outsiders in. Younger residents liked their individual choices for window frames, insulation, and colour and were hesitant to let the authorities dictate the overall aesthetics.
81 The State Property Management Law requires each dwelling to call a committee once a year and vote on a domoupravitel, who is in charge of the upkeep of that dwelling.
cashier, who collects the monthly upkeep fees (electricity, lift, cleaning, etc.) as well as the one-off fees for any large-scale remonti. In Blocks 45 and 52, these individuals were crucial to maintaining a record of inhabitants since 1990. In both cases, too, these individuals have remained largely unchanged – in 45, Dimitar Vuzlev’s wife, Maria has been the cashier for Entrance 12 for many years now (the current domoupravitel is their neighbour – the ‘Colonel’). In Entrance C of 52 – the cashier was Doryana’s husband from 1996 until the new law in 2009, when Georgi Kostov from floor 5 was elected domoupravitel (a task gradually taken over by his wife Vili). The “account book” where the payments are registered is perhaps the most important document with regards to tracing the changes in the social fabric in panelki over the past 30 years.

In Entrance 12, Block 45, Maria’s book dates back to the 1990s (Figure 1) and contains the names, signatures, and money paid in each month by each individual household. It is the ultimate surveillance tool that tracks the comings, goings, and basic financial statements of dozens of households over several decades (Figures 1-5). It also makes Maria Vuzleva a one of the most knowledgeable and authoritative figures in the panelka. According to her, the changing social fabric has affected the relations between neighbours:

First, money is always a problem. I don’t like to go and ‘beg’ people by knocking on their doors and asking for the 7 leva month fee [the fee in Block 52 is 10 leva]. There are some families that I have to go and ring them to ask for money. We are not as friendly as before, either. We are on “hi, how are you?” terms. Maybe because six flats changed. Maybe because the neighbours changed. Raffy sold his. The Doctor sold his. Yotov sold his. Only three were sold. Kolarovi aren’t here. Andrei gave his to tenant. Different generation from ours, different values.

This results in a kind of surveillance system which also occurs in Block 52 – the cashier is the person who knows the ins and outs of everyone and is the first to ring your doorbell, if like me, you return occasionally from abroad and must back pay fees. The domoupravitel under socialism was an official authority figure, who during the early stages was required to sign in guests and could request very

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82 Personal conversation May 2017.
83 The State Property Management Law also requires inhabitants to form a cooperative and upkeep a special fund for remonti and renovation. The domoupravitel is the person in charge of that sum. The minimum fee each inhabitant must make per month is 1% of the minimum wage.
84 Raffy is described as a particularly stingy Armenian who lived on the second floor. Raffy, during one of the four times the entrance collected money to fix the roof, which was leaking, refused to participate. Vuzlevi are on the last floor and were therefore directly affected. On day Dimitar went down to talk sense into Raffy: “I told him, ‘Raffy, you’re not a dumb man. Tell me, is there a house without a roof? How can I have a roof, but you don’t?’ We fought plenty. There’s a law that states you have to do it. Every inhabitant is 1/16 owner of everything from the block.”
intimate information – including your marital status – and was once again, albeit unofficially at first, at the heart of *panelka* life. According to Maria Vuzleva,

We keep seeing a young man and woman at the market wearing sports clothes. We don’t know which flat they live in, but they obviously live in our entrance but no one has come to declare that there are new people that have to pay. So now I’m going to spy on them to see where they live.

This surveillance is predicated upon the fear of the unknown, discussed in the previous chapter. It materialised first through the installation of a second front door – most often of reinforced steel. With time, the surveillance techniques became softer powered, as Maria Vuzleva’s testimony shows. As the social fabric changes, the lesser known people are singled out and tracked with great interest. I, for example, have been such a person of interest for years – first by people within Block 52, who refrained from saying hello, as if to confirm they did not trust me after a long stint abroad; second, by people from Block 45, who at first refused to talk with me, let alone let me inside, because they didn’t know who I was. The fear of the unknown is also directly connected to the discourse of democratic transition ‘prehod’ as a time of uncertainty and corruption. There is not a *panelka* in *Mladost*, which has not had a family suffer a break-in of some sort. Dodo, in fact, is one of the victims, as are several families in Entrances A and C of Block 52. The problem with robberies became synonymous with the type of democratic transition Bulgaria was undergoing – marked by mafia circles, graft and deal making. According to Dodo, “there were no robberies when I was 16. Then democracy came, and with it, so did the bandits.” Retaining a flat after 1990 ceased to be the luxury it had been prior to that. It was not safe either, as the threat of intruders, both in terms of new neighbours and in terms of robbers, was solidified in people’s minds.

The push towards isolation and (thermal) insulation – from neighbours, robbers, and the state altogether – impacts the effectiveness of the national renovation programme. Many inhabitants, especially the more senior citizens, express horror at the thought of having to let people in to first measure their flats and then come and do *remonti*. Others say they have already carried out all the *remonti* they need and do not want the government to “butt into their private lives.” One person in particular voiced his disapproval of a potential renovation application proposed by the *domoupravitel*, saying he had spent “thousands” on noise-cancelling window frames and that if the block was to be renovated, everyone would need to follow the same aesthetic and, therefore, he would be forced to downgrade. The scepticism and distrust towards the state, despite the long-term PR campaign promising “free” (as in fully subsidised) renovation, is one of the main reasons for the low rates in Bulgaria today.
Yet, as the cases of Entrances A and C of Block 52 (Figure 6-7), as well as Entrance 14 of Block 45 (Figure 8), partially show, there are some protracted attempts of joint action to renovate the external façade of some panelki. However, the approach, rather than rejuvenating the aesthetic discipline of homogeneity with which panelki were first created, further revealed the growing fissures within the social fabric. This will be discussed in the next part of the chapter, offering some key insights about how and why the Bulgarian panelki, left to the devices of individual flat owners, can be deciphered and read like palimpsests to reveal more about the lives they contain. For now, it is important to discuss the outliers in the universally accepted mosaic and patched approach to panelki aesthetics in post-socialism. Perhaps the most telling of all stories is that of the domoupravitel of Entrance A, Block 52 – Mihail Vladov. His life was briefly touched upon in the Chapter Five (see page 121) with regards to how he attained his flat, but what is of concern here is the active role Mihail has retained with regards to the upkeep of his entrance. Mihail has been the domoupravitel for 15 years, during which funds were raise to sponsor an entirely new piping system, roofing, as well as a new, cream-coloured heat-insulating external façade (see Figure 7). “Without waiting around,” he says,

I convinced them about the façade – one, because it insulates and it means you spent less on heating, and two, because I find all these red, green and blue experiments with neighbour balconies and such just plain awful. The only family who didn't want to participate was Marga’s [Bineva], who just five months ago had decided to add internal insulation, so she said she could not have both.

Looking at Entrance A, you cannot miss Marga’s third-floor flat, which looks like a remnant of the past stuck between the new aesthetic of the present. The entire façade looks like a collage of the panelka as it was – bare and grey, and slightly crumbling, and the panelka as it should be – clean, sanitised, ordered, a new blank canvas upon which to express one’s self.\(^{85}\)

Similarly, Entrance C’s attempted renovation reveals more about the ‘dissensus’ (Dolff-Bonekämper, 2002) than the consensus among the households. From Figure 6 you can see the unapologetic separation of the flats on the first and last floor from the renovation plan. In this case, as Doryana’s husband, and then-treasurer, Rossen Drenski\(^{86}\) says, it was a question of money. Hristovi, the family on the sixth floor did not have the financial means to contribute; Ilievi, the first-

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\(^{85}\) Perhaps the most interesting and surprisingly long-lasting instances of this is Entrance 14 of Block 45, where the first floor living room balcony was twice spray-painted just weeks after the renovation. The first message read “<3 Burov” followed by an unforgiving response underneath, reading “e gei” [is gay]. The loaded sentence and the local ‘shout-out’ to Burov remains untouched five years later (Figure 10).

