

“A Public Place Should Be for Both Roma and Non-Roma”: The Function and Use of Public Places from an Ethnic Perspective

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This text is an analysis of the ways public spaces in a neighborhood of one Moravian city in the Czech Republic are used. The estate's urban layout reflects the needs and lifestyles of the region's residents at the time it was built in the 1950s. Research conducted revealed clearly formulated preferences for the possible revitalization of the area. The ethnically and socially heterogeneous residents cannot, however, agree on the purposes the space should serve and for whose benefit. The research indicates a tension between the non-Roma residents and the Roma community, which affects both groups' ideas for its revitalization. Analysis of their oftentimes conflicting expectations, and the consequences of social exclusion, all of which break down along ethnic lines, is the focus of this study. The mixed-method research combined a quantitative and a qualitative approach.

Key words: Roma, neighborhood revitalization, social exclusion, public spaces

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Introduction

This text is a result of a secondary analysis of data collected during an applied research project conducted in an unnamed Czech town, where the local council is planning the redevelopment of a public space. The aim of the research was therefore shaped by the requirements of the commissioning body. Their task was to identify the relevant interest groups and their needs concerning the revitalization of a space referred to here as the *Pláček* – an area located in the middle of a housing estate, formerly the site of a well-known children's playground.

This study presents findings related to a deeply rooted, albeit latent and long-standing, conflict that may be understood as a negotiation over the function of public space. On the one hand there are the proponents of quiet – primarily some of the owners of the adjacent private apartments – and on the other, the most frequent users of the area, namely Romani families residing in nearby municipal housing. Although the voices calling for peace and proposing to turn the former playground into a parking lot are in the minority, they represent socioeconomically

better-situated actors who are actively engaged in negotiations with the municipality. Their concerns are not only about improving their living environment but also about increasing the value of the properties they own.

Thus, the contestation over the meaning and function of the *Pláček* can be examined both through the lens of ethnic differentiation and in relation to the economic, social, and symbolic status of the involved actors. Drawing on theories of public space, this study interprets the construction and production of this specific public space through the theoretical framework of *spatializing culture* (Low 2017).

The applied research was conducted by a research team consisting of seven academic staff members and four pregraduate social anthropology students. The team included experts in applied anthropology with experience in research on public space, Romani studies, anthropology of education and social work. The students primarily contributed to the quantitative data collection, specifically through a survey conducted among the local residents. The research team was composed of both men and women across different age groups. Four academic members of the research team are the authors of this text.

None of the researchers were from the town where the research was conducted, nor did they have personal ties to it. However, the team gained some prior understanding of the locality through a brief preliminary

investigation conducted a year before the main research. During this visit, two members documented the site photographically, recorded observations, and established initial contacts with local residents.

1. Theoretical Grounding

This town in the Czech Republic, which will remain unnamed, has between 15,000 and 25,000 residents and is a typical example of urbanism in the spirit of socialist realism. The many high-rise apartment blocks that make up the housing estate are surrounded by pleasant, mature greenery. Some of them have small courtyards, which the locals call “backyards” or “nests.” The housing estate that is the subject of this study is the oldest one in the city. Its construction was motivated by industrial development and the beginning of operations by a large engineering company in the 1950s. As was common in former Czechoslovakia, the residents themselves participated in the construction of the estate and the improvement of the public space between 1948 and 1988, as part of what was then called “Action Z” (Roberts 2005: 1).

The housing estate centers on a large triangular-shaped space which the locals call the *Pláček*². *Pláček* is not only a space but also a place in the sense that it is experiential and with granted meaning (see e.g. Augé 1995; Casey 1997). In the logic of the original urban planners, this space was intended to serve as an alternative to the town square, offering residents an opportunity to meet and socialize. It had its golden era in the 1970s and 1980s, when it included a popular playground that boasted unusual – perhaps one could even say, designer – play structures.

It has been said that the uses and equipment of public spaces change over time. “Public spaces evolve along with the development of the people. Their form changes from community to community in the context of geographical location and social, economic, societal, and religious requirements.” (Dvořáková 2016: 12) Such spaces reflect the actual state of a society (Durdík 2016). Currently, most of the *Pláček* has fallen into disuse for several decades. A small part of the original playground is being used as a parking lot. The area is bordered on all sides by roads and apartment blocks that are home to approximately 1,400 residents.

The demographics of this part of the city are quite heterogeneous, both in terms of educational attainment and also in terms of age distribution and ethnicity. The



Map of the locality where the fieldwork was conducted. The empty space of the *Pláček* highlighted in green is surrounded by residential buildings

neighborhood is currently undergoing a generational transition. Young families with children are replacing the first generation of “old settlers,” many of whom have lived in the housing estate their whole lives. In many cases, residents have improved the common space around their individual apartment buildings by themselves. There are well-kept flower beds in front of the entrances to many of the buildings that are filled with blooms and ornamental shrubs. These modifications to the public space prove that the residents of the housing estate have a relationship with their environment that extends beyond the thresholds of their own apartments. At present, new tenants are arriving, renting the apartments of older residents who have moved out of the estate to live full-time in their vacation cottages.

No major investment has been made by the city in the development of the estate in recent decades, and the attractiveness of the area is not helped by the uncontrolled and unplanned parking of cars at its heart. As Setha Low says, public spaces are not only part of the physical tissue of a particular environment. They are essential for people’s socialization, learning, and recreation (Low 2023: 9; see also Low 2017; Tuan 2018; Lynch 1960). As such, they are the seedbeds for inclusion and exclusion.

After a long period of inaction, the city has decided to revitalize the abandoned space of the Pláček and transform it into a functional area that will better meet the needs of the local residents. To that end, we conducted a survey of the residents of the housing estate, the goal of which was to identify their preferred options for upgrading the area with an eye to revitalizing community life in the locality.

The majority of the apartments in the buildings in the vicinity of the Pláček are privately owned. They are occupied by their owners and their families, or they are rented out. The apartment blocks in places have decorative elements that recall more traditional houses, like moldings, arched windows, and sgraffito. Some of these features have disappeared in recent years when the buildings have been covered with insulating panels.

