

Rethinking the Production of Petržalka: A Phenomenon of State Socialist Urban Assemblage

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Abstract: As the largest housing estate in the former Czechoslovakia, Petržalka was a special case not only because of its size but also because of its strategic location in Bratislava. Its construction during the normalisation periods of the 1970s took place concurrently with the realisation of the nation-wide Prague-Brno-Bratislava highway. Thus, the development of Petržalka was not just about building residential complexes, but also to comply with national economic planning of the territory. It is a product of interactions between various agencies, from centralized state planning commissions, industrial and building enterprises, national regional councils, architects and engineering collectives. Important concepts in defining socialist cities in central and east Europe, according to Kimberly Elman Zarecor (2017) are ‘infrastructural thinking’ and ‘socialist scaffolding’ while Ivan Andráško (2018) suggested adopting the Actor Network Theory (ANT) in studying the housing estates, to trace relationships between actors and understanding the ‘complexity of socio-technical configurations of places.’ Along with Colin McFarlane’s definition of assemblage (2011) to describe the actors’ relations to each other in the process of urban development, I will contextualise Bruno Latour’s ANT (2005) for the case study of the production of Petržalka in the 1970s and 1980s. I attempt to use these tools to explain how territorial development plans were translated on site by tracing the relationships between various urban agencies. This analysis would conclude how far centralised economic policies on infrastructure influenced the production of the housing estates during state socialism and how they allowed variations in practice over time.

1. Introduction

Figure 1 is a view of the largest housing estate in Slovakia, Petržalka. It is a glimpse into the spatial characteristics of socialist urban planning of the late 1960s and 70s. Among its features which conform to the idea of the ‘socialist city’ are the spatial articulation, scale, limited buildings intended for commercial use, vast usage of prefabricated panel buildings which resulted in its urban aesthetics (Hirt, 2013). The housing estate has for more than two decades been infiltrated by commercial project developers, anticipating more transformations in the process. While the material legacy of the socialist regime is an obvious continuity of the past, however, similar continuities can also be detected in its institutions, practices and spatial planning policies (Tuvikene, 2016). For instance, the current planning system of the independent Slovak

Republic is still ingrained within the concept of territorial planning inherited from the Czechoslovak regime. Although they were certain modification, it is still based on the system and methods refined in the 1970s (Finka, 1997). While most studies on socialist cities and housing estates focus on the architecture and urban forms as an imprint of ideology from totalitarian regimes, there are less discussions on the relationships between the top political actors and their subordinate technical actors, and their urban outcomes.

The concept of space, which is represented here by the urban patterns is considered here as relational, which is produced, dynamic and changing. It is the relational spatial approach which enables us to grasp the how the actions and decisions of various actors affect or are affected by space (Tait & Jensen, 2007, p. 115). Hence the paper examines how the composition of power relations between the actors led inevitably to certain urban outcomes of Petržalka. It attempts to utilise the concept of assemblage in focusing on the emergence and process of state socialist urban planning in Czechoslovakia during normalisation (1968-1989). Actor Network Theory (ANT) here is a tool in urban assemblage, to trace the translation of urban policies into the production of the housing estate and its resulting infrastructure, as well as exposing which actors benefit those policies and which are disadvantaged. Ivan Andráško, a geographer on post-socialist cities justified the use of ANT to ‘understand the complexity of the socio-technical configuration of places’ regarding the housing estates in East and Central Europe (Andráško, 2018).

The main component of this paper is divided into four sections. It begins with a brief historical background into the conception of Petržalka in the late 1960s. Then the important actors in the production of Petržalka and their structural hierarchy will be discussed. This is followed by an explanation of important successive urban planning policies, seen here as intermediaries



Figure 1. *View from Most SNP of Petržalka.*

which define relationships between the actors as well as the crucial planning documents as mediators. Finally the production process will be analysed along with an ANT diagram.