\(^{86}\) Personal conversation January 2016.
floor flat owners, and coincidentally the same people who once complained about receiving a first-floor flat despite being highly ranked in the municipality, had rented their flat out and the tenants did not contribute either. The privately initiated renovation programme thus uneart this growing economic and social disparity between the inhabitants that until then had been difficult to trace in such details by simply looking from the outside. Yet, had it not been for the initiative of these three domoupraviteli, even this limited community approach would not have been achieved. This is particularly striking when the entire 14 entrances of Block 45 are compared (Figure 9) to show the layers upon layers of different colours and styles chosen by individuals. The slow implementation of the renovation program in Bulgaria means that the panelki inaugurated this unique mosaic look of competing stories and individualities nested in ‘dissensus’ with each other. Regardless of whether one, like most architects and engineers who once worked on panelki, finds that sight aesthetically pleasing, it is of immeasurable value to the current research. The panelka palimpsest, studied from the outside, can provide important details and information about the lives and desires of the people living inside. More curiously, a more focused look at the first-floor façades reveals the graphomania of discursive battles, etched onto the walls, about whom Mladost belongs to.

6.3 How to Read a Panelka Palimpsest

With the on-going debate about the rejuvenation of panelki and constant attempts to change attitudes about the national renovation programme, there is an emerging discourse about the ‘failure’ of panelki today. On the one hand, it is a failure by inhabitants to preserve the original plans and aesthetic by undertaking frivolous remonti, like closing in balconies. On the other, and more importantly, it is a failure on the part of the local government and the legislative branches to enforce effective penalties for such practices. Once again, just like during socialism, the state removes itself from the politics of panelki, which remains an institution dominated entirely by private interests. Then there is the discussed ‘failure’ to meet EU energy efficiency standards and come to terms with a housing stock that is nearing, or surpassing, its normative lifecycle (of 50 years).

These failures have left panelki to be self-governed over the past three decades, where the larger tectonic shifts, both social and economic, are etched onto individual façades in Mladost. If it had not been for these ‘failures’, the panelki

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87 In a 2012 interview with the Bulgarian National Television, then-Regional Minister Lilyana Pavlova imposed a de facto amnesty on individual renovations of balconies, saying, “All who have glazed balconies before the year 2001, can rest assured – there will be no fines, there will be no sanctions, and no need to take action to legalise the balconies. The only question remains with those who are after 2003, but I still say there are no special and targeted checks for them” (cited in Dnes.bg, 2012).
would not have become the complex palimpsests of material culture and personal histories they are today. Again, in recent years, as under socialism, the panelka retains its capacity as a failed social condenser, yet an extraordinarily productive one. As such, it is important to approach the reading of panelki palimpsests as objects both fragile and expressive, defined by a “totality of constantly shifting and realigning iterations over time as the critical unit of analysis” (Buchli, 2017: 389).

Here, I return to Foucault and the processes of subjectification as he refocused his work towards the more hidden and unseen practices that go against the overarching domination of any particular institution – the capillary notions of power that flow into the most private aspects of daily life. According to Foucault, this form of power “applies itself to the immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him” (1982: 781). In more ways than one, the external aesthetics of panelki façades today can guide a trained eye to some of the most essential and private aspects of the lives contained within them. Those crumbling façades become the physically embodied canvases on which the present is negotiated by individual inhabitants-as-artists. For every single block of flats patched up by individual efforts, from colour and paint to closed-in balconies, there is an open and ever changing discussion amongst individuals, as well as within their changing selves. It is the physical representation of a sort of vertical village, a collection of billboards or calling cards that seek to highlight, as loudly as possible, who is inside. Both the exterior and interior of the panel, its malleability, make it the material and canvas upon which a kind of Foucaultian diagnosis of the present is possible because it is a series of, at times counterproductive, but always highly successful relationships of destruction and reconstruction that sustain an ever-changing social life (Buchli, 2017: 388).

Let us start our reading of façades with Block 45, which, observed from my third-floor balcony in Block 52, resembles a mosaic of glass, metal, and concrete, and by extension, of past and present, old and new. There are some original external balconies in 45, supported by metal railings, many of which now rusty. The top floor balconies have DIY roofs made most often from plastic, because, according to what both Kalin Kosturski and Stavri Stavrev told me, the Bs-2-64 and -69 panelki typologies had failed to account for roofing for the top floor balconies. A closer look reveals the different levels of ingenuity and intervention by individual inhabitants – no two closed-in balconies are the same.

Curiously but unsurprisingly, because Block 45 is so old, it is almost certain that those balconies that have remained unchanged or remain with glazed windows belong to the oldest residents, those most adverse to change and to welcoming
outsiders, like *maistori*, in. On the other hand, the more colourful and individualistic the insulation and closed-in balcony (Figure 11), the wealthier and better off that flat’s owner is expected to be. Note the differences between each floor of Entrance 1, Block 45, represented in Figure 11. First, there are four flats (Floors 1, 2, 4, 6), which have stopped the *remont* at the kitchen wall, constraining it to only closing-in the balcony. You can see how the insulation added to the adjacent room protrudes several centimetres beyond their façades above and below. Furthermore, it is noticeable that the sixth floor flat is the only one that has retained the original metal railing, adding insulation above, and presumably behind it, to close in the kitchen. It also is the only kitchen with such small windows. Everything about this picture reveals economic inequalities and budgetary concerns. It is about who can *afford* the latest and most expensive window frames, and in this case, who is capable of standing out in new ways, like adding an air conditioning system to one of the rooms. Another noticeable feature is the fading of colour as you go up. It seems the experiment with eccentricity, which was first attempted on the first floor, and subsequently copied in similar fashion by the two flats above, has failed in this entrance. The choices for more neutral cream colours that are preserved by the higher floors resemble a battle across 45 about how much colour is too much. The other side of Entrance 1’s flats presents a much more ubiquitous appreciation of red (Figure 12), making those few flats that remain different stand out even more from the rest.

By looking at these colourful interventions, you can trace the signature of the same construction worker that added the heat insulation and painted the balconies. It is essentially a sign of an alliance, friendship, and communication among certain neighbours. Choosing the same colour, wearing the same signage, means, at the very least, those neighbours are on speaking terms and share the same *maistor*. In Entrance 4 (Figure 13) of Block 45, one of the neighbours had seen his neighbour, or *komshiya*, ‘getting his balcony done’, liked it and had his done the same way. That man, it was commented by his neighbours later, is a man with “cash on hand,” *barovec*, who can simply call over a *maistor* and get the job done on the day. For many, work like that requires planning and saving and acts like these are seen as attempts by those better off to “show off.” Over the years, I have seen other renovated balconies being painted over several times to improve their aesthetic quality and match that of the surrounding flats. For the most part, the façade, whose feeble and crumbling original state is left here and there like “hanging underwear,” as some residents call it, is a powerful expression of personhood, a signpost designed to be seen, like a billboard. It is also a material expression of the state of communal affairs – it reflects how neighbours get along, where the fractures among them may be, who is the pressure point, and how successful grassroots democracy is in finding consensus on all issues relating to the external aesthetic of the shared building.
For most, how their balcony looks is a source of pride – it resembles how much they value themselves and their home. It also shows how they see the external world and, conversely, how they want to be seen from the outside. That is especially important for those few pockets of the past that resisted the external changes that have now become predominant. Even the Vuzlevi family, who insulated their small kitchen balcony in the 1990s but did not remove the wall to extend the room, say they would like to do the same for their living room balcony. “The other balcony is only glazed too, we don’t have the money,” Dimitar says. But there is a certain promise, of remont, hinted here that sometime in the future, “knock on wood,” the Vuzlevi family could afford to present themselves to the world through their flat properly. While it is easy to dismiss these patches of past as neglected flats and focus on the poignant colours and flashy remonti, these remnants also, in fact, contain a normative function – a look to the future and a source of potential. The palimpsestuousness of panelki means post-socialist everyday life has not consolidated, similar to the way everyday life under the previous regime was far from static or superfluous. That everyday life in contemporaneity remains uncertain and its negotiation is etched right on the panelki walls.