A group of apartment buildings owned by the city is an exception. They are seven buildings in a row, in which there are 200 apartments. Some of them are connected, giving them the shape of the letter “U.” These seven buildings originally were so-called *svobodárny* (literally, “bachelor quarters,” or “dorms,” as we will call them here). They provided minimally sized housing units for unmarried workers who moved to the city to work

in factories and sometimes in schools. Nowadays, the city-owned apartments in the “dorms” house renters and whole families despite their cramped spaces.

One of these seven buildings is distinguished by its uninsulated façade. It is inhabited mostly by people who are defined by the town as being at risk of social exclusion: Romani families, and in some cases ethnic Czechs. Most of the Czechs live there alone. This building is the only one in the housing estate that has the official status of a socially excluded locality. Due to the concentration of socioeconomic vulnerabilities, a municipal center with social workers has been established to deliver appropriate interventions. The police make regular patrols to ensure order in the public areas. According to the employees of the management company, socially pathological behavior sometimes occurs also in one or two of the other “dorms,” but to a much lesser extent.

The coexistence of the non-Romani population and the Roma in the dorm seven is not entirely problem-free. The Roma complain about constant marginalization by some of their Czech neighbors. On the other hand, the non-Romani residents have complaints about excessive noise and inappropriate behavior by certain members of the Romani community. According to them, this happens mainly in the open space in front of the apartment building nearest the Pláček. In addition to Roma and ethnic Czech residents, the housing estate is also inhabited by members of the Czech Republic’s Ukrainian minority and its Vietnamese community. The research participants did not raise issues about these two minority groups.

In almost all of our in-depth interviews – both with residents and others – the informants felt the need to draw our attention to the special nature of the housing estate, or to inform us of reasons why it is considered an “inferior” address and the apartments there do not have a higher market value: “*When you want to sell your apartment, it’s like: ‘That estate? No way!’*” (Informant 27)

Many residents explain this by saying that the city owns the apartments in the dorms and has moved in almost all of its “socially vulnerable” citizens, many of whom are Roma. The housing estate has gained its bad reputation thanks to that. For that reason, we have dedicated part of our research to mapping the current state of interethnic relations and potential situations of conflict. We also focus attention on stereotypes, both negative and positive. Using the method of non-participatory observation, we compared our expectations with the actual

living situations of the Roma and non-Romani residents. We asked residents of the dorms, their neighbors, and residents of more distant areas in the town, as well as city employees, non-profit organizations, and institutions active in the neighborhood, about how well they all live together. The objective of the study was to identify who claims the public space, and what strategies in terms of construction of space through human interactions are employed. The conceptual framework employed in this study draws on the notion of “spatializing culture” (Low 2017: 7), a multidimensional approach “that includes social production, social construction, embodied, discursive, emotive and affective, as well as translocal approaches to space and place. To “spatialize” in this context means “to produce and locate – physically, historically, affectively, and discursively – social relations, institutions, representations, and practices in space.” “Culture,” as used here, refers to the multiple and contingent forms of knowledge, power, and symbolism that constitute human and nonhuman interactions; material and technological processes; and cognitive dimensions, including thoughts, beliefs, imaginings, and perceptions.

The authors of this study argue that the aforementioned perspective is useful for identifying “social inequalities embodied in space, which are manifested and reproduced in daily life” (Low 2017). According to Low, as competing claims to space and place give rise to territorial and cultural conflicts, they increasingly reshape social relations among ethnic and religious groups, social classes, regions, nation-states, and local communities.

This study ultimately aims to determine whether the expectations and priorities regarding the upgrading of public space differ between Romani and non-Romani residents. It also investigates what public space means to each group, how social exclusion affects this space, and how that exclusion influences its use. The fieldwork confirmed the hypothesis that the dormitory residents – particularly Romani families – constitute a distinct and specific interest group. In the questionnaire survey, we deliberately chose not to collect data on participants’ ethnicity, but on the other hand to ensure that we get answers from representatives of all groups. Roma participants¹ in the research were recruited through three main strategies. First, following initial contact with adults present at the *Pláček*, we introduced ourselves, explained the purpose of the research, and noted that some members of the research team speak Romani. This approach

generated interest in the research among the Romani residents; some were eager to speak to us in Romani and to share their concerns about the future of the space. Secondly, in order to avoid capturing only the perspectives of those who spend time in the public space, we also conducted door-to-door visits, both in buildings predominantly inhabited by the Romani residents and throughout the entire estate. Lastly, a local social worker helped identify relevant members of the Romani community who were invited to participate in the research, particularly those not present in the public space during fieldwork hours.

Although the scope of the research does not allow for comparison to long-term historical-ethnographic case studies (e.g. Abu Ghosh 2008; Sadílková 2016; Ort 2021, 2022, 2025), and it did not allow for an in-depth exploration of differing statuses and histories of individual Romani families, we argue that even a short-term study of this kind can contribute to the discussion on spatial politics. It does so by mapping questions such as: Who is perceived as belonging – or not belonging – to a given public space? Who is seen as entitled to use that space, and on what grounds?

2. Methodology

Fieldwork for this study was conducted during one three-day and one four-day visit to the locality in 2024, employing a rapid ethnographic assessment of the area known as the “*Pláček*,” with an emphasis on grounded theory. The researchers used qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured and unstructured interviews with residents. We also conducted a quantitative survey among residents and visitors to the locality.

As part of our qualitative research, we conducted non-participatory observations around the *Pláček* at different times of the day. Using the snowball method, we conducted 29 detailed, semi-structured interviews with residents of the locality, of whom 15 were women and 14 were men. We also spoke to 22 other people who regularly visit the locality in the course of their employment and have regular contact with the local residents. Interviews and observations were also conducted among members of the Romani community who happened to be in the area of the dorm. The purpose of the two focus group sessions was to discover the various viewpoints on the functioning and potential future use of the public areas in the housing estate.

