Socio-spatial aspects of ageing in an urban context: an example from three Czech Republic cities

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study is to examine how older people make sense of the changing urban environment – that is, how they experience, perceive and interpret their everyday interaction with its materiality, as well as their social ties, networks and relations. The results, based on seven focus groups and 37 individual in-depth interviews with older residents of the three most populous Czech cities, show how older people maintain the continuity of their activities, autonomy and independence within the limits of their personal resources in an active relationship with a changing urban environment and within the post-socialist context. The research supports the results of former studies that emphasise the ability of older adults to negotiate their position and actively cope with change while they age in place.

KEY WORDS – ageing, urban environment, social change, post-socialist city, qualitative research, Czech Republic.

Introduction

Contemporary sociology is returning to the concept of *space* seen through the complex relation of its social and physical dimensions (Gieryn 2000). Gerontology has undergone the same *spatial turn* with the increasing impact of environmental gerontology in the context of demographic trends and urban change that structure the experience of ageing and old age (Ekstrom 1994; Kendig 2003; Wahl, Schiedt and Windley 2003; Wahl and Weisman 2003). In recent years, gerontology has been criticised for a lack of understanding of mesospatial–urban relations (Andrews and Phillips 2005; Kearns and Andrews 2005; Kendig 2003). To this is also related the attempt to overcome a certain anti-urbanism built into the basis of gerontology, as discussed by Phillipson and Scharf (2005), that is, a tendency to a one-sided negative evaluation of urban change and the assumption of the social

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exclusion of senior citizens (Laws 1993). There is also a strong ageist tendency in urban studies of interpreting the ageing of the urban populations in negative terms as a decline or decay of the neighbourhoods (Pain 1997). Nevertheless, internationally published papers that combine the new focus on the urban experience of ageing within the context of post-socialist cities are to a large extent missing (Kovács 2010; Steinführer and Haase 2007; Sýkorová 2008, 2012; Temelová and Dvořáková 2012; Vidovićová 2013).

One exception is Kovács (2010), who summarises five basic hypotheses relating to the position of senior citizens in the context of post-socialist cities: Kovács introduces the low residential mobility thesis, which states that a lower willingness on the part of senior citizens to move may be a result both of local housing market conditions, particularly low flexibility, and also of the higher emotional and health demands placed on older people by relocation (Fokkema, Gierveld and Nijkamp 1996). The second thesis points to the fact that older adults have been concentrated in old housing stock mostly in the urban centres, followed by the newly built housing estates at the outskirts. For our study, we use the framework of inner cities to focus on those parts of the urban environment where we can observe long-term continuities as well as ruptures, and where the symbolic change leading from less favourable and less-maintained places to more desirable and wealthy ones is most visible (Steinführer 2003). As Steinführer points out, residents ageing in place 'used to be a typical feature of socio-spatial differentiation during state socialism, due to the low level of residential mobility and the almost non-existent influx of younger urban dwellers' (Steinführer *et al.* 2010: 2337) who inhabited mostly the new prefabricated housing estates.

The privatisation thesis then follows on from the preceding one in assuming that older people have acquired their current housing mainly through the privatisation of formerly state- or municipality-owned apartments nationalised after the Second World War, which allowed them to acquire their current housing cheaply and thus placed them in a relatively advantageous position compared to generations obtaining their accommodation on the open market (Lux and Mikeszová 2012). Because of this type of housing allocation there can occur what Kovács calls housing over-consumption, that is the use of apartments which in terms of size exceed the needs or abilities of older residents. The final proposition is the dissatisfied trapped thesis, built on the findings of high-rise estates studies (Musterd and van Kempen 2007). Musterd and van Kempen distinguish here between 'unsatisfied springboard residents', who are planning to move out, 'satisfied springboard residents', who are considering moving out, 'grey middle', neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and finally 'unsatisfied trapped residents', who express a significant dissatisfaction both with their apartment and with their surroundings, but are either unable or unwilling to move out.

On the basis of the analysis of five selected post-socialist cities (Leipzig, Vilnius, St. Petersburg, Budapest and Sofia), Kovács (2010) states that there are marked differences between cities and that one cannot arrive at an unambiguous conclusion which might be applied to the 'post-socialist' city as a single explanatory model (*cf.* Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008; Ferenčuhová 2012); the impact of contemporary changes on the population of older people is to be conceived in a diversified manner. The qualitative and non-representative nature of the data in our research do not allow us to test these hypotheses, but they nevertheless form an important framework for our analysis on the ageing of the urban population.