This is, of course, visible when looking at Block 52, as well. Of particular importance is the flat on the fourth-floor incorporation of French windows in the living room. The owner of that flat, Georgi Kostov, who is of particular focus in the following section, wanted to be unique, and what better way to signal one’s uniqueness than to reinvent the once closed-in balcony and open in back up. As far as I know, among the multiple inhabitants who have undertaken several remonti, Georgi is by far the only one to manipulate his balcony so many times. And again, the façade is a promise – Georgi loves his flat, loves the garden of roses he upkeeps below, which he can see from his living room. Georgi's panelka is a paradise, which deserves to be opened up to the world and seen. It stands in stark contrast to floors 1 and 6 in Entrance A and floor 3 in Entrance C, where their isolation from the common renovation alienates them. There, in Marga’s flat, the rationale is that internal insulation exists, but there is more to that story – in her own words:

The big remonti we gave to our kids' flats. Our flat is the last one remaining without a remont. Nadya’s flat in Slatina – we totally made it new. The other one, where my mother-in-law lives, in Borovo, we made another big remont. But you can’t do everything.

The exclusion has consequences – less so for Marga and her family because they have been in Block 52 from the beginning. But the situation is much more extreme in Entrance C, where the first floor is 'marked' with graffiti (Figure 14)
that now read ‘Here lives …’ According to several inhabitants, a sex worker had rented out the flat for a brief period. She had allegedly tried to conceal the nature of her business by having her clientele enter through the bedroom balcony. However, someone eventually spray-painted the kitchen and bedroom façades with vulgar messages, revealing the name and occupation of the inhabitant inside. The shaming, preceded by months of verbal abuse, resulted in the inhabitant leaving 52 altogether. Yet, the markings on the walls remain. After several years, the only change is that the name has been spray-painted over.

When it comes to first-floor façades, the reading needs to be adaptable, because it is concerned not specifically with the externalised individualities of inhabitants, but with the anonymous messages that keep a hand on the pulse of the discursive battles occurring over time. From the 2003 ethnographic study, I know *panelki* were used in the 1990s as notice boards for competing political parties. Posters for the 2001 political movement, led by Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha\(^88\) would appear and disappear from the entrance hallway and external panels of Entrance C. Today, in conjunction with the rise in pseudo-nationalism and xenophobia in Bulgarian politics, there are more and more flags, white-green-and-red combinations, and pictures of national heroes being added to *panelki* (Figure 15). The rise of xenophobia is noticed via *panelki* in another way – the rise of swastikas on façades (Figure 16). It both works as a marker about which flats support a semblance of Nazi ideology, as well as cordonning off the areas within which these anonymous supporters congregate.

The art of ‘tagging’ first floor balconies, sealed or unsealed, is widespread, most often resembling a tic-tac-toe game of communication among football fans (Figures 17-9), predominantly teenage boys. The game is an attempt to erase or disfigure the name and date of the opposing team and enforce dominance with your own team in the neighbourhood. It is a never-ending linguistic and artistic battle of signs. Over the years, it reveals how the changing demographics affect team loyalty.

A reading of these palimpsests reveals two major processes: *Mladost* is a living organism where the external façades mark the constant shifts in the way people carve out everyday lives; *Mladost* begins to uncover, from the outside in, and for the trained eye of a *panelki flâneur*, the secrets and intricacies, in both temporal and spatial terms, of a highly complex and heterogeneous microcosm of people. A community, some forced by circumstance, others welcomed by chance and connections, to share a built environment and architecture. And unlike Tomalevski’s fear that mass produced architecture would create superfluous people, the ever-changing palimpsests show the opposite – individual subjects

\(^{88}\) He would be elected prime minister that same year.
visibly carving out distinguishable lives for themselves. This reading can be adapted to other panelki neighbourhoods, in and outside Bulgaria, because it helps decipher the banal and the everyday to illustrate how the social condenser works – that panelki are not just remnants of a past regime, grey and anonymous spaces, but active and artistic urban environments that are constantly reinventing themselves.

6.4 The Idea of the Home

Oftentimes, these external transformations are reflexive of even more extensive internal changes in the private lives of panelki owners. According to Mary Douglas, writing about the idea of the home as a complex system of time and space management, the strongest indicator about what distinguishes it from other institutions is “not the stoutness of the enclosing walls, but the complexity of coordination” (Douglas, 1991: 305). That coordination, in the sense of allocating “space and time and resources over the long term” (ibid.: 296) has an increasingly important impact on the way inhabitants interact with their flats in post-socialism. What is possible to show by looking at the way remonti are incorporated is that some flats retain their functionality and ‘commitment to the collective good’, while others are transformed with the sole aim of satisfying and producing “spaces for individuals” (ibid.: 296-7). On the one hand, you have the flats that have retained their generational hierarchy, and any changes (if at all) are designed to make communal life easier; on the other, you have the flats completely transformed according to the new requirements of their inhabitants. Dodo’s remont (Figures 20-2) was primarily focused on ‘freshening up’ the kitchen and the living room to make them more efficient and convenient for everyone to use. The living room was of particular importance as they had bought a new couch, which they expanded into a bed for me with pride. All the changes there were cosmetic and gradual, because, as Dodo said, money is always tight, but remonti are always required. But no renovations, except in the kitchen, really looked to the future in terms of design and technology. Dodo even showed me how he and his son, Alex, attempted to recreate the original cornice moulding on the living room ceiling which was added by the first maistori when they moved in (Figures 23-24).

In Dimitar Dinev’s case, the role of remonti is similar to his friend Dodo, but the incentive was different. Dimitar’s flat underwent a fire several years back and the damage was significant (Figure 25). Using money from the insurance, Dimitar was able to redo the kitchen in a “modern way” (“you have new desires – you suddenly want a TV in there”) for the first time since his parents moved in (Figures 26-7). The rest of the flat is still undergoing gradual renovation (Figure 28), which Dimitar is more or less doing alone. Following the fire, the flat had to
be stripped down to its bare state, revealing the uneven walls, holes in the floor\textsuperscript{89}, and all the other limitations inhabitants were dealing with decades back. The biggest focus was on the children’s room, as discussed in the last chapter, and the kitchen – he and his wife’s bedroom, as well as the living room, where his mother lives, were the lowest priority.

In Block 52, fewer flats retained their original social makeup, so there are more cases where the way individuals imagine the home determines the coordination of space over the long term. In most of these cases, this coordination concerns whether their children are living in the flat with them. In the case of Kostovi on the fourth floor, their biggest remont was organised in time for their son’s wedding celebrations in Bulgaria. He was bringing his wife and their newborn baby from Australia to stay with his parents and, according to Georgi Kostov, the flat had to be perfect for them:

We changed everything – from the tiles on the floor to the French windows in the living room. No one had seen anything like it in Mladost, there simply wasn’t anything like it. I can’t even believe how much we changed in no time. In this flat, at the same time, there were 18 people working together. There was nowhere to stand and so I went downstairs and stayed in my car until they needed me\textsuperscript{90}.

The flat was coordinated in due time so that it would look right for the foreign visitors – it needed to be unique and practical, so that it would seem impressive to the outsiders coming in (Figures 29-30). As Georgi says,

My son, Chrisi, in Australia has a problem. He has a flat in a closed in residence. There’s green in the middle, including a pool. In one apartment with three bedrooms, one large living room and kitchen, what service rooms they have? One toilet and one bathroom, both separate. Can you imagine? It’s so stupid, so stupid\textsuperscript{91}.

In sharp contrast, Georgi describes how the flat is designed to cater to his every whim – how, after all these years of family life and compromise, now he feels the uit of being in charge of the domestic space.

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\textsuperscript{89} Dimitar told me he emptied “bags and bags” of cement in the floor holes, which were in the corners where the wall and floor panels conjoined, and “it just disappeared somewhere below – it’s like the entire building is hollow.”

\textsuperscript{90} Personal conversation May 2017.

\textsuperscript{91} This is a recurrent fear among many panelki inhabitants – sharing a flat with only one toilet. The 'luxury' newer panelki had was introducing a toilet in the bathroom and a separate toilet. Because the flats fluctuated in terms of how many people lived there, having only one toilet became a central point of conflict and contention.
I have such amenities here that I can never have anywhere else ever in the world. This, for example, is my dining spot (Figure 31). A pillow on a comfortable chair. [Reaches behind] Here’s my wine. [Gestures at nearby cupboard] Here’s my whiskey, or cognac, and the rakiya is in the fridge. Black pepper, several kinds of nuts. Whatever tickles my fancy and everything within an arm’s length. The remote control, if you want to watch. Radio, if you want to listen. You sit, you eat, you relax. If I want to read, I go to the living room, sit on a comfy sofa where the balcony used to be. I have some things I need on the left, to the right there are books. That’s where I do my gymnastics – it’s a fairy-tale. The bedroom converted into a music room. A computer, a great tall stool for my instrument. My feet on the bureau. Two mirrors to watch your posture. Fairy-tale.

