Centralization or de-centralization: sustainable development (or not) in planning the City of Sofia, Bulgaria

S. A. Hirt
Department of Geography and Planning, University of Toledo/
Department of Urban Planning, University of Michigan, USA

Abstract

Minimization of land consumption and maintaining compact urban forms, have become key components of pursuing sustainable development through land use planning means, at least in most of the Western World. This represents a substantial ideological shift in the Western planning profession, which from its inception to the mid-to-late twentieth century was dominated by notions of de-urbanization, urban dispersal and de-centralization. This paper strives to understand where does the Eastern European planning profession stand in this eternal planning debate between advocates of compact and advocates of disperse urban forms. This question is particularly relevant today, as historic Eastern European cities are undergoing radical spatial transformations, brought about by the collapse of the socialist system, transformations which include the loss of the urban edge and the emergence of low-density development on the urban fringe.

The paper uses a case study – this of the City of Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria – to throw light on the historic and current standing of Eastern European planning. The paper finds that planning in Sofia has subsequently wavered between promoting compact and promoting disperse urban forms, with each school of thought claiming a temporary victory at some historic era. Based on the latest plan of Sofia, and on a few dozen in-person interviews with planners, the paper also concludes that victory in the latest, post-socialist, round belongs to advocates of urban de-centralization. If this is the case, Eastern European planners seem to embrace an ideology of sustainable development starkly different from that of their Western European colleagues, and seem intent on pursuing the current de-centralized Western model – the very same model that Western planners are now trying to overcome. At the same time, the paper argues, due to the financial crises in Eastern Europe, the extreme de-centralized model, even if blessed by planners, has a limited chance of implementation.
1 Introduction

1.1 Sustainable development and the compact city

Sustainable development has become a key goal for urban planning in many, if not most, areas of the world. While the term “sustainability” has been interpreted in a multitude of sometimes conflicted ways, there is currently a broad consensus that, with respect to land use planning, it is closely linked with minimizing land consumption, that is, with maintaining compact urban forms.

Historic cities were, of course, compact for thousands of years. It is the advent of the modern era – firstly the rise of the railroad and then of the automobile – that made urban dispersal, as we know it today, possible. But urban dispersal was not the automatic result of technological innovations; it was the consciously promoted solution to the dreadful problems of the congested, unsanitary, early industrial city. Planning became a profession precisely in response to the misery of the early industrial city. For many of the early and most influential planning theorists, as Ebenezer Howard and Frank Lloyd Wright, the existing city was dilapidated beyond repair and the solution was to be sought in its substitution with new, disperse forms, built on green fields. Dispersal became the chief ideology of the early planning profession, whether it took the shape of Howard’s “garden cities” [1] or this of Wright’s “Broad-acres city” [2]. The ideology of de-urbanization – that is, urban de-centralization, de-congestion, dispersal, rose to even greater notoriety after World War II, when the building of satellite towns became official government policy in many European countries. In the U.S., although the federal government was less directly involved in the development of new towns, a number of policies, from unprecedented highway construction to provision of tax incentives to suburban homeowners, contributed to the creation of what is today the most disperse system of settlements worldwide, often labeled by the derogatory term “sprawl”.

That promoting de-urbanization was perhaps a necessary planning reaction to the blighted conditions of the early industrial city may be, perhaps, hard to dispute. But since the later part of the 20th century, the planning profession has been increasingly asking the question: Did we go too far? It is the persistent crisis of a many older urban cores, the proliferation of auto-centered, soulless suburban settlements lacking the richness and vitality of historic cities, and the unprecedented amount of land consumption, often far surpassing levels of population growth that have made this question recently only grow in acuteness.

It seems that a consensus is now emerging amongst planners on both sides of the Atlantic that further urban de-centralization is no longer desirable. Sustainable development is interpreted as, amongst other things, revitalizing historic urban centers, protecting still untouched green areas from urbanization as to keep them green for future generations, and encouraging compact developments at both the urban and the regional level. Sustainability, taken to mean the preservation of the natural heritage and landscape from a variety of perils including human exploitation for urbanization purposes, has become a key notion in documents on territorial development of the European Union [3].
Healey and Williams point out [4], current debates among European planners clearly gravitate toward revitalizing the concept of the compact, not the disperse city. Despite the fact or perhaps precisely because of the fact that metropolitan regions in North America are by far the most spread, thinking among North American planners has also moved toward advocacy of compact forms. Talen and Knaap [5], for example, point out to an emerging consensus amongst the American planning profession that planning must promote compact, pedestrian-friendly forms. And the American Planning Association, in a programmatic statement, endorsing the principles of “smart development” [6], has listed the efficient use of land resources and the encouragement of higher-density, compact forms as key to building a sustainable future.

