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Renovation of Old Building Facades. Analysis of Post-Soviet Countries' Experience and a Proposed Methodology for Community Engagement

Abstract. The article examines the problem of the disorderly condition of residential building facades in Ukrainian cities, which has emerged as a result of Soviet urban space management policies, public indifference to the shared urban environment, and the lack of effective urban policy after independence. The differences between approaches to the renovation of mass-panel housing and historic buildings are analyzed: in the former case, priority is given to residents' comfort and needs, while in the latter—to the preservation of cultural heritage and the authenticity of urban space. Examples of modernization programs from Poland and Estonia are presented, demonstrating the effectiveness of renovation policies under two different approaches. A methodology for community engagement during the planning and implementation of renovation projects is proposed, with an emphasis on building residents' trust and ensuring proper communication, which enables more effective adjustments to proposed plans and helps prevent potential problems. Systematic renovation contributes to improving quality of life, fostering economic development of districts, and shaping an attractive urban environment.

Keywords: facades, street, renovation, community engagement, historic development, residential development, urban environment, international experience.

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Problem Statement.

For most of us, owning real estate means the right to manage it, to change it according to our needs and desires. We arrange our apartments, renovate them, add or remove design elements, and strive to make our housing comfortable. However, every right has its limits, and the limit of the right to own one's apartment is the beginning of someone else's property, such as a neighbor's or the street. While the neighbor's apartment is something tangible and understandable, for the majority of the population of the post-Soviet space public space appears as something that can be sacrificed for the sake of one's own convenience. This is manifested in unauthorized extensions, installation of grilles or air conditioners, glazing of open balconies.

On the scale of the city, such actions form a general picture of chaos and neglect and have a negative impact on local communities. Cities that we consider beautiful are those where there is a balance between private and public, between individual needs and general order. Conversely, areas without a policy on public space are much more prone to decline due to the accumulation of

elements that, in the visual struggle for attention, create chaos, which is unpleasant to stay in and, as a consequence, to live in.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.

DBN V.2.2-12-2019, despite establishing a certain framework for the preservation of historical building structures, does not provide a direct basis for prohibiting or authorizing facade modifications. It offers only highly conditional contextual guidelines for understanding violations of the cityscape, which fail to cover a broad spectrum of problems: *"The construction of new buildings and the reconstruction of existing ones must take into account the requirements for the preservation and restoration of the historically valuable architectural and urban qualities of the traditional environment, in particular to harmonize with them in silhouette, scale, main principles and means of architectural composition (including proportions, rhythm, tectonics), color, facing materials, etc."* [1, p. 13.2.4]

The current Order No. 76 "On the Approval of the Rules for the Maintenance of Residential Buildings and

Adjacent Territories” dated May 17, 2005 [2], also contains very general explanations, while Resolution No. 219 “On the Optimization of State Architectural and Construction Control and Supervision Bodies” dated March 13, 2020 [3], created a legal vacuum by liquidating the State Architectural and Construction Inspectorate, as the newly established bodies failed to function properly. Thus, despite the elimination of an openly corrupt institution and improvements in the transparency of many processes, the actual control over interventions in the appearance of buildings has become even more complicated and prolonged.

Jane Jacobs, an American and Canadian journalist, writer, and activist of the last century, wrote about the gradual and synchronous deterioration of the condition of areas that were built in a short period of time in her book “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”: *“Neighborhoods built up all at once change little physically over the years as a rule. The little physical change that does occur is for the worse – gradual dilapidation, a few random, shabby new uses here and there.”* [4, p.198].