Our quantitative research using the questionnaire was conducted using the “random route” method. We systematically approached potential respondents who live in the designated area of the housing estate, including the dorms, by starting from one apartment in each building and proceeding through the building in a pre-determined direction (Adams – Brace 2006: 56). This method allows the researcher to make contact with a target population when no list of residents is available (Bauer 2014: 520). Here, the researchers asked the respondents the questions in the survey and recorded their answers. In all, they obtained 148 completed questionnaires, which considering the estimated 1,400 residents of the locality was about 10 % of the target population. The completed questionnaire was translated into electronic form and anonymously analyzed using the statistical and analytical software program SPSS. Eighty-five respondents to the survey were women (58 %) and 63 were men (42 %), with an age range of 18 to 86 years, maximum educational attainment from elementary school to university-level, and various economic statuses. The respondents were purposely not asked about their ethnicity in the questionnaire, but care was taken that the individual ethnic groups were evenly represented in the sample of respondents. We tried diligently to keep all information that could lead to identification of the place of the research and its inhabitants anonymous.

3. To Whom Does the “Pláček” Belong and Who Belongs on the Pláček? Ethnic Czechs from the Estate and the Residents of the “Dorms”

The Romani community in the housing estate forms a relatively homogeneous and, from an external point of view, unified group. Its members are residents of the dorms for the most part. As in other Czech cities and towns, the Roma here are descendants of those who came to Czechoslovakia at the end of World War II and later (Pavelčíková 2004; Sadílková 2016; Donert 2017; Ort 2025), mostly from less-developed rural parts of eastern Slovakia. They replaced the original Romani population in the area that was systematically murdered by the Nazi regime during the war (for more on the holocaust of Roma and Sinti, see Nečas 1999; Donert – Rosenhaft 2022).

The fourth-generation descendants of the Roma who came after the war are now living in the estate. They

have put down roots and regard the locality as their home. They may even be said to think of it patriotically. That is true not only of the estate as a whole, but also the area of the Pláček. At the same time, it must be emphasized that in the basically homogeneous ethnic environment of the Czech Republic, the Roma are a highly visible minority. Even decades after their arrival at the estate, and despite the natural process of their territorialization in the town (see Ort 2021), they are still perceived by the non-Roma as a foreign element. It is important to recognize that in Czech society, they have often been – and still are today – the victims of discrimination and securitization (see van Baar 2011; Kupka – Walach – Brendzová 2021).

One Romani resident of the dorm said: *“We are at home here. Of course we are comfortable here, and when spring comes and it’s nice outside, we come out here [on the Pláček]. That’s how it is and I don’t see why there has to be a parking lot or some apartment house there.”* (Informant 03) Here the informant is referring to the demands of some residents and car owners that the existing provisional parking lot be expanded and to a proposal to build another apartment block on the spot.

The residents of that particular dorm see the fact that it has been designated by the city as a place threatened by social exclusion as a form of discrimination. According to some of its residents, the Roma are being stigmatized and intentionally excluded by the city – and then the city is surprised that they are excluded. *“Mainly, the city says that this housing estate is an excluded locality. How so? Why are we an excluded locality? We are the same as you people, like everyone else. We pay rent like other people and the city still [makes that designation]. There is no crime at all among the Romani residents – so why do they do that?”* (Informant 04)

Based on such responses it seems that the residents of the dorm are unsure about what it means to be “designated” as “threatened by social exclusion.” It is clear that they would like to know whether based on that designation they (or the city) would receive some special financial support, and if such support were to be provided, would it improve their standard of living and in what time horizon? As for the inadequacy of their housing, they complain about the area in front of the building and the condition of its façade. So far as we can tell from seeing the inside of the building and its outside areas, they are completely justified.

There also was an obvious great sensitivity in the answers that may be the result of “anti-Gypsy” sentiment. Non-Romani individuals express these sentiments by distancing themselves from Roma and by maintaining segregation within the school environment. In the specific case of this housing estate, one of the local schools is almost entirely attended by non-Romani children, while the other has a large proportion of Romani students (Regarding the subject of “anti-Gypsy” sentiment and segregation of the Roma, see, for example, Cortés – End 2019, and the previously mentioned van Baar 2011. In the specific case of the Czech Republic, compare research conducted on the portrait of the Roma in the media by Sedláková 2022).

3.1 On the Dynamics of Intergroup Attitudes

In the course of our research, many of our informants mentioned the fact that in the “dorms” the apartments are small. They were designed and built for unmarried persons, and not for families with many children or more than one generation of residents. The problem of the size of the apartments in socially excluded localities (i.e. the inadequate size of the apartment given the number of household members) has been mentioned in a number of studies that have examined the subject of social exclusion in the Czech Republic (see Čada 2015).

Low-income residents began to move into the dorm buildings in the second half of the 1990s as a consequence of privatization of the city’s other housing stock. (Regarding the privatization of apartments in general, and for specific case studies of the emergence of particular socially excluded localities, see, for example, Matoušek 2012, 2014). Middle-class residents have left these small housing units and the dorms have gradually become places where lower-income residents live because they cannot afford to rent apartments elsewhere. This has meant that families with many children, who not surprisingly spend a lot of time outdoors, have gradually taken over the nearby public space of the Pláček. That area has become overcrowded and conflicts have arisen over use of the play structures. Children living in apartments not in the dorms have gradually stopped coming and, like other residents of the housing estate, have begun avoiding the area (informant 16).