2. Conception of Petržalka

Before the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia, Petržalka was a former village at the southern part of Bratislava on the other side of the Danube river which became annexed to Bratislava in 1951. It was deemed crucial to expand authority over Petržalka due to its proximity to the Austrian border (Szalay; Ed. Moravčíková, 2013). However there were obstacles as the village was prone to flooding. To encourage ideas on how the potential city would emerge, the Council of the National Committee of Bratislava announced an international urban planning competition in 1966. The entries came from as many as 310 participants from 28 countries with the highest number of entries from local architects in Czechoslovakia (Gross, 1969, p. 45). Through seminars and discussions with the finalists, the Chief Architect and the Bratislava National Committee exchanged ideas on how they envisioned the future urban district of Petržalka; these include not just residential flats but also preservation of landscape, complex civic amenities, entertainment hubs, to be applied with the latest modern building technology. In spite of their ambitions for a futuristic, convivial and complex urban district, they could not fight the forces of political control after the Prague Spring event and the widespread obligatory use of standardisation methods in the late 1960s. The project of designing Petržalka was eventually commissioned to Stanislav Talaš and Jozef Chovanec from Stavoprojekt. While their plans had to follow the important 1966 directive territorial plan (*Směrný územní plán*) of Bratislava, they were also influenced by the competition results in 1967 and approved by the higher authorities in 1970.

The normalisation period in Czechoslovakia is of particular interest in this paper because of the new policies and shifts in political structure which facilitated the largest mass housing projects in the former socialist country. Mary Fulbrook (2013) explained that 'normalisation' is a term used by scholars in Central and East Europe to analyse top-down imposed politics and policies by the state during periods of stability after political upheavals. The 1970s was a period in which Czechoslovakia experienced this relative stability, when the regimes embarked on self-legitimising efforts. Under the banner of being concerned about meeting the needs of the people, they increased standards of living by relaxing conditions of consumerism, shorter working hours per week for more leisure time, social family welfare and of course, housing provision.

In addition, Bratislava was experiencing waves of urban migration from other parts of Slovakia. As the previous German, Hungarian and aristocratic inhabitants were expelled and expatriated after World War II, the new residents had no connection to the city other than their places of work. Thus, the regime aimed to win them over with not just monumental buildings and disseminating ideology, but also by promising them adequate and sufficient dwellings.

To keep up with the demand, the Communist Party directed 500,000 residences to be built especially in large cities within 1971-75 and subsequently 640,000 in 1976-80 (Rietdorf, 1976, p. 252). This was in parallel with the realisation of the Czechoslovakian Prague-Brno-Bratislava highway in the 1970s to form better connections within its national boundaries than to be associated with its former Austro-Hungarian Empire through inherited road networks. This impacted the trajectory of development of Bratislava as the city became a bypass for highways between Czech lands and the rest of the cities in Slovakia. Mass housing neighbourhoods such as Petržalka and Dúbravka in Bratislava were developed along the highways with direct connections to Prague. Bratislava received more support from the Communist Party in the 1970s

five-year plans to build the new urban district of Petržalka not least because it was close to the Austrian border and thus would be a showcase city for the regime (Szalay; Ed. Moravčíková, 2013, p. 199). Petržalka was initially planned to contain more than 40,000 dwellings for almost 150,000 people equipped with social and civil amenities with important public transportations, along with industrial sites such as Slovnaft chemical plants as workplaces (Talaš, 1978, p. 20).

3. The Hierarchy System of Actors

Before we could begin to construct and determine the Actor-Network model, it is essential to understand the hierarchy of the structure and administration of the building industry in Czechoslovakia.

In 1968, Czechoslovakia was federalised and divided into Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic. In the name of allowing more self-governing autonomy, the Ministry of Construction and Technology of the Slovak Socialist Republic (MVT SSR) co-existed and was officially under the jurisdiction of the Slovak National Council and the Slovak Government. Both Czech and Slovak Republics each have their own Planning Commissions. MVT SSR and the Slovak State Planning Commission cooperated to determine the level of standards in construction, types of technological equipment and also the need to increase investment costs based on certain indicators (Runštuk, 1978, p. 58). Below them at regional levels there are the national committees, well-known to be the state organs at regional, district and councils. The role of the regional national committee was to approve detailed development plans and at the district level produce planning documents. It was at this level, within the Department of Chief Architect of Bratislava where the project of Petržalka was first prepared (Hague, Prior, 1991, pp. 20-21). Through federalisation, the national republics were respectively in charge of their own tasks of territorial planning and construction, however the laws remained federal and the central authorities were still in control over investment and technical policies. Therefore, despite federalisation, the real power was still within the stronghold of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) headquartered in Prague (Maier, Šlemr, 2016, p. 172).