Georgi’s flat is moulded to reflect the life he plans to lead in his final years – playing music, relaxing, and focusing on himself. As he says himself, “I recognised that this is my source of happiness after I turned 70.” What is highly unusual is the authoritative way in which the flat was organised – so that he could impress his daughter-in-law, so that he is comfortable – even though his wife and son continue to cohabit it. In direct opposition to the coordination of the common good, the idea of the home here is synchronised solely around Georgi’s requirements and sense of comfort.

Georgi’s neighbours, the Trizlincevi, have approached the latest remont of their flat in a similar way – they planned to entirely reconstruct it once it was just the two of them. It must be noted that from all the respondents I spoke with, Trizlincevi are the ultimate remont leaders, having carried out four renovations since they moved in. The latest one, according to Reni Trizlinceva 92 was the final one because it achieved her “dream” of turning a “soc’ flat into a Western one:”

We have been making a home for 30 years. We’ve changed everything and I’m immeasurably happy. I’m proud. We saw a TV program showing how you can create open space planning from a panelka. And that’s what we did. We dug into the floor panels to carry the pipes into the living room and we had our dream come true.

With the big change, requiring them to bring in industrial machines to break into the reinforced concrete of the floor panels, all the other rooms were repurposed once again. The former kitchen (originally a bedroom) is now Reni’s office, while the former kitchen, which had undergone several iterations, is now a kid’s bedroom for their grandson. In Trizlincevi’s words, there is literally nothing

92 Personal conversation May 2017.
more they can change in the flat, except, they mention through laughter, adding a
horizontal panel to create a tiny “upper floor platform for a bed that’s accessed
through a ladder.”

But not all homes, as ‘fairy tales’, function so openly and imaginatively – either in
the goal of the common good, or as more “protohierarchical” (Douglas, 1991:
306) institutions. Some panelki flats uncover another invisible subject, akin to
the socialist child, discussed in the last chapter. That invisible subject, the subject
with mental health issues, was excluded from participating in panelki during socialism – good examples are how Doryana’s brother-in-law had a chance to
buy a flat after the woman it was originally intended for was diagnosed with
schizophrenia; or the third-floor flat granted to the doctor that helped treat one
of the DK leaders’ daughter. Mental health was swept under the rug inside Block
52, and Mladost in general. The silence around it began to crack wide open in the
1990s, particularly with cases of people committing suicide by jumping out of
their flats. Block 52 has had two such incidents – one in the late 1990s and
another a few years back. First, a middle-aged woman, was seen falling off a
balcony by a group of children playing in what used to be a playground behind
the panelka. One respondent, who was there at the time, remembers the
gruesome details of the scene and the woman’s husband first looking out from
the balcony then immediately going outside. The kids in the neighbourhood were
encouraged to write condolences for the woman’s two teenage children.
Her daughter, the older sibling, according to the respondent, accepted the letters
and asked that they never speak about it again. The family of three stayed in the
flat for many years to come and there was no discussion, let alone memorial, to
mark the incident thereafter. There were just rumours about the woman’s
mental health and marital struggles. But, after her death, no one would speak
about her directly. That tragic case was not an isolated one in Mladost during
those years. Two respondents, who were schoolchildren at the time, remember a
classmate talking about several neighbours dying after jumping. There was a
sense of normalising of this phenomenon with the acknowledgement in school
that “someone had done it again in my block.”

In the past decade, the phenomenon has only exacerbated, prompting
considerable media coverage. In the past ten years alone, there are at least five
recorded suicides by jumping out of a panelka in Mladost (BNR, 2011; Standard,
2012; Nova News, 2013; Blitz, 2015; Offnews, 2016). One case that has not been
reported is the death of another neighbour from the sixth floor of Entrance A of
52 some years ago. The man, in his late 30s, was a recognisable local figure,known to walk his dog, play table tennis behind the block, and hang out with a
group of friends, who were vilified as “junkies” by some older inhabitants. But,
beyond allegations of being under the influence of narcotics, there was no
mention of the state of his mental health. I wanted to speak to his parents, with
whom he lived, but they had recently been robbed, despite their son's *nekrolog* (obituary) still hanging from their front door (Figure 32). According to some of their neighbours, they were understandably grief stricken and had asked for privacy.

In a similar fashion to the way things were carried out under socialism, people who are different, who are deemed ‘abnormal’, are made invisible and rendered silent. The question of suicide is a prevailing one and it reveals a deep psychological trauma within the intimate lives of dozens of people, a trauma that cannot be diagnosed and explained by a reading of the external material culture alone. It is a trauma that can only be sensed through a prolonged and shared lived experience of the changing everyday life inside *panelki*. But while suicide, as a topic of discussion, was largely inaccessible, there were other issues that became visible within several flats that I was invited into.93 One case included an elderly couple94 living with their daughter, who had moved back home after a breakup and a loss of a job abroad. The daughter was always hidden in what used to be her room as a child, as her parents apologised on her behalf for her “sleeping so late.” The daughter was never seen during my visits, but I would occasionally see her parents throw away bottles of vodka and whiskey that were hidden in different places, most often in the balcony cupboards. Another case95 involves a man, now in his forties, who continues to live under the care of his parents. When visiting them, he was also hidden in his room, while the conversation was dominated by stories about the personal and professional success of his older brother and the excitement about him coming home to visit. The examples are extensive, and they range from people with serious issues, dependencies, disorders, and learning difficulties, to cases where you hear parents justifying an overbearing approach because their children were “sickly” when they were young. These subjects, once the invisible children of socialism, are once again rendered invisible in the present day, hidden behind panel walls and contained from the outside world. The only stories and rumours that are told revolve around the recurring cases of suicide, which seem to explode the tightly kept secret that some people may be struggling. I think this topic requires much more in-depth analysis by more capable and trained researchers – what I wanted to recognise here is a sort of taboo topic of everyday life that, particularly in a place like Block 52, has created that ‘other’ way of how not to be, of what not to do and talk about, that in many ways defines the boundaries of what counts as normal everyday life. It also opens up a peculiar discussion about what narratives and discourses permeate the panel walls. These stories were shared as gossip when we were kids, but they were never to be broached directly with

93 To respect the privacy of everyone involved, I’ve omitted any details about the location of these flats and who these families are.
94 Personal conversation May 2013.
95 Personal conversation May 2017
the grieving families. Outsiders would talk and share, perhaps even sympathetically, but the victims’ families themselves would never acknowledge it and would act as if nothing had happened. It was a strange game of pretend, particularly in a block where the walls are so thin that you can hear when your upstairs or downstairs neighbour sneezes.

6.5 The Artists of Everyday Life

According to Georgi Lozanov and Georgi Gospodinov, who attempt a genealogy of everyday life under socialism by looking at artworks through “non-art eyes” (Lozanov, 2016: 8), it is possible to resee a certain period by focusing on “the ways artists went through it” (ibid.) More specifically, their artworks are artefacts that are like pages of the microhistory of Bulgarian socialism – a history predicated on the fact that the experience of everyday life outlasts ideologies and regimes. Some of the artworks analysed are concerned with the panelki byt – from the alien new cityscape and the concrete promises of modernity to the intimacies of untested bathrooms and kitchens. I argue that the true artists of everyday life, both under socialism and after, are the inhabitants themselves. Their total art is not paintings on traditional canvases, but the full-scale panelki façades; the entire flats are installations, marking temporal shifts and the touch of various actors, like the maistor, the socialist child, the returning émigré, the dreamer, and the senior citizen – with remonti being their lifelong and outstanding oeuvre.

Rather than looking for evidence in the experience and reflections of artists and their art, my approach is closer to the role of ‘total installations’ in Ilya and Emilia Kabakov’s work. The panelka flat is approached almost forensically, so as to unpick and deconstruct its multiple layers and decipher its ‘story.’ According to Boris Groys, concerning Kabakov’s The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment,

These installations always have a story to tell – the story of the realisation of the project or action in question. And pictures painted in the traditional manner, art objects, photographs and videos can all be used in the context of these installations. However, the pictures and objects used in this way do lose their traditional status as works of art. Instead they become documents, illustrating the story being told by means of the installation (2006: 35-36).