Following this setting of the recent agenda in urban studies and social gerontology that calls for a more detailed insight into the 'attitudes, motivations and experiences of older people who are ageing in place' and for studies to 'deepen our understanding about the way in which cities are changing, and about the positive and negative contributions that the changes have on the quality of daily life in old age' (Phillipson 2007: 337), our contribution therefore aims to bring localised insights into this under-studied issue. The main research question is: How are contemporary urban changes perceived, experienced and dealt with by ageing inner-city residents in the post-socialist context? The subsidiary questions are: What meanings do older people in urban areas give to town spaces and their changes, and what meanings do they derive from them in their everyday life? Do they experience or interpret urban dynamics (specifically, the processes of revitalisation, regeneration or gentrification) as restrictive and exclusive, or as inclusive and enabling and, subsequently, what strategies do they apply to cope with them or to shape them?

To answer these research questions, we focus on the three most populated and dynamically changing Czech cities (Prague, Brno and Ostrava). In the paper, we bring a brief insight into the theories that have informed the formulation of our research questions and methodology. The Czech context is introduced as well as the methods and techniques used in the field work. The analytical part is then divided into sections according to the main thematic areas, in which the dominant narratives are discussed as well as the various coping strategies and activities of older people.

Theoretical framework

Urban change, place attachment and the experience of growing old in the neighbourhood

Some authors have described ageing as a 'shrinking of space' (see Nair 2005), meaning a reduction in the activity or functional radius of an

individual with respect to his/her higher attachment to the immediate environment, such as the local neighbourhood or house and flat (Hodge 2008). The quality of the neighbourhood and its social environment, such as having social partners and friends in the locality, significantly affects the life satisfaction of older people (Gabriel and Bowling 2004; Oswald *et al.* 2010). As Oswald *et al.* point out,

> the neighbourhood represents subjectively important places; housing is defined not only by objective physical risks and barriers, but also by the experience of the place one lives in. This involves the perceived indoor and outdoor aspects valued by the individual, such as having a nice view or having access to cultural interests in the neighbourhood, as well as place attachment, reflecting the personal bonding, on behavioural, cognitive, and emotional levels, as proposed by theories of place identity. (2010: 239)

Positive place attachment and the feeling of belonging represent a source of life satisfaction, especially when older people are facing declining health or are coping with the loss of important others. However, place may also be filled with negative meanings, anxieties and frustrations relating to other dimensions of its familiarity. At both poles, long-term residence in an environment is seen as an important factor (Oswald and Wahl 2005: 23), as it connects a resident to 'his or her place'. Rowles (1993) distinguishes various analytical dimensions of this relationship as autobiographical, physical and social insideness, that is, embodiment through control and empathy with the external environment (embodiment through rhythmicity and routines), day-to-day meeting with people and building one's own identity on the basis of long-term contact, shared memories and recollections, sometimes represented as 'nostalgia for past imagined communities' (Phillipson 2007: 326). At the pragmatic level, staying put can simply mean the possibility of autonomous control of one's own everyday activities (Wiles *et al.* 2012).

It is, however, clear that the dynamic nature of the urban environment can stand in contrast to these assumptions of the benefits of a stable environment for older people, particularly given the period of accelerated cultural and structural change which the post-socialist urban context represents. This instability may take the form of (1) direct change from one location to the other (*e.g.* as a consequence of forced relocation or personal choice), or when (2) the location itself changes while people are staying put. Both of these can lead to an improvement in the quality of life and satisfaction of an ageing individual as well as to social exclusion (Phillipson 2007). If we focus on the second kind of change in the urban environment, the risk of exclusion is usually associated with a marked deterioration and decline in the social status of a location (Scharf *et al.* 2005; Smith 2009), but it can be also associated with a significant increase in perceived social status, either

through revitalisation policies or, for example, commercial gentrification and the effects of economic globalisation (Phillipson 2007). However, the consequences of these changes can be ambivalent and depend both on their scale and pace, on perceived environmental press in the Lawtonian ecological sense, and on the personal competences of the individual (Smith 2009). According to Smith in her study on deteriorating neighbourhoods, the fundamental difference in the perception of the pressure of the environment depends above all on spirituality and faith as well as on life history, which act as intervening protective factors against external negative influences (Smith 2009; similarly Krause 2006). In their study of gentrifying neighbourhoods, Burns, Lavoie and Rose demonstrate that even if people can stay put, 'they may experience feelings of strangeness, insecurity, and social exclusion' (2012: 8) as a consequence of a limited financial accessibility to local services, the influx of a large number of strangers into the neighbourhood and the disappearance of the places of former community life. However, the positive effects of gentrification are represented by an improvement in the physical condition of the environment, an improvement in safety, a wider range of services, *etc.* Different perceptions of the impact of urban change depend upon cultural background, home ownership and the scope of weak social links reaching beyond the boundaries of a neighbourhood (Burns, Lavoie and Rose 2012).