The successful implementation of prefab panels in housing could be attributed to important organisations and research institutions in Slovakia. One of them, directly subordinated to the Ministry of Construction and Technology, was the Research Institute of Construction and Architecture (VÚVA), which conducted experimental constructions and typification components, based in Prague, Brno and Bratislava (Žáčková, 2014). Stavoprojekt, a large centralised state-run design institutes with offices in every city, was responsible for housing estate projects as well as establishing 'regional variants of individual prefabrication methods' (Moravčíková, 2011, pp. 24-25). Specialised research institutions, which were subdivisions of Stavoprojekt, were the Institute for Study of Design and Standardization (ŠPTU) and the State Regional Planning (URBION). Architects and engineers within the Stavoprojekt had to conform to the needs of the Party and the state construction enterprises. For Petržalka, the Bratislava Stavoprojekt was in charge and together with the Institute for Study of Design and Standardization (ŠPTU), researched the standardisation and development of prefabricated panels (Ibid). URBION and ŠPTU were fortified after federalisation, to aid the urban development of Slovakia, particularly Bratislava as its capital city (Maier, Šlemr, 2016, p. 172).

Interestingly enough, the main investors in building projects also acted as general contractors, entrusted by the Ministry with 'advice' from the regional National Committee (*Národní výbor* or NV), to coordinate, develop production and ensure quality of construction within the limits of

the economy. In 1957, to increase the efficiency of project coordination and building enterprises, a department of general investors were established. As in the case of Petržalka, the general investor was Investing. Since the 1960s, there were technical and economic organisations working with the main investors to increase efficiency, and the role of the general investor expanded to include engineering and quantity surveying, taking on more responsibility for construction projects (Pechar, 1979, p. 51). By 1970s their roles went from just investor to simultaneously being the quantity surveyor, engineering consultants, technological suppliers and contractor, though officially they were referred to as the ‘investing-engineering’ firm. The planning documentations and preliminary studies on Petržalka prepared by Stavoprojekt were negotiated with Investing before being officially approved by the National Committee of Bratislava.

Even though the National Committee of the City of Bratislava had their own Chief Architect Department fulfilling the role of the Planning Authority, in reality they were not as influential as Investing, and could not objectify any conflict that occurred during construction. For that matter, the *štábu vedenia stavby* or “building management staff” was officially set up with representatives from the relevant actors involved to resolve any conflicts on site (Podobský, 1982, pp. 31-32). Furthermore, the National Committee had its own department in allocating housing to the people moving into Petržalka.

In addition, the state enterprise mainly in charge of the residential complex, was the *Pozemné stavby n.p. Bratislava*. Meanwhile the planning of roads, public transport infrastructure in Petržalka were adjusted to suit the Prague Brno-Bratislava route. This was under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Transport, Posts and Telecommunications of the SSR, with the *Dopravoprojekt Bratislava* in charge of project development and construction carried out by *Doprastav Bratislava*. (Hulej, 1989, p. 37). There were of course other parties involved, such as *Hydrostav* and *Vodohospodarske Bratislava* on geological and water management, (Dvorín, 1973) however the urban actors discussed here were the main influential actors that shaped the course of the mass housing development.



Figure 2. Masterplan by Stavoprojekt Bratislava showing the original plans for various mass transit stops, proposed drainage canal and different building functions. Source: *Vystavba Petržalky* by Stanislav Talaš, *Architektura CSR* p. 19-23, Issue 1/1978.

4. Mediators and Intermediaries

According to the Actor-Network Theory concept by Latour, the intermediary is something which transports meaning or force without undergoing transformation, while the mediators are objects in which the meanings are transformed and distorted as they are transported throughout the network (Latour, 2005, p. 39). In this context, the intermediaries which defined the relationships between the aforementioned actors were the spatial planning policies established successively in the 1970s. The mediators in this case were the investment funds, regional (*oblastný*) and territorial (*uzemný*) planning documents, which became on-site working documentation and thus materialized in space. Figure 2 shows the structure and hierarchy of actors governed by the intermediary and the mediators which underwent changes as they become transformed throughout the network.