1.2. The Eastern European city: toward compactness or toward dispersal

In the post-socialist decade, Eastern European cities have been undergoing through spatial transformations of a breath-taking magnitude - transformations which include but are not limited to the spatial translations of growing class segregation; physical and social crisis of the socialist housing complexes; privatization of space; and residential exodus from downtown. But one of the most remarkable spatial outcomes of the post-socialist transition has been “suburbanization” [7]: the proliferation of lower-density, predominantly single-family housing settlements – the homes of the new bourgeoisie – on the urban fringe, typically immediately beyond the ring of socialist housing complexes. The term “suburbanization” may not be quite precise because in many cases these settlements are not autonomous jurisdictions, i.e. suburbs, as they exist in the West, but are within the existing boundaries of large cities. Either way, however, lower density settlements of such type now prosper on the fringe of many historic Eastern European cities, from Russia to former East Germany.

The central question of this paper is what are the views of Eastern European planners on this process? How does Eastern European planning relate to what has been one of the most dominant planning debates in the West – to centralize or to de-centralize urban forms, to territorially expand or to retain the cities within their current urbanized boundaries? Is sustainability currently interpreted as closely overlapping with the notion of the compact city, as it is interpreted in the West? And what has been the historic context of this debate – between proponents of dispersal and proponents of compactness – in Eastern Europe?

1.3 The case study: the City of Sofia

To answer these questions, this paper analyzes historic and current planning debates on disperse vs. compact forms in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. The findings in the paper are based on review of literature on the planning history of Sofia, and a review of planning documents, media and archival sources. Particular attention is directed to the post-socialist era. Sofia is currently preparing its first post-socialist master plan. The plan is a work in progress, but the Municipality has published a series of early planning drafts, which were
used for this analysis. In addition, the research relies on 40 in-person interviews with city planners working on the new plan, conducted by the author in 2002.

2 Historic context

It has been said [8] that the growth of a city, whether left to develop organically or guided by a plan, pulsates under the influence of two competing forces – these of centralization and these of de-centralization, of urbanization and of de-
urbanization, of land-intensive and of land-extensive growth. The growth of Sofia has certainly wavered under the exertion of these forces pulling it in different directions, each being championed in a particular historic era, rejected in the next, and restored to primacy once again. The story of the debate between advocates of compact and advocates of disperse form, each group claiming a temporary victory, is very much the story of planning the City of Sofia.

2.1 Sofia and its planning, 1879-1939

Sofia was elected as the Capital City of Bulgaria in 1879, after the country regained its independence from Ottoman occupation. Unlike other European cities that had historically been seats of wealth and power, Sofia was a town of little significance through the 500 years of Ottoman rule. Thus, despite its ancient history, and with the exception of some Roman ruins, a few pre-Ottoman churches and a few Ottoman mosques, it is essentially a post-1879 city.

As a result, Sofia’s growth coincided with the rise of modernist planning doctrines in the late 19th and early-to-mid 20th century [9]. Sofia’s first planners (many of whom were foreign-born architects or engineers) were deeply imbedded in the “intellectual wells” of mainstream European urbanism [10]. The planning of the City, thus, followed the chief trends of Western urbanism – from Haussmann-inspired street-network restructuring to proposals for garden cities (although these were never built in their pure form).

The historic debate in Sofia between proponents of retaining the existing city and these of its dispersal seems to have started in the very year of 1879, when Sofia was just elected a national capital. At the time, Sofia was not much more than a small, poor, pre-modern, non-descript and typically “oriental” town [11], hardly worthy being the capital of an aspiring nation. Thus, came the first idea to de-urbanize it by simply abandoning it entirely and altogether, and building by it a twin, brand new city, under modern European planning principles. The proponents of preserving the city, however, gained their very first victory – the idea for abandoning Sofia was rejected personally by the Prince - Alexander Battenberg - who feared the old city would fall into complete disarray [12].