Whereas Kabakov removes himself as author and only uses his memories to construct fictional subjects in his installations, so as to tell “fictional stories about fictional characters that are not even clearly identifiable as art events,” (ibid.: 36)
the *panelki* palimpsests open up real ones. They are identifiable art events that ubiquitously document the banality of everyday life and each flat is a new immersive experience, each time transforming the always identical prefabricated space into a new reality to be experienced and reflected upon. Take, for example, the role real art plays inside *panelki* flats. As a rule, very few flats have paintings – or, in fact, anything for that matter – hanging from the walls. Some inhabitants admit that the hardness of the concrete make it nearly impossible to drill a hole in the walls. In other flats, where the majority of the paintings tend to be icons, inhabitants have opted to lay them on top of bookshelves and tables, creating miniature shrines, like the religious corners (or ‘red corner’ from the traditional Russian Orthodox church) that underwent drastic transformation under socialism in the Soviet Union (Buchli, 1999: 4). There are also those inhabitants who dislike the permanence of paintings – drilling a whole in the concrete wall is a permanent mark – and prefer the walls free so that furniture can be moved around and experimented with without the need to match it to the walls. There are cases in which inhabitants attempt to forcefully utilise the concrete walls – lifting some furniture, like cupboards off the ground and turning the walls into both a small art gallery and a police interrogation room (Figures 41-2).

In all these cases, the art on the walls is not relevant in terms of its own independent value, but because of how it corresponds with and reflects on the individual stories of their owners. That’s also the role pictures plays in Kabakov’s installations, as well as other Moscow Conceptualist works that “found the picture interesting specifically in its non-autonomous, non-artistic use” (Groys, 2006: 30). The picture is no longer the idealised escape into a world beyond the concrete surroundings, but precisely a documentary illustration, evidence of the everyday life narratives being consolidated through it. From the flat-gallery you learn less about the artistic tastes of the inhabitants than about their deep ties to a pre-socialist Bulgarian culture and petit-bourgeois consciousness that has been forced onto the concrete walls of an institution which is made to resist such intrusions. According to Kabakov,

[The subject] is simultaneously both a ‘victim’ and a viewer, who on the one hand surveys and evaluates the installation, and on the other, follows those associations, recollections which arise in him … he is overcome by the intense atmosphere of the total illusion (1995: 256).

Kabakov focuses on fiction, illusion, and utopia, whereby the viewer is encouraged to study and feel her surroundings, as if they were real, so that they can discover what happened to the invisible protagonists – who they were, how they lived, etc. With *panelki* the experience is concrete and contextual, each flat adding layers to the overall experience of everyday life. And the audience is almost never an external one – with the transition to democracy, fewer and
fewer people are allowed inside flats – except family, and decreasingly so, friends. Oftentimes, as is the case with Dodo’s, Georgi Kostov’s, and Trizlincevi’s families, the audience guides, and eventually transforms, the story and the space of the panelka installation. Either it is a generational transition where the audience (children) becomes the artist (parents) as the artists accept a new passive role in the domestic realm; or the audience is removed and the artists are able to reimagine the space according to new circumstances.

In the 1970s and 1980s, homeowners experimenting with remonti wanted to distinguish themselves from the house and life of preceding generations, as most vividly shown in the case of Doryana’s flat. The panelka flat was a blank canvas whereby inhabitants could seek to realise themselves through difference. The process of DIY was only the first step in this attempt at self-realisation, which reached its most extreme and abstract levels in recent years. And it is most visible externally because the biggest battle in the reconstruction of the domestic space is the façade, setting off a recurring process of invention and imagination. According to Groys, for Kabakov, the “circumstances of the Soviet Union were in themselves only semi-real. The Soviet Union was itself just a gigantic art installation... If you want to escape a set of fictional circumstances you have no choice other than to sign up to a different fiction, invent more narratives” (2006: 31). That is the silent continuity observed in everyday life inside panelki before and after socialism – people always approached their byt as an escape from the outside world, it’s just the tools they used to do that changed over time.

To illustrate just a fraction of the extensively individual narratives invented by panelki inhabitants, I would like to juxtapose several identical flats as total installations (Figures 33-35). The first set of pictures (Figure 33) depicts the “kitchen” of four identical three-room flats in Entrance C, Block 52; the second set is from four-room flats in Entrance A; the third – Block 45, Entrance 12. By omitting the context of the lives and identities of the families pictured, these kitchen snapshots serve to universalise the banality of everyday life in a similar way to Kabakov in his On the Roof installation. Everyday life is universalised by the illustration of the “commonness of the experiences documented and the very notion of familial relationships,” as Boym, commenting on Kabakov, puts it (1994: 193). The universal quality, however, is contextualised by the strikingly different traces and marks of autobiographical self-representation. In Figure 33, that is the contrast between the age of the inhabitants and the age (as in how recent the remont) of the kitchen. That contrast reveals stories about the connections between two families with woodcraft and the traditional Bulgarian house, and two others with their reimagining of what a modern panelka kitchen ought to look like. In Figure 34, it reveals a distinguishing artefact of socialist design once used as a physical separator of dining room and kitchen. In Figure 35, it reveals generational change and limited options for families who
live and die inside panelki. Their striking differences and stories, contained by their perpetual, and immovable, coexistence, renders the “borders between literally and literal easily transgressed” (Boym, 1994: 193).

However, the artistic work of self-creation that traces the existence of panelki artists/inhabitants is never complete, utopian or transparent. It is a work in progress and one in constant dialogue between past and present. As Dimitar Dinev put it, “There will always be remonti, there’s no other way. The requirements change.” These requirements largely coincide with the new material realities, tastes, and social pressures on inhabitants to continuously mould themselves in accordance to their home. In the 1990s, with the mass closing in of the flat with double doors and glazed balconies, the private domestic sphere “became idealized as a site of autonomy and refuge from an intrusive state and the ‘abnormal’ social, economic, and political conditions it fostered” (Fehérváry, 2013: 51). According to Fehérváry, the Hungarian post-socialist experience shows a similar process where “private domestic spaces were envisioned as having the potential to be the ultimate heterotopic space, complete with the power to envelop and transform their inhabitants” (ibid.: 234). The Foucaultian use of heterotopic spaces refers to spaces that are “irreducibly ‘other’ and perfect in contrast to the messiness around them” (Foucault, 1986: 27).

For Fehérváry, the attempt to renovate kitchens and bathrooms in Hungary, to transform the panelka into an “enchanted island” (2013: 235), or ‘fairy-tale’ as Georgi Kostov put it, which had the restorative powers of ‘forgetting’ the socialist past, is the ultimate expression of heterotopia in the private space. The remonti are seen as social condensers of European identity, as well as sites of differentiation from socialist modernity. The luxury kitchen and bathrooms generated “utopian imaginings” of lifestyles beyond Hungary’s borders (ibid.). This is also what Dimitar means when talking about the perpetuity of remonti and the necessarily changing demands. However, what I have observed in the panelki I was welcomed into is that thirty years after the fall of socialism, the concrete ecumene is far more resilient than what is described by Fehérváry in Hungary. There are indeed similar cases of upgrades, particularly to the kitchens and bathrooms, but what stands out even more is the complexity of individual stories, not the overarching and embattled discourses about modernity. Today, thanks to the panelki owners, the boundaries between past and present are being transgressed.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is the place that original electrical sockets play in many contemporary panelki flats (Figures 36-37). Even Trizlincevi, the family who had reimagined their flat to the extreme, carrying out several remonti until the open-plan kitchen was achieved, have not removed the sockets, but
have upgraded them with modern add-on so that more appliances can be connected. The reason this particular artefact is so resilient is because wiring a panelka flat is a particularly daunting task. The reinforced concrete walls meant that holes and the electrical wires (for appliances like lamps) had to be installed in advance and most of the cabling was lined along the floors. The same goes for the radiator pipes, which line the corners of walls in each room (Figure 38). Therefore, the black sockets also protruded several centimetres out from the wall. Trizlincevi kept them as the only original artefacts from they day they moved in ("it was how we got it"), both revealing a sense of nostalgia for the past, as well as a very practical recognition of just how difficult it is to rewire the flat and drill holes in the concrete. “You don’t want mess with the cabling any more than you need to. Back in the ‘90’s, when we followed the DIY methodology, it was trial and error with the cables – you turn the fuses off, drill what you need to drill, turn the fuses back on and if something doesn’t work, you’ve hit a cable,” Sasho Trizlincev says. Other inhabitants, like Dodo and Vuzlevi, simply kept their sockets saying, "There are no better sockets than those.” In all cases, the artefact of the past persevered, despite intense pressures to change with the “demands.”