From 1969 and throughout the 1970s, a succession of regulations and spatial planning laws were established, which consolidated the power of certain actors over others. While the Urbanisation Project for Slovakia had been ongoing since the 1950s, in 1971 the Republic was divided into 13 different territories with guidelines for urban developments, that resulted in the Resolution No.2 (Finka, 1997, p. 88). In 1973 after an audit by the central Ministry of Construction

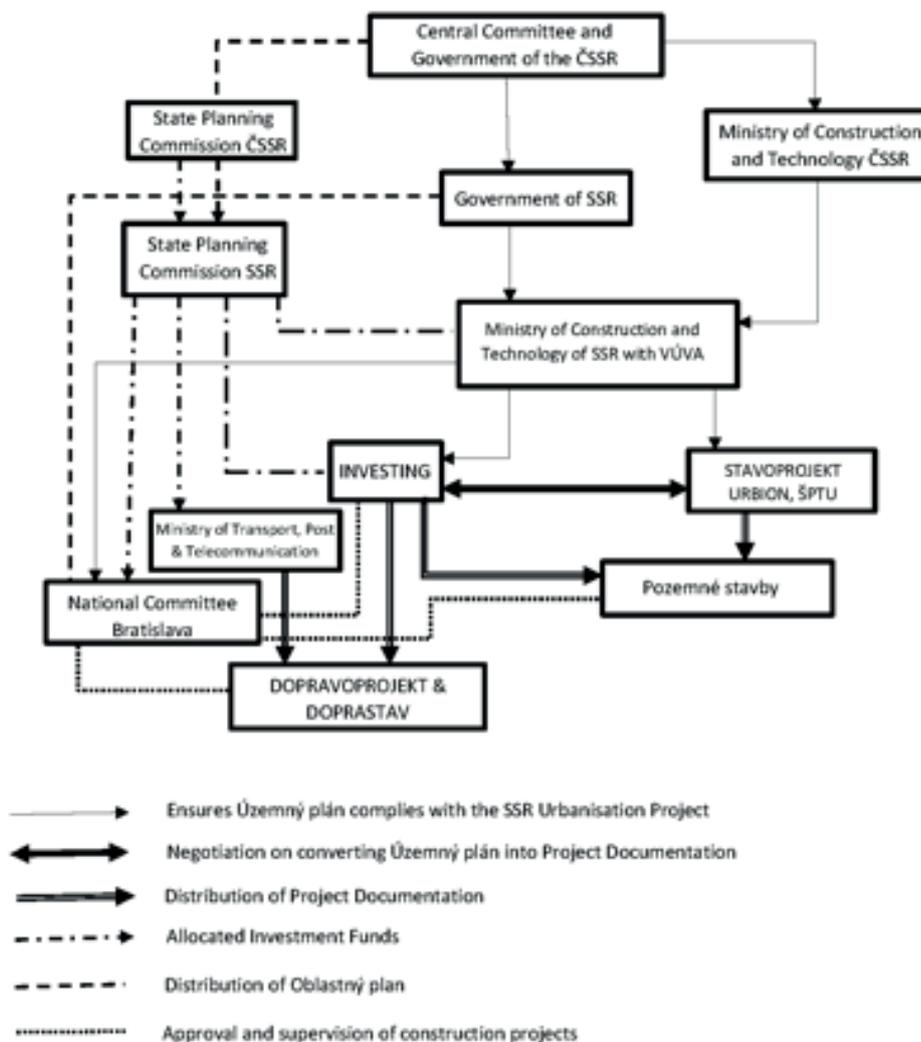


Figure 3. Diagram showing how mediators defined the actors' relationship to each other.

in the national committee, they found several discrepancies and disorderly conduct in practice with regards to residential building projects. These exposed violations prompted the MVT SSR and the central authorities to reduce the responsibilities of the National Committees and develop a more comprehensive system to regulate their investment activities (Michalec, 1976, pp. 265-268). This ultimately led to the Territorial Planning and Building laws which came into effect in Czechoslovakia in 1976. The Construction Act No.50 and Building Code legally bound the housing construction with territorial planning, directly influencing the growth of mass housing (Hauskrecht, 1983, p. 2; Moravčíková, 2011, pp. 32-33). Uzemný planning documentation were also redefined and an essential component of the 1976 laws stipulates that the contracting authority, in this case would be Investing, was given the right to approve and make necessary changes in the planning documentation (Gál, Furdik, 1984, pp. 38-39). These laws and eventually the important 1976 laws had great repercussions on the structure of the relationships between the actors, and became a foundation for the decision-making process hereafter.