Through the following 120 years, Sofia grew exponentially, as it kept drawing people from the rest of the country like a magnet, reaching today a population of a million and two hundred thousand (15% of the national population). Its spatial growth was even more explosive. In 1878, its total territory was only 3, in 1919 – 8.5, in 1934 – 42 square kilometers. For only its first 50 years as Capital, it annexed 53 adjacent towns and villages [13].
Between the wars, Sofia’s growth was especially chaotic, as the city was flooded with immigrants and refugees from territories lost in wars. Un-serviced, un-sanitized, ad-hoc settlements were formed along its periphery, in stark contrast to the planned morphology that characterized, by that time, its central areas. As Sofia kept annexing new territories to house its growing population, the ideas of Howard and Wright of how to overcome urban chaos and channel growth into new settlements kept receiving growing and favorable attention within the local architectural and planning profession, particularly through the writings of two architects: Trendafilov and Nenov [14].

By 1938, when the first master plan of Sofia was prepared by the German architect Adolph Mussmann, urban de-centralization, and particularly Howard’s garden-cities theory, was already well accepted as the most progressive planning philosophy of the time - as the Chief Architect of Sofia, T. Goranov [15], advertised it in it an article, it was the correct “system adopted by all new English and German cities”. The 1938 plan of Sofia carried the chief principles of Howard’s theory, as it sought to organize “Greater Sofia” in a conglomerate of settlements, divided by greenbelts [16]. But here is the Bulgarian peculiarity. As Sofia had grown too much and too chaotically between the wars, and was, as usual, cash-strapped, the unplanned spread of un-sanitized settlements along its periphery was recognized as inefficient, as it was doubtful that the city could ever muster the resources to properly service them. Thus, the central idea of the 1938 plan was to de-centralize the city in terms of functions, to substitute the mono-centric with a poly-centric structure, but in terms of territory, its goal was not to further expand the city, as would be in concordance with high-modernist European trends, but on the contrary, to shrink it – to concentrate development in selected already urbanized territories, while leaving the rest green [17].

2.2 Socialist Sofia and its planning

Mussman’s plan was discarded as a bourgeois-fascist remnant after the post-World War II victory of the communist regime. But the debate between the two philosophies – this advocating re-constructing the city and this advocating the further conquest of new lands – continued and only intensified.

The first-socialist plan, known as plan “Toney” after the name of its author, was adopted in 1945, after a nationwide urban design competition. As its predecessor, this plan did not stipulate any further territorial expansion (the City was to stay within its borders of 40-45 square kilometers) and sought to keep moderately high average urban densities. While it emphasized urban infill and re-construction, the plan aimed, at the same time, to decentralize Sofia in terms of functions even more forcefully than the 1938 plan - it advocated a polycentric structure of neighborhood centers, capable of carrying at least some of the functions that were until then limited to downtown [18].

But by the mid 1950s, it was determined that urban infill opportunities may be exhausted. Population migration toward Sofia intensified, as a result of the building of large new industrial facilities in the city periphery, attracting ever growing numbers of workers from the rest of the country. The 1945 plan had
foreseen a population growth of up to 800,000 for the year 1975, but by 1955 Sofia’s population was already exceeding 600,000. Thus, in 1956, the Council of Ministers mandated that Sofia prepare a new master plan, and listed several main planning goals, two of which deserve special attention as they appeared for the first time so explicitly: developing Sofia as a compactly built city and preserving its historic heritage [19].

Two urban design teams were pre-selected to develop alternative plans for the city – one led by L. Neikov and one by V. Siromahov, both architects. The two alternatives presented starkly polar visions of Sofia. The plan prepared by Neikov’s team kept closer to the goals of the 1956 ordinance mandating the plan – it proposed to keep Sofia into its existing borders, further utilize infill opportunities, and initiate comprehensive renovation of the city’s older neighborhoods. The plan by the team of Siromahov wanted just the opposite – to expand the city limits over vast lands of agricultural lands and start building new residential complexes on a massive scale [20]. After lengthy deliberations, it was Neikov’s plan, for a compactly built city, as the more realistic alternative, that received official blessing and became Law in 1961.