Recent studies on the renovation of residential buildings and the transformation of post-socialist urban environments emphasize the importance of comprehensive modernization policies and community-oriented approaches. Research by Sýkora and Bouzarovski shows that post-communist cities have undergone complex socio-spatial transformations, including changes in housing ownership, governance, and the condition of the housing stock, which require new models of urban management and renovation strategies [11]. In this context, the modernization of aging residential buildings is widely regarded as an important instrument for improving both the quality of urban environments and the energy performance of housing. According to Power, refurbishment of existing residential buildings often provides greater environmental, social, and economic benefits than demolition and replacement with new construction [9]. Empirical studies confirm that energy renovation measures can significantly reduce energy consumption and improve building performance when properly implemented and monitored [10]. Recent research also highlights the importance of deep renovation strategies that combine energy efficiency improvements with broader upgrades to building functionality and living conditions [13]. The experience of Northern and Eastern European cities further shows that residents’ preferences and satisfaction influence the success of housing policies and renovation programs, particularly in districts dominated by mass housing estates [12].

The practical implementation of such approaches can be observed in several post-socialist countries that have launched large-scale renovation programs for mass housing estates. In particular, the experiences of Poland and Estonia demonstrate different institutional models of renovation policy, involving housing cooperatives, public financial support mechanisms, and active communication with residents during the planning and implementation of renovation projects.

The purpose of the publication is to analyze the phenomenon of the chaotic state of facades and the prevalence of this problem, to review foreign practices of facade renovation of Soviet residential buildings, and to propose a methodology of interaction and involvement of local communities in renovation projects.

Main Part.

Origins of the Problem. Soviet architecture and methods of planning aimed at functionalism, particularly when it came to residential development built away from historic city centers. Resources were held only by the authorities, who planned, made decisions single-handedly, and largely took care of the streets. In a compulsory manner, city residents themselves also took part in cleanings every Saturday under the threat of reprimand and social stigma.

Despite the fact that most streets were indeed kept clean, this practice relied entirely on discipline rather than belief in the correctness of cleaning the street. The policy regarding the arrangement of territories and their use was very strict, and grassroots initiatives to change the functional purpose or use of space were ignored or punished. Thus, the population at the same time developed an understanding that the street is under municipal maintenance, and an aversion or unwillingness to do anything on their own. Everything outside the apartment became alien and indifferent.

This brings us closer to understanding the logic of people who neglect the external appearance of facades and their overall image. Their thinking is maximally pragmatic, focused on the environment of their lives, which is limited to the area of their apartment. From this point of view, the desire to practically expand the living space through balcony glazing, which in many types of panel buildings is open, is quite understandable. The balcony immediately acquires many new functions, in particular as a buffer room for saving heat in winter, a storage, a laundry-drying area, or even the expansion of the adjacent room at its expense. At the same time, the design of the balcony is almost never discussed with neighbors in the building, let alone with local authorities.

Based on this logic, the problem of double-glazed windows also becomes understandable: they are invisible in panel housing but stand out sharply when it comes to the historic city center. Owners of apartments in historic buildings may also lack an understanding of the value of preserving the laconic appearance of such a building. The same applies to satellite dishes and air conditioners. A similar situation is with insulation, which is attached as an additional layer to the facade of the building.

All together we have a purely utilitarian perception of the building, an unwillingness to enter into dialogue with the city and the street in particular, chaotic and defiant balconies, uncoordinated changes in buildings such as disharmonious windows or equipment.

The Essence of the Problem.

There are several main problems, and when trying to regulate city policy on facades it is worth

distinguishing between typical residential buildings and historically significant buildings and city districts.

The essence of the problem lies in the absence of city policy on this issue, the inability to find approaches to understanding with the local people, and the lack of resources to implement changes. To find a solution, it is worth starting from the basic needs of the people and then, taking them into account, try to reconcile the private and the public.

Since panel housing of Soviet times is outdated in itself, because it was built with other intentions, in another period and with a different vision of people's needs, there is no need to worry too much about preserving the original appearance of the buildings. The conditions allow for the development of solutions, a project of glazing open balconies and cladding already glazed ones, coordinating the external appearance of the building into one composition. A mass solution for a mass problem. Residents of old panel buildings seek practicality and tidiness.

However, the old buildings themselves do not cause any harm, and once renovated, they continue to serve their owners no worse than new constructions. Examples can be found nearby, as the same problem occurs in Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Estonia, etc. Their experience can be applied in Ukraine, with adaptation to specific local contexts and problems.