In their in-depth interviews some informants, mainly those who live at a distance from the Pláček and do not visit it, revealed a continuing lack of trust in the resi-

dents of the dorms. They are skeptical that if renovated, the public space can successfully be used by both residents of privately owned apartments and residents of city-owned apartments. In that connection, they point to conflicts about which they have heard from time to time. At the same time, however, there are many informants who are apartment-owners (in our research they predominated) who describe the shared neighborhood as without problems, or much better than in the past. They connect the improvement in the situation with the transfer of a homeless shelter for men to another part of town. For example: *“It’s a good thing the homeless shelter is gone. That was a big problem, but it’s better now.”* (Informant 17)

Many informants take a neutral or even positive stand, saying that the current residents of the dorms do not cause problems. They say that many of them are their friends and greet them familiarly, and that they understand why they need to spend a lot of time outside, considering their small, overcrowded apartments. Some of them even describe situations where their children play alongside children from the dorms on the same playground and no conflicts arise (Focus Group 1). This same picture is confirmed by almost all the residents of the dorms who took part in our research. We repeatedly had the opportunity to witness such conflict-free interactions while we were conducting our research.

Some research participants emphasized that they had nothing against the Roma, but simply desire peace and quiet. For example, a female informant aged 45–55 stated:

“I’m at an age where, when I come home tired from work, I just want peace and quiet. And when someone is dribbling a ball on the playground – sometimes even until 10 p.m. – it’s annoying.” She added: *“The playground shouldn’t be right under the windows. You know, children don’t go outside that much these days anyway. And then when some do and they make noise, people get annoyed. If only they would leave by 8 p.m.”* (Ibid.)

While some informants mentioned conflicts that have to be managed – and in the evening hours, when intoxicated individuals were arguing and breaking bottles on the playground, calling the police was necessary (Informants 23, 24, 29) – others went so far as to propose converting the entire space into a parking lot (R29). On the other hand, there were also informants who highlighted that the children from the dormitories were still experiencing a kind of childhood they themselves once had:

"These are still the genuine kind of kids – they spend a lot of time outside, they're not constantly on their phones, and they get plenty of exercise." (Informant 8)

An analysis of the references to conflict around the Pláček, and of attitudes toward the residents of the dormitories, reveals that the owners and residents of private apartments, on the one hand, defend their right to peace and quiet. Many would welcome the transformation of the playground into a parking lot. At the same time, however, a significant number of them also acknowledge the need of the dormitory residents to spend time outdoors. The potential redevelopment of the public space thus emerges as a topic around which intergroup attitudes are negotiated and dynamically reshaped.

3.2 We Need Benches

In particular, the residents of the dorms stress the need for installation of new benches in sufficient number, not only in the area of the Pláček, but also in the buildings' courtyards. They ask for installation of *"at least two benches in each of the areas between the buildings"* (Informant 12) and *"on the Pláček."*

The residents repeatedly said that they need benches so they can sit and chat with each other or mind their children while they play. We became aware that the state of the benches was a real problem in many places around the estate. For example, away from the Pláček, one of our informants showed us a substandard bench that was damaged in such a way that users could ruin their clothes or get a splinter. Directly on the Pláček, the benches are so far apart that the people sitting on them cannot easily talk to each other.

Some residents of the dorms told us that they had bought some outdoor chairs on sale and put them out in front of their building. However, they were forbidden to do this and given the reason that the area belongs to the city. Prohibiting the chairs directly contradicts what seems to be allowed in other areas of the housing estate, where the owners of similar outdoor furniture told us that they leave their own chairs out on the grass and lock them up. They set them up when and where they want (in the sun, in the shade, close to playing children, etc.) It appears that the residents of the dorms feel that their status is not equal to that of the residents of other buildings in the estate, in that privately owned furniture

is permitted in some public areas and prohibited in "theirs." Their responses show that the residents of the dorms are in fact capable of taking action, deciding on joint approaches, and planning investments.

3.3 A Playground Like We Had

When it comes to improving the usefulness of the public area of the Pláček, the Romani informants from the dorm placed importance on renovation of the playground and play structures for children and young people. One informant, a Romani woman, remembers the Pláček as it used to look:

"Back then there was a huge yellow jungle gym. There were ropes hanging from it you could climb up and then you'd swing down. There was still concrete underneath. There was a big carousel that looked like a mushroom. You could hang down from that too. We'd swing on it and go round and round. There was another jungle gym there, where the concrete is, and yet another one you could slide down. There was a beautiful airplane and a climbing structure that had a tunnel going through it." (Informant 03)

These memories and many others like them reflect the changes that took place after the fall of the communist regime and economic transformation. The residents of the dorm, who go to the Pláček regularly in sunny weather and spend time there in conversation with friends and watching their children play, said they are worried that something other than a recreation area might be installed on it, like a parking lot or a new building.

"It's all up in the air. We don't know what we'll do if they take this away from us too. Is it better for the town that 'gypsy mothers with children' sit between the buildings or by the side of the road on the curb? Would that be better than letting the kids play here, where they've played all their lives?" (Informant 03)

Behind these words we can see the heated emotions stemming from residents' fears that their children will have nowhere to play in their free time and that mothers will have to sit and socialize where they will disturb other people and thereby get into conflicts. The Romani informants are particularly concerned that the space they have been using around their homes will de facto be taken away from them if its function changes. They fear this will significantly worsen their quality of life.

3.4 Memories of the “Romani Clubhouse”

The dissolution of a Romani association that was formerly active in the locality is connected to the local children having a more difficult time finding a place to spend their leisure time. It seems that the association fell apart because some of its members moved away from the city. The association sponsored a “Romani clubhouse” that closed down at about the same time. It is now remembered fondly by Romani parents and grandparents. They describe it as the perfect facility for their children, and they were happy to help organize its programs and activities. They recall the names of the people who worked in the clubhouse and activities like field trips and summer camps (Informants 03, 04, and 09). Even the non-Romani residents of the housing estate remember it as a place where they could go play board games and get to know the other children who lived in the estate, including the ones from the Romani families. *“We still know all of them by name and use the familiar Czech form of address with them.”* (Informant 19)

We encountered a certain lack of understanding about this situation among the Romani informants. The old children’s club was transformed into a “low-threshold” facility³ for at-risk children and youth. The Romani parents feel the loss of a club that was functioning well for them and are not enthusiastic about the opening of the low-threshold facility, about which they have little information. According to them, it is not much used. On the one hand, it could be that the current social services provided there are working well, in that they provide assistance to clients without stigmatizing them and the clients’ anonymity is assured.