But by the end of the 1950s, industrialized methods of construction had entered Bulgaria. The vast economies-of-scale opportunities were quickly appreciated, and by the late 1960s, the large state-owned building enterprises had started constructing several “panel-made” neighborhoods (panels are prefabricated standardized construction units) on the city fringes. As population continued to grow, a partial update of the Neikov’s plan was adopted in 1963. Ironically, this update was, for all practical purposes, nothing else but the rejected only two years ago plan of Siromahov [21]. The update envisioned the construction of two enormous housing complexes for hundreds of thousands of people - Mladost and Liulin - to be built anew over agricultural fields through the methods of industrialized construction, as an austerely standardized version of Le Corbusier architectural styles.

From there on, Sofia embarked on a new road - a road of spatial expansion and mass construction of a magnitude that was unimaginable before – an era that lasted a quarter of a century. Altogether, 200,000 living units were built in these complexes, housing currently over 700,000 people, or two-thirds of the city present population. The conquering of new territories for the complexes was inherently mandated – the daunting size of the state-owned building enterprises utilizing industrialized construction methods could only achieve economies-of-scale, if let build upon vast clean areas – “we could not have not expanded beyond the existing territory – the cranes and the lines of panels required it”, as one of the designers of such estates explained [22]. As a result of the thirty year-long expansion, by the late 1970s, only 30% of the one-million, by that time, population of Sofia lived in areas that were part of the city before the war, while the rest – on newly conquered lands [23]. In the mean time, many older parts of the city suffered from systematic disinvestments.

Between 1961 and 1989, Sofia adopted a series of plan updates, but a fully new plan was never prepared. The socialist collapse found it with a much-
outdated 1961 plan as its last legally valid plan. The debate between advocacy of compact and of disperse forms was yet to be revisited, in post-socialist context.

3 Post-socialist Sofia – current planning debates

The end of socialism led to radical changes in development patterns. The construction of panel-fabricated housing complexes completely ceased. As the state withdrew from many of its former functions, including housing production, an overwhelming majority of new housing is now constructed by the private sector. New housing comes in two basic forms. The first is the medium-height apartment building – a modified return to what was typical for pre-socialist Sofia, built upon restituted land in downtown, if space permits, in some prestigious areas near it, and recently, in the socialist complexes. The character of these buildings is starkly different than this of their socialist predecessors. They are smaller in scale, monolithically constructed, and exhibit a diversity of aesthetic styles unimaginable in socialist times. The second is the single-family house, typically built in the mountain outskirts, mostly these of mountain Vitosha. These houses house the newly rich, seeking to escape the urban chaos, similarly to what the western bourgeoisie has been doing for over a hundred years. The peripheral areas are also witnessing the construction of large new office complexes, warehouses and super-markets.

Current development patterns push in two directions – one toward urban re-construction and one toward further land consumption. On one side, the desire of the newly wealthy classes to withdraw in the mountain areas is leading to the urbanization of areas that only until ten years ago were only sparsely populated. Public green spaces, in some of the mountain outskirts, have all but disappeared. However, while some of the wealthy may be drawn to the mountains, most appear to highly value the benefits of living around downtown, which is why housing prices in the central areas are highest, and new growth, that is, urban infill in central areas (often at the expense of formerly publicly-owned green space) is even more intensive than growth in the periphery. Thus, new growth in the Vitosha region – the most popular area for new single-family housing - comprises only around 15% of all new housing growth, according to data from the National Statistical Institute. Further, the private parties that finance the new developments cannot afford to stay far away from existing infrastructure. Thus, the land-consumptive model that ruled between 1960 and 1989, sponsored by the all-powerful sole land owner and investor – the socialist state – seems today not replicable – the overall model of development, in times of financial crisis and fragmented, small-scale, privately-led investment, seems more likely to move toward the land-intensive, rather than the land-extensive paradigm [24].