Oblastný plan were the regional economic plans which consider spaces as economic planning units, and its function was to ensure a proportional economic and social development of its targeted regions (Finka, 1997, p. 99). Whereas the uzemný plans, were essential guides for urban planning and they were divided into three different stages from large economic units, zones and to settlement structure (Michalec, 1976). The 1976 directive uzemný plan of Bratislava which contained plans for Petržalka, had to be approved by the top ministries and entrusted to Investing and Stavoprojekt to be transformed into working documents for the subcontractors. These working documents had to confine to the funds allocated by the State Planning Commission. Although according to the 1976 laws the uzemný plan was seen to be on equal footing with the oblastný and national economic plans, it was still in practice inferior to the oblastný plans, as the State Planning Commission would only allocate funds based on the latter. In addition to the priority to adjust the urban layout for highways networks, this would inevitably reduce the spatial quality of urban planning in Petržalka (Finka, 1997, p. 89).

5. Production Process & Actor-Network

Even with the approval of the proposals for the new district of Petržalka, there was no way those plans would be set in stone especially when confronted by the real world. Important aspects of the production process that articulated changes on site are discussed here before going in-depth into the Actor-Network.

The natural environment was a factor which shaped the changes in the production process. Situated on the southern banks of the meandering Danube river, the natural environment itself was precarious as the former village which existed there previously had survived flooding several times. However, the central government's insistence on introducing a large, exemplary housing district to fulfil its housing building goals gave them no other choice, considering the natural landscapes of Bratislava. Bounded by the Carpathian mountains, surrounding several industrial sites and crucial agricultural lands, geographically Bratislava had already taken on a scattered form. Hence, Petržalka had an advantage in which it was still underdeveloped and the north side of the site could be easily linked directly with the central city area via a new bridge in addition to the existing one (Talaš, 1978, p. 20). Preliminary studies in the early 1970s were prepared by the Bratislava Stavoprojekt proposing an artificial drainage canal built along the perimeter of the planned estate to protect the new development from flooding. When the project was handed over to Investing to evaluate and process the feasibility of the project, they

decided instead to deepen the riverbed of the Danube and increase the height of the levees (Szalay; Ed. Moravčíková, 2013, p. 199). The geodetic survey done by Investing showed that the subsoil was inadequate for construction of high-rise buildings and needed plenty of gravel as well as adequate technology to lay the groundwork for a firm foundation (Dvorín, 1973). Therefore it took three years to do engineering works to lay the proper foundation in Petržalka before the first housing construction began in 1976. It impacted the construction of highways and road networks. The proposed metro line that ran through the north-south spine connecting different sections was immensely shortened in favour of protecting the stream and also due to limited funds, eventually forming long green recreational strip.

Other than the natural conditions, this project was contingent upon the directives and funds allocated by the top actors. The capital of the Slovak Socialist Republic had a duty to fulfill the goals set out by the KSC Party in Prague. Industrial production, particularly in the main sectors of chemical and mechanical engineering had to increase their performance and undergo restructuring in accordance to the 1976-1980 five year plans (Köcher, 1981, p. 6). Housing construction along with its respective urban infrastructure were considered as non-productive investment which had to develop concurrently to support the heavy industry. The *Komplexná bytová výstavba* (KBV) also provided guidelines on the types of social amenities for a certain number of housing. These specifications on flat categories to the quantity and size of public facilities was supposed to ensure that the planners and architects conform to the *oblastný* plans detailed by the Slovak Planning Commission and the Construction Ministry. However with changes to the Bratislava development plan throughout the years, annual revisions prioritised mainly the building of more flats every year, inevitably decreasing the number of social amenities (Maier, Kibic, Hexner, 1998, pp. 87-88). With the preliminary engineering works for foundation consuming more costs, this put high demand on Investing and the other enterprises to manage the project, within the time, production capacity and workforce given its large scale. According to Investing's 1973 document they promised to deliver 50,000 flats until 1988-1990 while acknowledging that they must compromise some required buildings from the KBV (Dvorin, 1973). This role was assumed by *Pozemné stavby*, who managed to successfully build 49,829 flats and while the first residents had to frequently cross the Danube to the city centre of Bratislava for their basic needs, there were no shortage of pre-schools and schools (Szalay; Ed. Moravčíková, 2013, p. 199).