Although the need for stability in the environment of an ageing individual stands in contradiction to the constantly dynamically changing urban environment, empirical studies show that this relationship is complex and it differs according to local contexts (Andrews and Phillips 2005; Burns, Lavoie and Rose 2012; Smith 2009). There is, therefore, a need for new concepts and empirical evidence based on different urban environments and cultural contexts (Phillipson 2007).

Locating the research in the Czech Republic: urban ageing in the post-socialist context

In the Czech Republic, the transformation processes after 1989 also played a crucial role in shaping the experience of growing old in urban neighbourhoods and new forms of risks and opportunities to individuals ageing in place were accentuated. These resulted from the sometimes contradictory cultural and political changes (Haase, Grossmann and Steinführer 2012; Haase *et al.* 2011) associated with the reorganisation of urban environments and also from changes to their spatial structures and functional organisation. The regeneration policies and practices of town districts, and the significant changes in home ownership as a result of the

transformation of housing markets to more neo-liberally and democratically oriented ones, also play an important role via the processes of privatisation, restitution and price deregulation (Borén and Gentile 2007; Lux and Mikeszová 2012; Lux and Sunega 2010).

Nevertheless, the impact of these changes on ageing urban populations is debatable: in the field of housing for example, on the one hand, the exclusion hypothesis has been supported by the fact of rising rents and overall housing costs (energy prices, loans for rebuilding, *etc.*), as well as fragmented, but intensified gentrification and increased spatial stratification (Kovács 2010) that put part of the ageing population under economic pressure and risk of displacement. According to Lux (2003), the Czech housing market was divided into two segments, described as 'privileged' and 'non-privileged': 'Strict rent control with open-term contracts and strong tenant protection was at the same time combined with a liberal system of rent setting with no restrictions on the terms of the contract and no effective system of tenant protection' (Lux and Mikeszová 2012: 79). This situation, combined with a lack of sheltered housing owned by the state or municipalities and little provision for the legal protection of older tenants, has brought considerable insecurity into the lives of the low-income segment of the senior population in the renting sector. These negative effects are multiplied by the changing structure of local retailing, and functional changes to local infrastructure, mainly from residential to commercial use, as, for example, in inner-city Prague: declining accessibility to everyday facilities, lower residential satisfaction with receiving social support from neighbours and declining confidence, or higher exposure to relocation urgency, have been the main negative perceptions by older residents (Temelová and Dvořáková 2012).

On the other hand, for many older people improvements in the current pension system and their economic position has placed them in a more favourable position than young families struggling with the new effects of the market economy, such as unemployment and the increasing costs of acquiring one's first home (Sýkorová 2007). People over 65 are also among the most satisfied proportion of the population in relation to the housing they occupy, while at the same time they reflect housing over-consumption (Lux 2005). In this context, an interesting phenomenon is the very low mobility of older people, referred to above. This is caused by cultural influences, the generally low mobility of the Czech population, and a strong attachment to place among the older residents. In the Czech Republic, older people have generally been living in their apartment for an average of 30 years (Vidovićová and Gregorová 2010) and 76 per cent indicate the desire to stay put (Kuchařová 2002). This is also reinforced by the situation in the housing market, through a combination of relatively high rents, a lack
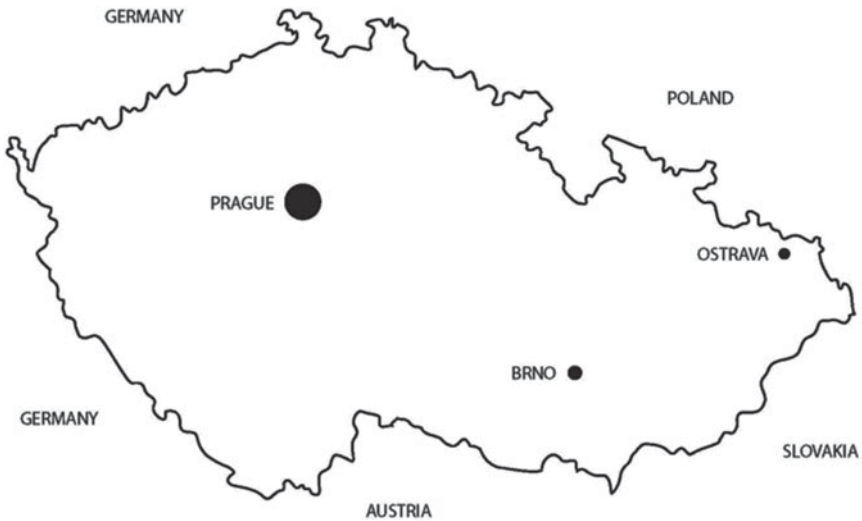
Figure 1. The Czech Republic in the Central European context. *Source*: Martina Zuzaňáková.

of available smaller apartments and an absence of economic measures to enable older people to buy their homes.