Other inhabitants, like Georgi Kostov, wanted to erase these remnants of the past, seen as irrational, space limiting, and foreign to his western visitors. So they tore out their black sockets and instructed their maistori to dig holes into the panels to install new ones. The resistance of the panelka is felt most strongly when you attempt to carve into it. “That was really hard – adding the electrical new sockets,” Georgi says with regards to one of the smallest details in an otherwise quite significant transformation of the entire flat. The situation is similar in Dimitar Dinev’s flat, where so much importance on transforming the children’s room – there, Dimitar installed new sockets (Figure 39), but failed to do it in the living room (Figure 40).

There are some panels that just don't budge, dude! Other panels are like butter. I assume some of the thinner panels are from a concrete that isn’t as strong. I know that because I dug out all the sockets.

The nagging question of these sockets is actually one that pervades the entire discussion about the transformation of everyday life in post-socialism. Because, rather than the creation of an idealised space, as argued by Fehérváry, where remonti follow larger normative guidelines regarding the direction of progress after socialism, what these seemingly superfluous sockets show is the utter banality and commonness of everyday experiences in Bulgarian panelki. The sockets are an indicator of the hidden resilience of concrete and how it forces a certain physical reconciliation with the constraints and irrationalities of the past. How – despite the sweeping and continuous efforts to utterly transform the material reality of panelki flats so that they match the changing requirements of
the external world – something like a black socket leftover from socialism still retains its place in that space as one of the “barest necessities of life” (Buchli, 1999: 55).

6.6 To Live and Die in the Panelka

This dissertation has attempted to show how the panelka flat can be used as a diagnosis of the present – as a site where negotiations between past and present, as well as various notions of the self, are constantly renegotiated. Through its external and internal changes, it is possible to trace a complex rejuvenation effort where old and young people attempt to reinvent or consolidate new identities and dreams by transforming their domestic space. And, most importantly, because Mladost, and panelki in general, continues to be left to the care of the individuals inside them, the palimpsest never forms a firm document or narrative – it is always being overwritten. The most that a reading like this can hope to achieve is a critical analysis of this moment in time, of how today is different from yesterday. In this sense, I follow Foucault in his exploration of what he calls “[m]aybe the most certain of all philosophical problems, that of the present time and of what we are in this very moment” (1982: 785). As such, the goal of this chapter has been to show how, during the last three decades, human beings in panelki have continued to carve out new lives for themselves, and have documented those histories in different subjectification modes inside their homes. I do not claim any of those modes are final, because the panelka is only a social condenser in its productive failures across various temporal and spatial iterations. That means the changes are both banal and ubiquitous and require constant attention and analysis. Instead, what has been attempted here is to show how a particular method of looking at and into panelki can help decipher some of these stories today and show how and why they are different in each flat-as-total-installation.

One thing that is particularly striking and different today is the reconciliation of some of the inhabitants with the fact that that their lives will most likely be spent inside the panelka. From Dodo and Dimitar, who grew up in those flats and are now bringing up their own children, to Trizlinchevi, who sent their children off into the world so they can finally live their panelka life the way they always wanted, what is constantly being reiterated is a sense of contentment and joy over having some control over the final version of the home. The ‘fairy-tale’ flat of Georgi Kostov, the way the French windows open up so he can look at his rose garden below, is a sign of a change in the relationship between flats and their owners. With almost no exceptions, the people I interviewed over the years have come to love their flats and would now never choose to move anywhere else. Their flats, for better or worse – and every inhabitant is open and quick to
discuss all the limitations of their own space, of *panelki*, of *Mladost*, as well as the overarching political state, etc. – are extensions of themselves, each affecting and shaping the other to reach the current state of cacophony. Sasho and Reni Trizlitseva describe the paradox of constant renegotiation and change best by this juxtaposition,

Sasho: I even told your father, Ivan, our *panelka* is the best. I’d never sell it. I’d never move from this village.

Reni: We’ve been building a home for 30 years and I’m immeasurably happy. I wouldn’t change a thing.

Their flat is an oxymoron – Sasho says it’s both the best kind of housing construction and yet he still calls *Mladost* a village. Reni promises Sasho that the flat, which has endured thirty years of constant *remont*, is now ‘perfect’. The contradictions are key to understanding the complex transformations of everyday life and how they are documented by the actions inhabitants have taken over the past 30 years.

Nonetheless, the *panelki* are theirs and will continue to be so until they die. Some, like Trizlincevi and Georgi Kostov, have made sure that the *panelka* is pushed to the extremes so that their ambitious dreams can be accommodated in it. As Georgi puts it, “when you’ve done something, made something, that’s where your place is. I discovered this after turning 70.” And because, from Day 1, the *panelka* was given to these people stripped and bare, it has been a constant and always changing process to transform it and make something (home) out of nothing (concrete). During that process, the home becomes a total installation where every mark on the wall, every piece of furniture, every closed-in balcony reveals layers upon layers of narratives about the changes in everyday life. And while the stories and flats in Block 45 and 52 are unique, it is their shared banality that allows the experience inside their walls to transgress the context of *Mladost* and universalise their message about the domestic space during socialism and after in Bulgaria. As Kabakov once predicted, there will be a time when “there are only installations, and... everyone will live in an installation” (in Wallach, 1996: 86).
Plates

Figure 1: The cashier's book, Entrance 12 (Vhod M) of Block 45

Figure 2: Income from monthly installments, 2016, Entrance 12, Block 45
Figure 3: “Cleaner” (*Chistachka*) fees, 1998

Figure 4: Expenses (*Razhodi*), 1998
Figure 5: Income – hot water (*topla voda*) | One-off income (*Izvunreden prihod*), 2007

Figure 6: Block 52, Entrance C, side view
Figure 7: Block 52, Entrance A, back view

Figure 8: Block 45, Entrance 14, side view
Figure 9: Landscape view of Block 45

Figure 10: “Burov is gay” [Burov e gei] sign, Block 45, Entrance 14
Figures 11-12: Block 45, Entrance 1

Figure 13: Block 45, Entrance 4
Figure 14: ‘Here lives’ (Tuk zhivee), Block 52, Entrance C

Figure 15: Flag and portrait of Vassil Levski, Block 50, Entrance 1
Figure 16: Swastika, Block 45, Entrance 1

Figure 17: From 1914 to 1948, Levski vs CSKA, Block 46, Entrance 1
Figure 18: A cacophony of colours on so-called ‘Chinese Wall’ block in Mladost

Figure 19: A blank canvas, Block 50
Figure 20: Dodo's new kitchen

Figure 21: Dodo's new kitchen

Figure 22: Dodo and his wife in living room
Figure 23: DIY cornice

Figure 24: DIY ceiling ornaments
Figure 25: Dimitar Dinev's living room after the fire

Figure 26: Dimitar Dinev's new kitchen TV
Figure 27: Dimitar Dinev’s new kitchenette

Figure 28: Dimitar Dinev’s DIY remont

Figure 29: Georgi Kostov’s living room
Figure 30: Georgi Kostov’s French windows

Figure 31: Georgi Kostov’s ‘spot’
Figure 32: A necrologue in Block 52, Entrance A
Figure 33: A collage of kitchens, Block 52, Entrance C
Figure 34: A collage of kitchens, Block 52, Entrance A
Figure 35: A collage of kitchens, Block 45, Entrance 12

Figure 36: An original *panelka* electrical socket with a modern upgrade
Figure 37: An original *panelka* electrical socket with a modern upgrade

Figure 38: Heat pipes and electronic clock in a kitchen
Figure 39: New sockets in new kids room

Figure 40: Old sockets in living room
Figure 41: Stained glass glued onto wall

Figure 42: A living room art gallery
Chapter Seven: Concrete Conclusions, Palimpsests, and Prognosis