Of course, on the other hand, something is clearly lacking. The original services the club provided to residents are gone. Today the parents and grandparents of the Romani children remember that mothers and other family members would participate in the club’s activities, leading dance groups, organizing sports activities, helping with cleaning and maintenance, and in some cases being employed there. Non-Romani children came to the club as well. One non-Romani informant, the owner of an apartment elsewhere in the estate, said: *“Yes, at one time we went there every day, when we were in the second grade. We went to play ping-pong.”* (Informant 19)

An informant from a Romani family remembers: *“There was a time when we went there a lot with the kids. The moms would come and watch. Why did they take it away*

from the kids? Those kids were dancing, going on trips, they even went to a summer camp with the center for a week. [...] There were a lot of kids going to that clubhouse. You had a place to send them to go dance or go do something fun, but it’s not like that anymore.” (Informant 19)

The residents complain about the worsened situation with today’s social services center. *“No one goes there.”* (Informant 03) That is the opinion of some informants who know little about the low-threshold center that is now located there and miss the old, successful clubhouse that was closed down.

In connection with the renovation of the public space of the Pláček, we encountered some ideas for making the area more attractive for children, adults, and seniors and making it functional again.

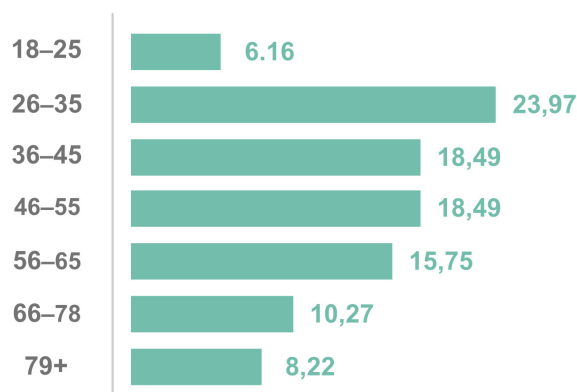
“One woman [...] was talking to a man who is a boxer and was teaching the boys to box. Why couldn’t they put a punching bag here [speaking of the Pláček]. In good weather they wouldn’t have to rent a gym. They could do some of their training outside, couldn’t they?” (Informant 04) There were other, similar ideas for better use of the space among residents of the dorms. They put a premium on action and coordination of individual measures – on the need to do something immediately, so that they could have places to sit close to the entrances to the dorms and at least a sandbox and some play equipment, even before the overall reconstruction of the Pláček (Informant 17). Many of the Romani informants were openly fearful that if they lost the Pláček they would never get it back. Our research showed that the residents were afraid that the city would not be transparent about its plans for reconstructing it. Even a temporary change might cause a panic among those residents. The city would do well to prevent that by informing residents in a timely manner about all the successive steps that will be taken.

Although there is no consensus among the Romani residents of the dorms about the details, for example, how to repair the big playground on the Pláček or what play equipment to add to the space, all of their answers agreed that the place should be renovated in accord with the original intent of the builders of the housing estate. According to the majority of the Romani residents of the dorms that border on the Pláček, the area is not sufficiently adapted and equipped for use by the citizenry, without regard to their ethnicity. As one of the Romani informants said, *“the Pláček should be for Roma and non-Roma!”* (Informant 09)

4. Statistics Reflecting the Exclusion of the Romani Residents of the Housing Estate

We focused on the foregoing problems in our questionnaire. Its results support the impression we gained from the qualitative research described in Chapter 3. We asked the respondents questions designed to elicit their preferences for use of the public spaces in the housing estate. The particular view of the non-Romani residents of the estate is best reflected in their answers to the open-ended questions we posed. A significant number of respondents expressed concern that the Romani residents of the dorms would dispossess them from renovated public spaces and they would have no access to them. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the current situation around the Pláček. In their opinion, the public space is already overwhelmed by the Romani residents of the dorms and the non-Roma never get access to it. The research utilizing the questionnaire was conducted simultaneously with both Romani and non-Romani residents of the housing estate. The respondents were sorted into seven age groups for further analysis of the data (chart 1):

Percentage of Respondents in the Indicated Age Groups



4.1 How They Live Around the Pláček

The neighboring community has a positive influence on the quality of life in the area of the Pláček. Sixty-one percent of the respondents identified their neighbors as an important factor influencing their life in the housing estate, using a seven-point scale in which the highest values were 6 and 7. Moreover, a majority of the respondents declare they feel at home in the housing estate (86 % of

the 141 respondents who answered that question). The physical condition and the equipment of the public space was mentioned as something negative about it.

A specific, but not always easily understood matter is the co-existence of the Romani and non-Romani residents of the locality. The Romani community is viewed negatively by the non-Romani residents and that opinion was expressed by 15 % of the respondents in their answers to the open-ended questions. They mention drug use, which the non-Roma believe is common problem among the Roma. To the questions, "When I mention the Pláček, what comes to your mind?" and "What do you dislike about the area around the Pláček, what doesn't suit you, and what needs to be improved?" some respondents gave answers reflecting strong anti-Romani sentiments. Their answers contained words like: *Gypsies, Mexico Square, (Romani) playground, Roma, the area of the Gypsy dormitory, noise, a feeling of danger (at night in the street), Gypsy playground, noise, mess, Gypsies and disorder, we live in "the Bronx," a housing estate full of minorities, the center of the housing estate is a problematic place, has a bad reputation, a problem, there used to be a playground for everybody, messy and dark.*

A few anti-Roma statements appeared in the answers to some other open-ended questions. For example, to the question, "What do you like best about the locality?" the answer "normal white people" was heard. Twenty-eight percent of the survey participants responded "the green space" to that question, while 15 % essentially answered, "nothing." Forty-seven respondents (31.8 % of those who responded) describe the Pláček as the "square," "hill," or "place," without a negative, positive, or sentimental connotation.