Petržalka was essentially an island bounded by the Austrian border and the Danube. *Sťah Most*, the oldest bridge linking it to Bratislava was rebuilt after being destroyed in World War II. However, it was not sufficient to handle predicted heavy traffic and could not be expected to withstand the weight of the lorries delivering materials and machineries for construction works. When the *Most SNP Bridge* (*Slovenského národného povstania* which meant Slovak National Uprising) was completed in 1972, it was an achievement, not just because of its aesthetics and as a symbol of the city's foray into auto-oriented modern urban planning which compromised part of the old city, but also because its completion was a prerequisite for the extensive construction of a new Petržalka, after the vast demolition of the village. Thanks to *Most SNP* and *Sťah Most*, two thirds of Petržalka was already finished by the time the third bridge, *Most hrdinov Dukly* (now *Pristavny Most*) was completed in 1985, which aided more speedy construction of the final part of the district in *Dvory*. The third bridge was significant as it was the link that allowed traffic from Prague-Brno to bypass the old city of Bratislava and continue seamlessly to the rest of Slovakia (Janto, 2017).

Subsequently, another strategy to aid faster production process was the mastering instrument of typification of flats. *Pozemné stavby* was obliged to use standardised buildings devel-

oped by the ŠPTU in Bratislava, such as the ZTB, P1.14 and P1.15. In addition, in 1972 in Czechoslovakia, the *nové konstrukční soustavy* (new construction system or NKS) a set of typographic documents for panel construction was created (Lipták, Pindel, 2018) and specifically the BA NKS system was the base for which the Danish firm, Thomas Schmidt was licensed to produce the concrete slab panels for Petržalka (Moravčíková, 2011, pp. 26-29). Similarly, to enhance quality and efficiency, the ČSSR had to allow neutrally political foreign companies to supply the necessary technology that they lacked. However in spite of this progress, Petržalka still unavoidably consisted of monotonous buildings of poor quality. In addition, the 1978 world economic crisis forced Investing and Pozemné stavby to make several compromises in Petržalka. They had to question the necessity and feasibility of the central boulevard, which was never fully realised as well as compromise the original conceptions on mass transit, social amenities and certain public spaces (Moravčíková, 2011, pp. 44-49).

The diagram shows the Actor-Network of the actors involved in the process of building Petržalka. It differs from Figure 3 as it employs a methodological principle of generalised symmetry, i.e. more ahierarchical and includes the non-human actors which have considerable impact on the production process. This network is composed from the embodied practice based on the reinforced intermediary 1976 Building Laws and Territorial Planning Act as discussed earlier. This urgent need for housing and to develop the largest housing estate in Petržalka was the obligatory passage point which enrolled the actors in this context. The power of each actor here is measured by the number of networked entities, and the number of mediators being translated, generated and distributed (Ritzer, 2010, p. 2). The question of how the actions of