Jane Jacobs notes that *"The only harm of aged buildings to a city district or street is the harm that eventually comes of nothing but old age – the harm that lies in everything being old and everything becoming worn."* [p.188-189], and also *"Age of buildings, in relation to usefulness or desirability, is an extremely relative thing. Nothing in a vital city district seems to be too old to be chosen for use by those who have choice – or to have its place taken, finally, by something new."* [4, p.193]

Another side of the problem is policy regarding facades of historical and architectural value. Most often this concerns the historic city center. Here it is important to understand that the priority task of facades is not to satisfy the needs of residents, but to preserve the authentic appearance of the building and the spirit of the city. Therefore, for the sake of heritage preservation, to some extent it is necessary to sacrifice comfort, strictly prohibiting defiant balconies and various modifications not coordinated with local authorities, and removing such if they already exist, returning the building to its authentic appearance.

The Purpose of Change.

In the historic center, strict heritage preservation policy should be implemented, including renovations and even the removal of balcony glazing and replacement of windows with appropriate ones.

In residential areas, in particular mass panel housing built at high speed and in short terms during the Soviet period, it would be better to be more lenient and thinking primarily from the perspective of the residents of these territories. Their quality of life and the convenience of their homes are the priority.

In the long term, with the presence of specialists, resources, and residents' willingness, it will be

necessary to carry out large-scale renovation to prevent old neighborhoods from turning into something similar to ghettos.

An aesthetic and comfortable public environment positively affects residents of adjacent areas and local businesses. Residents satisfied with their housing will rest better, work more efficiently, and spend more money, which on the city scale will gradually increase the attractiveness of the area for commercial activity. People will stay more often in neat places, which means they will visit local shops or restaurants more often. A quality renovation program of old buildings is citizens' gratitude and satisfaction with the city, as well as a key to the economic growth of previously unattractive districts, and therefore of the city as a whole.

International Examples.

Poland, Warsaw, Ursynów District. In Poland, housing cooperatives play a key role in managing the housing stock, especially in districts built during the socialist period. They originated in communist times as a form of collective ownership of apartment buildings and continue to exist today in a reformed form. Poland managed to transform the conditions of the socialist era into a functioning and fairly reliable instrument of urban management, granting broader powers to local communities. Ukrainian condominium associations (OSBBs) are a certain analogue of such cooperatives, but due to mistrust in authorities, weaker organization, and apathy or fear of solving problems independently, this form of local community organization has not taken root well, although it still has great potential.

The Ursynów district is one of the largest and most famous residential districts of the Polish capital, a kind of model of socialist planning of the second half of the 20th century. Its construction began in the mid-1970s in response to Warsaw's need for mass housing. The district was designed from scratch on the southern outskirts of the city. Large-panel multi-storey buildings dominated the development, built according to the Soviet model of microdistricts, with designated zones for greenery, playgrounds, schools, medical points, and shops. The district has certain parallels with Obolon in Kyiv, which is why it was chosen.

The housing cooperative "Jary" in Ursynów carried out a thermal modernization program in the 2000s [5]. Within its framework, all facades and roofs were insulated, balconies repaired, windows and doors in common areas replaced, heating substations modernized, and thermostats installed in apartments. Another important priority was the external aesthetic appeal of renovated buildings and areas. Residents were partially reimbursed for the costs of replacing windows in their apartments. The works were financed by the cooperatives themselves, without loans, with the involvement of the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management (NFOŚiGW) and the state thermal modernization program, which could compensate up to 30% of renovation costs. These measures produced a tangible result – more than 30% reduction in heat consumption, as well as qualitative renewal of residential development, including both buildings and surrounding areas.

Problematic aspect. In 2020, in the same district, the housing cooperative “Na Skraju” began a large-scale renovation of balconies in multi-storey buildings [6]. The balconies had not been repaired for over forty years and there was indeed a need for renovation. However, the work began at the end of April, in the midst of the COVID-19 epidemic, and without proper communication with residents. Due to quarantine restrictions, elderly people were forced to stay at home, and balconies – their only opportunity to be outdoors – were blocked. Residents described this situation as isolation within isolation. Residents tried in every possible way to stop the process; the case even reached the mayor. But the cooperative still continued the work to its full completion.