To the question, "What do you dislike about the area of the Pláček, what doesn't suit you, and what needs to improve?" respondents most often indicated the lack of playground equipment and furniture (20 %) and criticized the maintenance of the area (23 %). Many residents (15 %) mentioned dissatisfaction with the presence of Romani residents of the dorms as well ("Gypsy playground, Gypsy-Romani children, Gypsies, minority, they are taking over the playground for themselves, the blacks are taking over the playground").

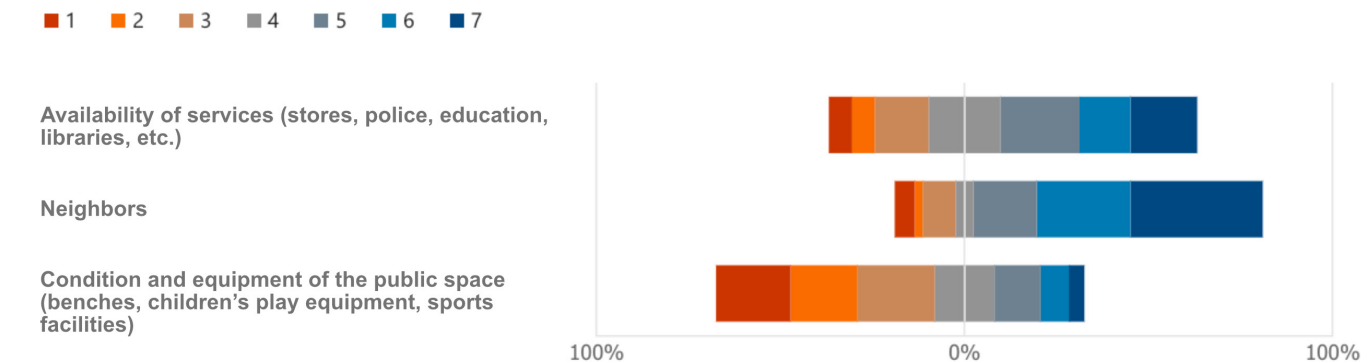
In connection with the Pláček, not quite 13 % of the participants in the survey (19 respondents, both older and younger), mentioned nostalgia for their (in many cases long-ago) childhoods. The birth years of the respondents

who associated the locality with their childhood and youth ranged from 1950 to 1996. Based on the age distribution of the respondents and assuming their childhoods ended when they were 12 to 14 years old (Collins 1984), we estimate that the area was considered safe and ideal for spending leisure time in the 2008–2010 period – by both the non-Romani and the Romani residents of the housing estate. According to the memories of residents, the number of Roma living in the dorms began to increase in the second half of the 1990s. The change in the perception of the area by the non-Roma to a negative impression thus dates from the time period when a greater

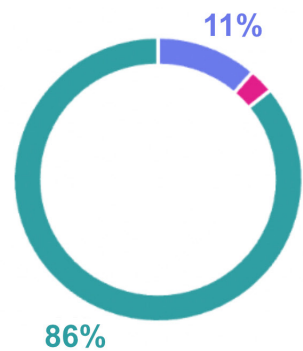
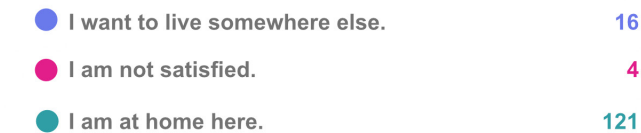
number of Roma began to appear in the public space. The stereotype of invasive, disorderly individuals who are destroying the Pláček is directly associated with the Roma.

On the other hand, the availability of services (stores, police, education, libraries, etc.) plays a positive role in perceptions of the area around the Pláček. Only 13 % of respondents consider services to be inadequate (rated 1 or 2 on a scale of 1 to 7, chart 2).

Question: What most influences the quality of life in the locality of the Pláček? On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 negative and 7 is positive, rate the following:



Question: How is life for you in this locality (chart 3)?



4.2 Play, Sports, and Leisure: The Utilitarian Function of the “Pláček” as a Public Space

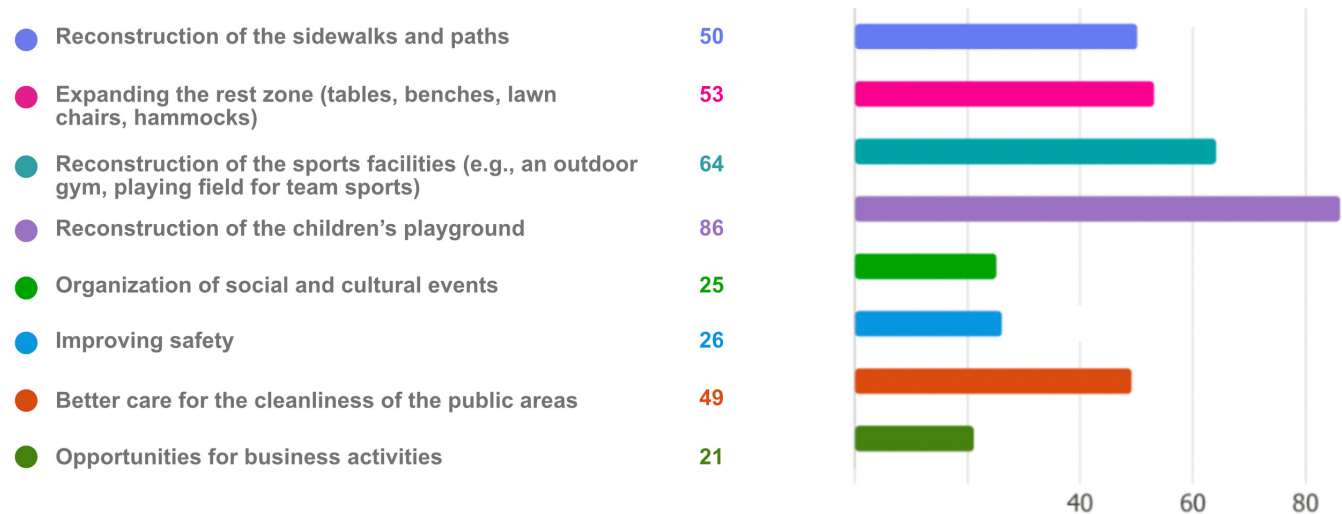
From the data we gathered, it appears that there is a demand for revitalization of the Pláček to serve all age groups regardless of ethnicity. The main priority is improving the playground for the children and following that,

repairing the sports fields for the use of young and early-middle-aged people. As the next most important priority, mainly middle- and senior-age residents are calling for the creation of a quiet area where they can relax. All these ideas of the ideal recreational facilities correspond to the physical condition of the individual respondents.