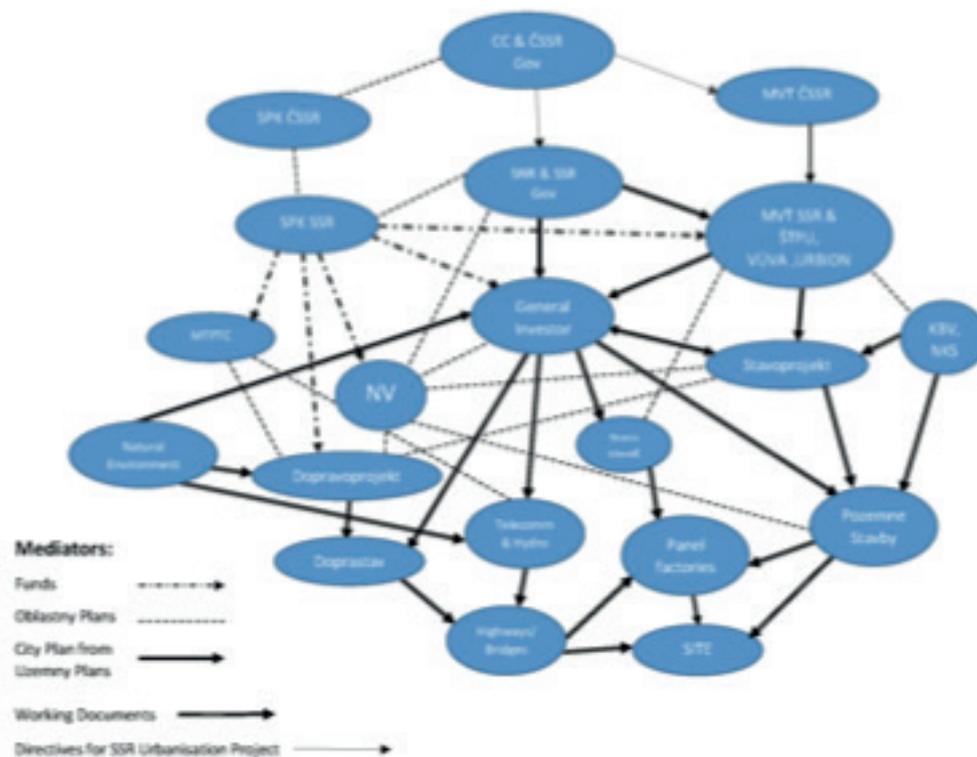


Figure 4. *The Actor-Network.*

actors are contingent upon others could also be deduced here. For the purpose of this paper, the network is simplified and the actors involved here are not exhaustive. Certain practices and outcomes such as negotiation, standardisation and calculative processes are black-boxed.

The most influential actor with the most networked entities here is Investing. It receives more entities from others and converting them into funds and working documents for the other actors based on its own studies and surveys. Its role was reinforced by the 1976 laws, sanctioned by the ministry and government of SSR and ČSSR, the general investor was faced with a responsibility to acknowledge that these plans were provisional and contingent in collaboration with other actors. The state-approved plan of Petržalka by Stavoprojekt Bratislava was overwritten by the engineering experts of Investing and enterprises under their contractual obligations. Investing had an advantage over the National Committee (NV), who could only supervise projects without clear guidelines. Once the research institutions under the MVT SSR and Stavoprojekt established the codification of building typology and residential complex, this was instrumentalised so that *Pozemné stavby*, once armed with the instructions on the working documents, could start immediately. They were, of course, contingent on the site conditions as well as the MTPTC, Doprastav and Dopravoprojekt to deliver the highways and bridges on time to allow more mobility on site.

6. Conclusion

In analysing the power relationality, we can conclude that by enabling more autonomy to Investing through a common law, it implies a control mechanism by the federal government of ČSSR, the coordination of which stabilises itself with the onslaught of the economic crisis in the late 1970s. Through assemblage, we could think critically about how power relations produce processes in which urban forms are made through power-relations (McFarlane, 2011, p. 208). While the original concept of having a lively district with a central boulevard, social amenities or adequate mass transit was not articulated on site as imagined, most of the layout conformed to plan albeit the housing blocks were built in looser forms and enclosures have larger radiuses. The housing estate of Petržalka was part of a larger whole in the development of Slovakia under ČSSR. With the industrial sector, urbanisation project and highways planned for Slovakia, this refers to the conceptual framework of a socialist city by Zarecor, in which “infrastructural thinking” and “socialist scaffold” influence the urbanisation of Bratislava and consequently Petržalka. According to which, the previous refers to decision making propelled by the requirements and scale of urban infrastructure’ while the latter is the “mechanism of implementation” and the “basic infrastructure for future growth onto which other systems-economic, social, political, environmental – can attach and become activated” (Zarecor, 2017, p. 7). With the history of ČSSR state socialist assemblage, this paper reflects how the spatial processes corresponds to the temporality of vision, thus creating a unique pathway of problems and challenges in the current Petržalka compared to other housing estates.

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