7.1 The (Extra)Ordinary Panelki

As I write these concluding remarks after a four-year long research, I am struck by the unpredictability of change. On the one hand, as I look outside my window from Block 52, Entrance C and look to Block 45, I immediately notice a myriad of transformations. The trees, once too feeble to even climb up on, are now six-floors high and in bloom. New balconies have been closed in and old ones, having undergone cycles of sloppy remonti, have façades that are starting to crack. Inside my own panelka, too, things are changing drastically – one of my neighbours passed away recently, a valuable informant and friend. The only visible sign of this dynastical change is that this car, which always had a spot on the parking lot right in front of the entrance, has been relegated to a less central spot. The lift needs repairing again and the plastic cover over the buttons for the floor numbers has been stolen (again) and replaced by a DIY piece of sheet metal with holes in it. On the first floor, a neighbour has installed a CCTV in the corner of the wall, allowing him to observe everyone who is coming and going from the building. Outside, the rose garden that Georgi Kostov has been tending for years is finally flourishing, like a small natural barrier to the street, or the beginning of an unambitious maze made up of rose bushes. When I was a child that space was just gravel and we used it as a football field. For the first time in years, I’m noticing large groups of kids racing down the street in front of my block and testing the boundaries of this concrete city. There are no longer any stray dogs – just stray cats – in the neighbourhood.

Yet, some things remain the same – my neighbour still plays the flute every day for hours and is in fact doing so right now as I write. I think this time it’s Mozart. There are still ‘prophylactic’ regimes where the centrally controlled hot water is shut off for several weeks in May. There are still bills to pay and meeting to attend, still innovative ways of approaching remonti in the age of fast furniture and YouTube videos that teach you how to lay tiles. Ultimately, Mladost is still here, brimming with life, far more diverse that Bogdan Tomalevski could have ever anticipated when he first put plan to paper.

My research, despite its ambitions, is humbled by the rich social fabric in Mladost constantly enforcing itself on the concrete. It must be noted that new layers are being added to the palimpsests all around and while many of the conclusions to be drawn are lasting diagnoses of the capillary power relations flowing through Mladost, the creativity of youth and the artistic expression of rejuvenation cannot be contained within these pages. In fact, these pages themselves will require freshening up in a few years time, just like a panelka façade. It must be revisited, just like I revisited Ivan Nikolov’s research from 17 years ago. But it must also be expanded – the limits of the palimpsest methodology should be tested beyond Mladost and Sofia, perhaps even beyond Bulgaria. It will involve a different gaze in contexts, like Bratislava where one of the main diagnostic marks has been
erased – the façade, but it is important because opening up the panelki, looking inside, listening, and living provides invaluable insights into what millions of people across Europe and Asia call home. The palimpsest, by definition, is difficult to decipher and requires a variety of tools and strategies to make that, which is invisible, legible. The goal of this dissertation has been an important first step – to look at the individual buildings no one looks at because they are seemingly unoriginal and ubiquitous; to question whether that which falls under the label of daily life is indeed as banal and uninteresting as often assumed; to trace the cracks and fissures, to try and figure out which ones were covered up, when, and why; to decipher the complex relationship people have with their homes. But most importantly, to experiment with how far curiosity can lead you in a neighbourhood constantly fortifying itself and to see whether the big ‘-isms’ – socialism, post-socialism, capitalism, etc. – really have had that linear and one-directional structural impact on the everyday life of ordinary people.

What better ground upon which to test this than the first prefabricated neighbourhood in a country still coming to terms with the legacy of its socialist past? A country where in a matter of decades, a majority of the population moved from the rural land and into the concrete boxes. Those boxes were all the same when they were handed over. Today, not one remains an exact copy. Mladost, true to its name, rejuvenates and tells stories about its individual artists and maistori. It is an exhibition and total installation showcasing, mosaically, how today is indeed different from yesterday. As social condenser, panelki failed productively, it has been shown, which is to say that their ambitious goal to transform society through architecture was not fully realised and had curious unintended consequences. It is to say, in a word, that the panelki were in many ways able to absorb, but were not made to contain, the incredible diversity that would give the cold concrete its flow of life. It failed to homogenise, despite Tomalevski’s and other architects’ fears, but what has been shown here is why that has been the case; how the particular approach by the socialist state to panelki construction compromised konstruktsiia in favour of stroitel’stvo, constrained by time and resources, resulting in a hollowed out and unfinished version of the original plan. It was that which inaugurated the peculiar relationship between inhabitant and panelka, between the empty and crooked prefabricate concrete panels and the would-be artists that would spend their entire lives sculpting them. It was that relationship that was examined here with the help of a palimpsestuous methodology that was able to approach these changes in layers, to uncover meanings and contextualise narratives and discourse about the past with cues and guidance from the surrounding material culture.

In some ways, the panelki have reached their final iteration for some inhabitants, who have come to terms, quite gladly in most cases, that their flat would outlive them. Georgi Kostov, perhaps the most telling example, no longer focuses on his internal space – there is no more need for remonti because there is no more audience. He is now stepping outside, looking to transform the space outdoors so that when he opens his French windows, he can marvel at his roses. When his son and daughter-in-law come to visit from Australia, he makes no further improvements to try and accommodate the ‘Westerners’. He instead plans to
take them on a road trip across Bulgaria and back to his village where he says he grew up without even so much as shoes on his feet. Kostov is a prime example of something clearly changing in Mladost. There are signs that some fortifications, fears of the outside world, are being taken down. It seems that people, particularly those who are older, are no longer just looking internally, but are starting to see Mladost as a community. These are small signs, of course, and there is a long way to go to undo the fear and isolation of the 1990s, but it seems to me that with every new bench added in front of block entrances, every new plant in the predetermined slots, there is a new relationship forming. A relationship showing a level of content towards the communal that has until now been primarily reserved for that which is private (or personal) – that which is inside your own panelka. Again, whether that will last and for how long requires this research to be revisited in the future.

7.2 The Dominanta, the Kommunalka, the Panelka

This research is situated within a long body of work examining the role of material culture on subjectivity in the context of the former socialist bloc. More specifically, I have contextualised the institution of panelka against other notable research that has explored the role of architecture on the social fabric. To a certain extent, there is a spectrum that extends from Michal Murawski’s dominanta in Warsaw on the one hand, in terms of arguments about the Marxian structural centrality in post-socialism, to Victor Buchli’s kommunalka in Moscow, in terms of the more protean and invisible ways in which daily life is shaped and moulded by grand discourses and competing narratives for truth. I have tried to show how between these two extremes there remains an institution that is central to the socialist regime, universal in its exported application across the entire bloc, and reflexive of each individual path to post-socialism. Just by looking at the way panelki façades compare in Bulgaria, Slovakia, and, say, Russia, gives you a certain sense of the directions these countries are taking, their relationship to the past and the competing discourses about the present. I have been able to show that the universality of the panelka makes it a valuable point of departure in a study of everyday life. The focus of this research has been on the Bulgarian case, specifically Mladost, but I strongly believe that the palimpsestuous methodology can be used in other context to open up and interpret prefabricated legacies.

More concretely, I placed my research in context with other work carried out about the panelka in other post-socialist countries, most notably Krisztina Fehérváry in Hungary, Kimberly Zarecor in Czechoslovakia, as well as Sonia Hurt, Nina Toleva, and Megan Lueneburg in Bulgaria. And yet, research is lacking in what is the predominant form of housing in many of these countries, housing that not only relates to the past, but is continuously shaping the present. When it comes to Bulgaria, specifically, not enough is known about the history and present of panelki. There are few archival sources, little information about the biographies of architects and the history of the DK factories. Even less is known about the current social makeup of these neighbourhoods that house more than a quarter of all Bulgarians. In this dissertation, despite some difficulties in terms
of gaining access, I have been able to provide a clearer genealogy of panelki and how they would come to dominate every cityscape. I was also able to add a valuable layer of context revolving around the seemingly erased history of Bogdan Tomalevski’s work as Mladost’s chief architect. His only concrete connection with his neighbourhood today remains that peripheral street named after him in Mladost 4. The scarce information I was able to collect about him, I have argued, changes the common perception about the role of architects in panelki construction – shows the qualitatively different intention than the commonly assumed lifeless and homogenous concrete boxes built en masse.