Thirty-four percent of the respondents replied to an open-ended question by saying that they most enjoy spending their free time on walks in the fresh air, particularly with family, children, and friends (12 % mentioned that specif-

ically). Twenty percent of the survey participants spend their free time on sporting activities.

Question: If you could influence the reconstruction of the Plácek, would you prioritize (chart 4):

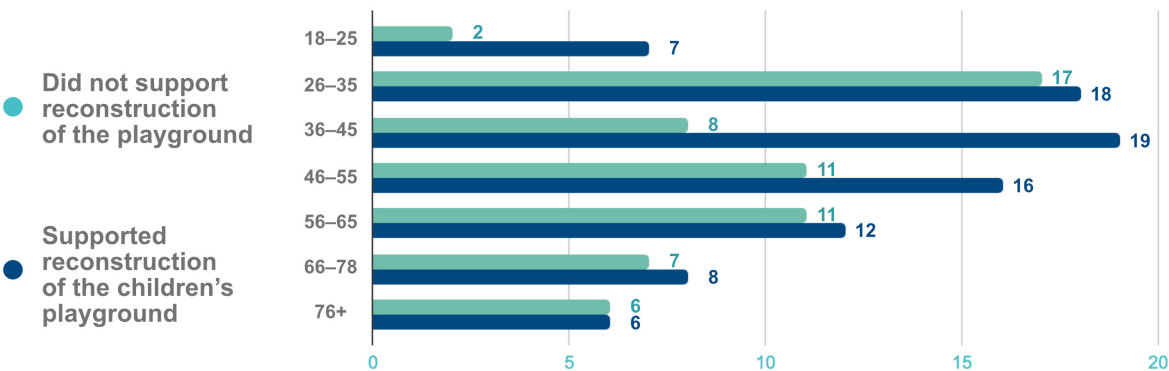


Note: The residents could answer this question by indicating more than one option without limitation.

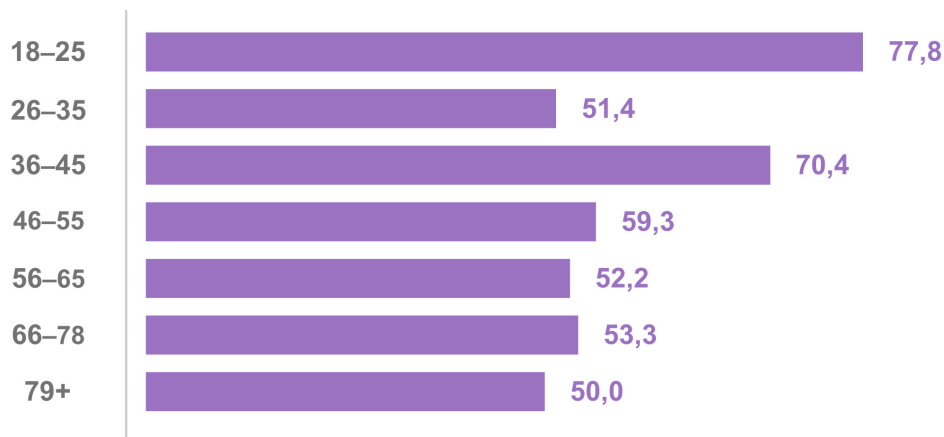
In our analysis we also were interested in knowing the percent of our respondents who want the children's playground to be reconstructed, broken down by the age group to which they belong. Looking at the answers by age group, the number of residents who supported improving the playground is indicated in bold-face type in

the table below. These responses should not be regarded as definitive – they do not mean that those who did not mention the playground did not want to improve it, but that they did not list it as a priority and placed more importance on other options among the alternatives we offered (chart 5).

Interest in Reconstruction of the Children's Playground by Age Group (Absolute Numbers of Responses)



The percentage of respondents in each age group mentioning reconstruction of the playground as a priority is as follows:

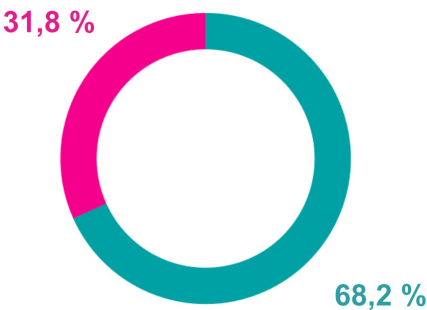
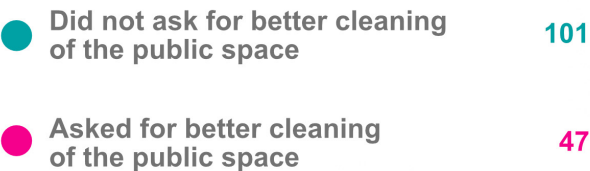


The above graph shows the percent of respondents in each age group that mentioned reconstruction of the children’s playground as a priority.

As the graph shows, at least half of the respondents in each age group mentioned reconstruction of the playground as a priority. Based on information obtained in the in-depth interviews, both non-Romani and Romani respondents said they favored reconstructing it. According to Low (Low 2023: 143), access to a good playground has a positive influence on child development, even in marginal neighborhoods. Young adults and those in the 36–45 age group expressed the most support for

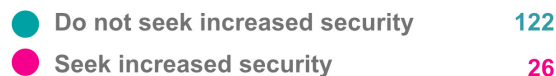
the playground. That is the group of present and future parents who place the most importance on the interests of very young and school-age children. Older residents might have more concern that additional play equipment would mean more children shouting in the outside areas and a less peaceful environment.