This case caused significant disputes and stress, but their source was not the renovation itself, but the lack of proper communication, which could have prevented these problems before they arose.

Estonia, Tallinn, Mustamäe District. The Mustamäe district was the first Soviet district built in Estonia after World War II, during which 53% of housing in Tallinn was demolished. “Khrushchyovkas” were used to construct 330 residential buildings.

In 2001, the Estonian government established the KredEx fund to improve the energy efficiency of the housing stock. KredEx provides 30–40% grants for residents to renovate residential buildings. An agreement is concluded between a technical consultant and residents, construction project documentation undergoes expert review organized and paid for by KredEx. After the expert review, the fund organizes a tender for the works through the state procurement register.

On the initiative of local authorities, as a result of the renovation program, 210 buildings were repaired and modernized [7]. Facades were insulated, heating systems modernized, ventilation installed, and balconies upgraded. A distinctive feature of the approach was the use of modular wooden panels developed by Tallinn University of Technology, with which active cooperation was conducted.

Currently, a large-scale SOFTacademy project is being implemented [8], also initiated by local authorities and financed from the municipal budget, cooperative contributions, and with the support of the European Urban Initiative.

Communication with residents is a key element of the project. Information days, seminars, and consultations are organized, where residents can learn about the benefits of renovation, discuss plans for renewing their buildings and courtyards, and contribute their proposals.

The Way to a Solution.

Just as laws regulate social and administrative life, the cultural code of a city regulates its appearance, setting the motive and rules for its construction and development. Walking through the streets of Prague, Paris, or Berlin, tourists admire the old architecture and the innovations skillfully integrated so as not to harm the perception of historical heritage. Beautiful streets that meet the requirements of the cultural code are a

strong incentive for business, tourism, and everyday life in general.

“We had learned of the plan in advance of the demolition purely by luck. No public hearing was required, for technically this was merely an adjustment in the curb line. We were told at first that the plans would not be changed; the sidewalk must go.” [4, p.124-125]. The problem is not new and occurs all the time. No matter how good plans and words may be, it is necessary to have levers of influence and public understanding in order to follow through. One aspect of such understanding lies in the right approach to social interaction with the population. While laws and regulations set boundaries and frameworks by imposing fines and granting benefits, the social work of developers and city administrations with residents provides both sides with a better understanding of the situation, allowing them to jointly arrive at the most optimal decision.

At this stage, before choosing the further model of communication with the residents of a building, it is important to determine whether the construction is purely residential or holds historical and architectural value. In the latter case, the appearance of the city has the highest value, especially if it is the city center, and the social component of the issue lies in properly explaining the importance of restoring the building’s appearance to its original form.

The causes of the problem are clear – difficult economic times, lack of experience and professional knowledge in the field, people’s desire to improve their circumstances on their own, even if it means sacrificing external neatness. One should not place the blame solely on the residents – this problem stems from a series of historical events and economic factors of the 1990s. The authorities tried to create rules, but by the time they tackled the issue, it had become so widespread that people perceived it as the norm, and punishing offenders would have meant punishing either everyone or no one. Nevertheless, there remains a certain point that calls into question either the integrity or the competence of supervisory bodies or local authorities. This concerns historical buildings, which are far fewer than panel housing, and therefore the scope of oversight should have been more favorable to maintaining proper façade policies. Historical districts should form a symphony of eras intertwined with modernity. Instead, modernity constantly seeks to disrupt this harmony for selfish reasons.

Soviet panel buildings fall into the first category and require serious renovation, as heating systems, windows, water supply, and so on are often outdated. In the absence of supportive policies for citizens, they try to solve their problems on their own. That is why practices such as covering exterior walls with insulation, modifying balconies, and introducing multifunctionality (as mentioned above) have become so widespread.

It is important to understand that with historical buildings the matter is relatively straightforward: the difficulty lies in convincing the owners that their additions harm the perception of the building’s value.