3.1 The planning response - “Sofia 2020”

In light of these dramatic changes in development patterns, what is the planners’ position? Which of the two competing models of development, the land-extensive or the land-intensive, has received their blessing?
The Municipality of Sofia is currently preparing its first post-socialist master plan. The planning process has gone through a complex set of stages. Notable is the fact that at each stage, a set of two competing alternatives was put together by different teams, as a way of promoting a healthy debate about ideas. These were Scenario “A” and Scenario “B” in 2001 [25], and then Version I and Version II [26] in 2002. Of these two sets, the former alternative is for a more compact city, the latter - for a more disperse city. Thus, Scenario “A” argued that the current city has vacant territories that allow the building of 260,000 new residential units – by far exceeding the housing needs of the population; viewed any residential de-concentration toward the rural areas as unnecessary; and placed emphasis on re-construction and infill. Scenario B, in contrast, argued for the benefits of “dispersed living amongst the natural environment [as it] is an expression of the new forms of spatial organization that correspond to information society”, and because such living is apt for the growing upper classes. As this battle of ideas suggests, the planning profession in Sofia is now sharply divided. The following interviews excerpts exemplify the two competing schools of thought: one for compact, and the other – for disperse urban forms.

“The thesis that our group advocated was that Sofia needs to stop growing, it has grown enough and from now on it must only become nicer, and internally improved...Under socialism, Sofia has taken too much territory, which it cannot manage and from now on it needs to work on what it already has, on its “inside yard”, so to say. And this is the philosophy of European cities at the moment.”

“Our alternative is the disperse city.... We want the region around Sofia to be inseparable from it and adopt functions that would relieve the pressures now piling upon the compact city. We want to encourage new types of residences, in a new type of environment of a totally different character, and encourage a lifestyle that is closer to nature, amongst nature. People are totally fed up with this highly urbanized environment that is now offered in the compact city - an environment that contradicts the basic principles of sustainable development... our people are craving for living amongst nature... In socialist times, the government had interest in cramping people in high-density housing estates because this would save it money. But in a market economy, in an information type society, a democracy, the compact city is no longer the right one...”

As the planning profession may remain divided between these two wings, however, it is increasingly clear that one of them has moved into a dominant position. Scenario B was chosen (voted by the Municipal Council to serve as the basis for future, more detailed planning) over Scenario A, in 2001, and Version I was chosen over Version II, in 2002. Both times, the winning vision was the vision that endorsed urban dispersal. Thus, the latest draft [27] clearly favors Version II, and starts with a bold vision of a broader territorial expansion. Its chief premises of future residential development is summed up as follows:

“It is not necessary to use the whole potential of the existing territories of the city; the growth in residential territory should be related to the growth in the standard of living, rather than population growth; and the over-populated urban territories should be renovated having in mind that the correlation between high residential density and poverty is [so obvious] that it needs no further proof.”
4 Conclusions

As Sofia grew exponentially over its 120 years as a national capital, its planners wavered between endorsing a vision of a compact city and one encouraging the urbanization of new territories. It is of little doubt that, as the two schools of planning thought continue to co-exist today, in the latest – the post-socialist – round, victory belongs to the believers in de-centralization. A peculiar return to Frank Lloyd Wright’s ideas of “living amongst nature” appears to have moved into dominant position. It is this type of “living amongst nature” – the suburban, not the urban way – that seems to be interpreted as sustainable development.

Nedovic-Budic [28] argued that in terms of compactness and densities, Eastern European cities are “at a stage that Western European and U.S. cities have long passed, but which the West would like to re-achieve in the future”. This is indeed true, although it is doubtful that the land-extensive model that was the ideological choice of the socialist state did much to preserve the compact traditional city. Quite to the contrary, the socialist state forcefully sought to de-centralize the city through the building of the massive housing estates; but it simply did not de-centralize it to the extreme extent that post-war western governments did. From a Western point of view, this relatively compact form of Eastern European cities may be an asset. But in Eastern Europe, if the case of Sofia may be used to infer generalization, the planning trend is to seek further de-centralization and by doing so to come closer to the current Western model – the same de-centralized model that Western planners now try to overcome.

Ironically, however, it is doubtful that planners in Eastern Europe will have the resources to implement this vision in the foreseeable future. Massive urban de-centralization requires massive resources for infrastructure in the peripheral areas, as the lessons of post-war regional development, whether in capitalist or in socialist environments, demonstrate. And these resources, in an era of post-socialist crisis and fragmentation, will in all likelihood remain unattainable.

References

Sustainable Planning and Development