Our respondents frequently mentioned the need for improved maintenance of the public spaces and reconstruction of their pavement. Approximately one third of respondents expressed the opinion that the cleanliness of the public spaces should be improved (chart 7).



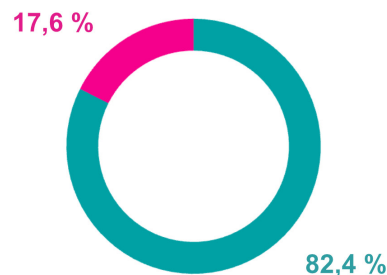
On the basis of the data we collected we can say that increasing security in the locality is not a priority.

A need for better security was mentioned by just under 18 % of our respondents. Not even the non-Romani



Both groups of housing estate residents – Roma and non-Roma – currently agree that the Pláček needs to be repaired. Both groups are of the opinion as well that the children's playground needs renovation. However, they disagree about whether both groups can use the public space together. The Romani residents, who mostly live in the small apartments belonging to the city in the

residents in the housing estate consider the Romani community to be such a danger that they would fear frequenting the Pláček (chart 8).



dorms, insist that they see no such problem and that of course non-Romani children are welcome to play on the playground. However, based on their earlier negative experiences, the non-Romani residents expressed reluctance and unease at using the public space in common with the Romani families.

Conclusion: The Housing Estate as a Laboratory

The locality we studied here is an exceptional area that not only has an interesting history, but also a demographically diverse population and strong potential for future development. The diversity of the residents is seen not only in their ages, but also in their social and ethnic backgrounds. The study provides an answer to the research question: How do different groups of residents claim the space known as Pláček? In a nutshell, it turns out that different groups of residents lay claim to public space in different ways, with their attitudes closely tied to their sense of ownership of the area. Apartment owners often perceive not just their units but also the surrounding space as “theirs,” and this perception underpins their desire for a quiet and orderly environment. Tenants, on the other hand, express concerns about limited access to these spaces and often feel uncertain or insecure about their right to use them. In this study we focused on three main issues:

1. **The perception of the space**, that is, how the residents perceive the area around the Pláček in the wider context of the entire housing estate. Many of the housing

estate's residents agree that it is an unusual district of the city, for the most part in a positive sense. They view the Pláček's bad reputation and the prejudice against it with bitterness. From our quantitative research it appears that the majority of our respondents have a positive attitude toward the housing estate, based on their agreement with the proposition that “I am at home here.” Many people comment that the locality has good potential for future development. It is clear that revitalization of the space is important to its residents. They support it and want to participate in it.

2. **The expectations associated with revitalization**, i.e. the improvements that the residents want and expect. In terms of their ideas about what to do with the area of the Pláček, the majority of residents are inclined towards the proposal to reconstruct the original playground. Residents would therefore like to return the space to its original purpose, or something similar to it. Forty-three percent of our respondents would like to see the addition of a sports field and outdoor gym (i.e. features for older children and young people, as well as ac-

tive adults). The survey also elicited quite a few opinions that called for making the area of the Pláček a more restful and relaxing place. In the qualitative part of our research, our informants mentioned the need for benches in particular and suggested places where they would like to have them located.

3. Fears about the renovation of the area and the risk of social conflict. There are negative aspects of revitalization that worry the residents. Mainly, they express fears related to the safety of the locality. In that regard, criminality, drugs, and conflicts arising in the context of neighborhood relations are the main things that were mentioned. The threat of exacerbating social differences in the locality is the basic perceived risk that we elicited in our research. Many citizens expressed concern that the reconstructed space would be occupied by only one group of residents. In that regard, the most frequently mentioned group was the residents of the dorms, especially the large Romani families who already spend a large part of their day in the area.

Pleasant public spaces contribute to the development of individuals and society as a whole. If properly main-

tained, they create a context for community life and contribute to the strengthening of social contacts in urban areas. They can support and contribute to an inclusive society by promoting positive individual experiences with others and acceptance of their differences, and by providing a platform for the exercise of distinctive cultural practices. However, public spaces do have a negative potential to build up and further entrench barriers between different social and ethnic groups.

We have clearly demonstrated that regardless of their ethnicity, the inhabitants of the area surrounding the Pláček unanimously agree on its potential as a place for socialization, especially of children. In the residents' eyes, it can also be a place for promoting wellbeing through sports and relaxation activities in a natural (even if somewhat artificial) environment. Public spaces that are sensitively developed with due respect to the requirements of all population groups have the potential to promote human solidarity and belonging. In them, we can share, learn, and play together without regard to ethnicity, and discover the different mother tongues and other characteristics of our neighbors.

NOTES:

1. To determine if the respondents were Roma, an established rule was used: either they present themselves as Roma, consider themselves to be Roma, or are perceived as Roma by other residents or other local actors, such as social workers etc. (cf. Gabal 2006: 10).
2. "Pláček" is a fictitious name of a former playground in a housing estate from the 1950s in an unnamed city. According to this playground, the closed part of the housing estate bears folk names such as "Pláček"/ "u Pláčku" etc. Throughout the text, clues leading to its unambiguous identification are deliberately concealed, which corresponds to the design of the research, in which we promised the informants, including city representatives and employees, anonymity.
3. Low-threshold facilities for children and youth provide services to children and youth at risk of social exclusion. The aim of the service is to improve the quality of their lives by preventing or reducing social and health risks related to their lifestyle, to enable them to better navigate their social environment and to create conditions so that they can address their adverse social situation. The service can be provided to individuals anonymously, and includes educational, training and activation activities, facilitating contact with the social environment, social therapeutic activities and assistance in exercising rights and legitimate interests. The service is provided free of charge.

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