That recognition and exploration of the intended social condensation versus the real-life construction, in turn, opened up a new conversation about the relationship between inhabitants and their flat. I have been able to show that the discontinuities in daily life are far more subtle than the symbolic rupture between socialism and post-socialism. I have been able to build upon Fehérváry’s research into the flat as heterotopic space and show that, in Bulgaria, this is not necessarily a post-socialist phenomenon. Instead, Bulgarians began experimenting with carving out different lives for themselves long before the regime fell – they employed crafty DIY strategies, they manipulated the concrete, and tested its unexpected malleability to the brink. They closed in balconies, turned bedrooms into living rooms, and removed toilets to extend kitchens. They transformed these ‘teacups’, to follow Tomalevski’s metaphor, into artisanal ‘wine glasses’, each slightly different from the other. And it is that diversity, that artistry that has been explored here. But to showcase this, I was required to build up a specific approach and methodology to question whether panelki are as banal and unoriginal as it is often argued; to resee them individually rather than overlook them because they are everywhere; to show that each mark on the walls, each transformed façade is more than just a simple remont; it is a layer of history, a part of a total installation with stories to tell.

That approach allowed me to both open up these fortified spaces, to look inside and put together a visual history, but also to observe at the panelki from the outside and read their façades like palimpsests, to analyse them as a mosaic of individual histories competing for attention and recognition. According to Bulgarian author Georgi Gospodinov,

Thank God, it is not ideologies, not utopias, nor states – but the days in which we live … our everyday life, which remain. It is that fleeting byt, which turns out to be more permanent than all ideologies. (2016: 45)

It is that focus on byt, which has enabled this dissertation to go beneath the meta-narratives of socialism and post-socialism, and to see how, concretely, life has changed over the last 60 years in Mladost. To show not only the “internal deterritorialisation” (Yurchak, 2005: 116) of the socialist system, how the way individuals were transforming their flats was opening up the system, mutating it “towards unpredictable, creative, multiple forms of ‘normal life’ that no one anticipated” (ibid.: 125). But, most importantly, how that deterritorialisation continued in post-socialism, how new iterations of being vnye were formed, new relationships between flat and inhabitant experimented with. These practices
are “not coded in the emancipatory rhetoric of grand narratives” (ibid.), but were entirely made possible by them. In other words, the constant reinvention of the panelka has loosely followed the transition to post-socialism, but it has never been strictly defined by it; there have been moves towards greater freedom documented under socialism and moves towards greater isolation and fortification in the early years of democracy and capitalism. The panelki, therefore, are never a totality – they are neither the imagined social condenser, nor the institutionalisation of the inalienable right to personal/private property: they are not the empty and soulless concrete boxes, nor the crumbling and ugly remnants of a past regime. They are ever changing experiments of artistic expression, of total installation that are both part of the contemporary reality and external to the overarching discourses of power and politics. Panelki are sites of “imaginary elsewheres” (Yurchak, 2005: 183), blank canvases upon which individuals attempt to carve out lives for themselves.

7.3 The Absence of the Promised Focus on Absence

This fleeting moment in my study of the panelka has resulted in some discrepancies in terms of the assumptions I had at the start of this research and the conclusions that I am now reconciling with. Perhaps the biggest concern is the concept of personal property and the weight I placed on it as juridical right and normative ideal. I have argued that Bulgaria was different from other regimes in the way it approached the question of property relations under socialism. The official introduction of ‘personal property’ in the 1971 Constitution, and the various experimentations with previous de facto rights to private property, was given substantial weight in this research – it was that juridical right that enabled the close relationship between inhabitant and flat to grow and it was on the basis of that normative right that the transition to post-socialism was so smooth in terms of the way panelki were privatised. But the fluidity of this institution, its refusal to be defined as a totality has to some extent proven that view to be incomplete and somewhat facile – and this has only been possible thanks to the extensive fieldwork and archival research carried out over the last four years (and the importance placed on the methodological triangulation).

What I learned from Mladost is that the right to personal property under socialism was not equal or accessible to all. It was a luxury only some people would be able to enjoy. People like the Vuzlevi family were first forced to live in a smaller flat than originally allocated (because, after all they had a ‘Colonel’ as neighbour), and then they had to wait years before they were allowed to purchase it. Others, like Marga in Entrance A of Block 52, resorted to early family planning so that they could be placed higher in the category list of those most in need of a flat. Some, like families of the DK elite who built Block 52 got four-bedroom flats. Others, like the doctor in Entrance 3 got a flat as a ‘thank you’ for their help. Everyone in Block 52 got a better flat than in 45, but many of them, especially they young families, had never owned a flat before and had been on the waiting list for years. This reflected something more than the so-called blat or barter economy – it reflected the new luxury of life, the gift of living in the city
that the socialist regime introduced. First, by collectivising the land and encouraging the move to the city, the socialist regime made the Bulgarian home into a luxury product; then, by introducing prefabrication in the housing industry as an answer, the regime made the panelka flat the most sought after commodity in Bulgaria; it made it the most valuable asset for any Bulgarian individual – and this has remained the case 30 years after socialism, when private ownership of panelki provided some stability through the years of hyperinflation, political change, rising costs and unemployment. The panelka is now typically used to contain up to three generations and is the main source of wealth for many families, not just in Mladost, but in Bulgaria overall. But, at the start of this research, I stated, following Buchli, that I intended to move away “from our preoccupation with presence” (1999: 5) – particularly when it comes to links between the materiality of this ecumene and everyday life in post-socialist contexts – and focus on “absence.” My original assumptions about the normative rights and the extent to which panelki were able to solve the housing crisis blurred that intention because, until the final chapters, I was focused primarily on the presence. Despite my attempts to showcase that which is invisible because it is overlook, I missed a very important point about panelki – those people that didn’t get a Mladost flat, those that struggled to get one, and those that got an inferior or smaller one than they needed. Because what happened to those lives, deprived of this luxury, raises further important questions – for example, how did those individuals, living in the smallest (one- or two-bedroom) flats create families? Did it affect their considerations about the number of children they would have? And what about those that never got a flat, or were moved from one rented flat to another until the end of the regime?

I don’t know how it panned out when the panelki were first inhabited, but in the context of post-socialism, the former ‘children of socialism’ are now adults in their late 30s or early 40s and still live in their ‘kids’ room’ with their elderly parents. Some even still share the room with their siblings. I know how hard it is for them to consolidate lasting relationships, to create stable families, and to move out from the panelka in search of a fresh start and a new home. It is sometimes shocking to think about how many people my age continue to live in flat they were born and how the limited space is constantly renegotiated to fit the extending household – just think of Dodo’s family and the reorganisation required to give his children some much sought after privacy. The panelka was never a gift or right that was granted to everyone by a benevolent Party – it was a luxury that only some people ended up with. It is perhaps the most important avenue for further research on the subject – an actual focus on absence, on those that were excluded and silenced by the panelki; those that did not share the experiences of growing up in Mladost with countless other children, of turning this concrete jungle into your playground.

And, lastly, Mladost is changing – most of the spaces Tomalevski reserved for public use – libraries, chitalishta96, parks and pools, playgrounds – have been restituted and privatised and some of them have been used to build new

96 Chitalishte is a Bulgarian public house – it has a library, educational classes, a stage, and various other spaces for public and communal use.
residential buildings. Once regarded as ‘new’ and ‘luxury’, they are now facing the same problems that panelki have faced – shoddy and rushed construction, façades that are cracking, interior designs that are dysfunctional for the contemporary needs. Perhaps a return to Mladost in the future, a re-reading of the panelki palimpsests requires the inclusion of these new, strictly post-socialist buildings, too. It is curious to compare whether Mladost as a predominantly prefabricated neighbourhood has the same impact on these pockets of difference as it has had on the panelki. It is also curious to explore how the processes of remonti and DIY work in designs and materials that follow ‘Western’ architectural principles. Unfortunately, because so little research has been conducted about panelki, especially in Bulgaria, and even more so in Mladost, the dissertation needed strict limitations and methodological consideration and could not include everything. However, given the depth and context, which has been explored here, perhaps it is a fitting starting point for a much larger and more inclusive body of work.
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