In the case of panel housing, however, leaving things as they are may not be the worst option. It is better to prepare thoroughly for long-term work with the community and have sufficient resources to ensure the project is completed, without leaving residents with unfinished or controversial renovations.

However, if the local authorities are determined and have sufficient resources for implementation, I would like to propose a methodology for communication when developing a housing renovation project:

- **First hearings.** Renovation projects for standard housing should begin with public hearings. This will help gather information about the general mood of the residents and establish the necessary contact between the key stakeholders. Trust and ongoing communication are the keys to successfully meeting expectations. Based on the professional vision of the designers and the wishes of the residents, several renovation options should be drafted.

- **Second hearings.** At the second hearings, the proposed renovation options are presented, one of which is selected and amended as necessary. A detailed renovation plan is then developed.

- **Third hearings.** At the third hearings, the final renovation project is presented. Depending on the residents' opinions, it is either approved and moves into the implementation phase, or it is sent back for revision, followed by another round of hearings.

- **Implementation with ongoing support.** During the implementation of the renovation project, it is important to remain accessible to residents' questions. Timely responses can prevent conflicts and misunderstandings.

- **Final meeting and feedback support.** Upon completion of the renovation, a final meeting with the residents should be held to present a report on the work done, discuss the ongoing maintenance of restored elements, and collect feedback. This not only strengthens trust in the designers and contractors but also allows lessons to be applied to future projects. It is

especially important to establish a feedback mechanism so that after completion, residents can report discovered flaws or technical issues. Thus, renovation becomes a well-established process with clear accountability, support, and steadily growing trust in local authorities, designers, and contractors.

Proper social work should become the norm and foundation of urban renovation programs in Ukrainian cities. Clean and renewed districts promote the city's economic growth. An aesthetic and convenient public environment positively affects nearby residents and local businesses. Satisfied residents will rest better, work more effectively, and spend more money, which, on the city scale, gradually increases the attractiveness of the district for commercial activity. People are more likely to linger in clean, pleasant spaces, and therefore more often visit local shops or restaurants. A high-quality program of old housing renovation is a way to earn the gratitude and satisfaction of citizens, and also a key to the economic growth of previously unattractive districts – and thus the city as a whole.

Conclusion.

The facade chaos we know in Ukraine emerged from the need to fill the vacuum of state policy concerning public space and improving the quality of life in old residential districts. The roots of this problem stem from totalitarian Soviet policies and were long nourished by indifference to the issue during Ukraine's early independence. While historical buildings primarily serve a cultural function, panel housing is meant to ensure comfort and quality of life for its residents, which should be the priority. As the examples of Estonia and Poland show, renovation programs may be initiated both by local authorities and housing cooperatives. Renewed districts become attractive for living and greatly improve the city's economy.

In such projects, communication with the local people and communities plays a crucial role. Proper communication can prevent a large share of problems, build trust between all sides, and take residents' needs into account.

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Реновація фасадів старої забудови. Аналіз досвіду пострадянських країн та пропозиція методики роботи з громадою

Анотація. У статті розглянуто проблему непорядкованості фасадів житлової забудови в містах України, що виникла внаслідок радянської політики управління міським простором, байдужості населення до громадського середовища та відсутності ефективної міської політики після здобуття незалежності. Аналізуються відмінності між підходами до реновації масової панельної забудови та історичних будівель: у першому випадку пріоритетом є комфорт і потреби мешканців, у другому — збереження культурної спадщини та автентичності міського простору. Наведено приклади програм модернізації з Польщі та Естонії, що демонструють ефективність політики реновації при двох різних підходах до неї. Пропонується методика взаємодії з громадою під час планування та реалізації проєктів реновації, з акцентом на довіру мешканців і належну комунікація, що дозволяє ефективніше вносити зміни в запропоновані плани та упереджувати потенційні проблеми. Системна реновація сприяє підвищенню якості життя, економічному розвитку районів і формуванню привабливого міського середовища.

Ключові слова: фасади, вулиця, реновація, комунікація з громадами, історична забудова, житлова забудова, міське середовище, іноземний досвід

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