Methods

The empirical research consisted of two phases. In the first phase, focus groups with inner-city residents were organised in 2010. In the second phase, qualitative in-depth interviews with residents aged 60 and over in the three largest cities in the Czech Republic, Prague, Brno and Ostrava (Figure 1), were conducted in 2010 and 2012 (follow-up interviews). The 'inner city' was defined separately for each city according to previous geographical studies by Ouředníček *et al.* (2011) for Prague, Hruška-Tvrdý *et al.* (2010) for Ostrava, and Mulíček and Olšová (2002) for Brno. The selection of participants in each city was based on socio-demographic analysis and also on the type of built-up environment and housing.

Localities

Prague, as the capital of the Czech Republic with a large historical centre and a relatively compact and dense built-up environment, represents the 'global' city in our study in terms of its connection to flows of financial capital, the presence of international companies, and the attractiveness to diverse types of non-residing visitors (businessmen, tourists). In addition, new

TABLE 1. *Population of Prague, Brno and Ostrava in 2011 (census data)*

	Overall population	Age 0–14 (%)	Age 15–64 (%)	Age 65+ (%)	Average age	Age index
Prague	1,241,664	13.3	69.5	17.2	41.9	129.7
Brno	378,965	13.7	67.9	18.4	42.2	134.9
Ostrava	326,018	13.9	69.6	16.2	41.2	114.8

Source: Czech Statistical Office (2011).

international and Czech residents have come to the city in recent years. Brno and, to a large extent, Ostrava are typical post-industrial cities. Table 1 shows that the cities also significantly differ in terms of their population.

The capital and global position of Prague also creates specific conditions in its inner city that are mostly affected by significant urban change, such as patch gentrification (Sýkora 2009; Hamnett 2000), where the gentrifiers are identified as affluent foreigners or immigrants who run their businesses and buy properties in the central areas. This process is also visible in the other two cities, but with different patterns that are influenced by depopulation in the case of polycentric Ostrava (Hruška-Tvrdý *et al.* 2010) and the general decline in the retail function of the historical city centre of Brno (Mulíček 2009). Whereas the city of Brno was mostly a centre of light industry, today a number of universities play an important role in supporting research and intensifying pressure on the studentification of the inner city (through the services provided and the pressure on shared living in the rental sector) (Steinführer 2006; Haase *et al.* 2011). In Ostrava, mining and steel industries have prevailed, resulting in a worsening environmental situation but also in strong local identity linked to industries enhanced by the socialist ideology.

Research sample, techniques and data analysis

The research sample comprised 46 interviewees who participated in the focus groups and 37 face-to-face in-depth individual interviews with 40 urban dwellers. The snowball method of sampling was applied. In total, 27 women and 13 men were interviewed (including three couples), all aged between 62 and 95 years; the population examined was ethnically homogenous. The interviews lasted from 27 to 108 minutes, 63 minutes on average. All participants gave written informed consent. The detailed profiles of the interviewees is depicted in Table 2.

The interviewers were provided with a schedule that included open and supplementary questions to ensure coverage of the key topics

T A B L E 2. *Profile of 40 participants from 37 interviews*

	Prague	Brno	Ostrava
Gender:			
Women	11	8	8
Men	2	6	5
Total	13	14	13
Age:			
60–69	3	3	6
70–74	0	1	1
75–79	2	5	3
80–84	3	1	1
85–89	3	4	2
90+	2	0	0
Subjective socio-economic situation:[1]			
Very good (1, 2, 3)	3	2	4
Average (4, 5, 6, 7)	9	5	8
Very bad (8, 9, 10)	1	3	1
Subjective health[1]			
Very good (1, 2, 3)	1	2	1
Average (4, 5, 6, 7)	9	7	11
Very bad (8, 9, 10)	3	2	1
Subjective perception of health limits to mobility:			
No limiting problems	6	2	6
Some problems, but not serious	1	7	4
Serious problems reported	6	3	2
Legal relation to a current flat (number of interviews):			
Owners (including the family members)	2	3	1
Renters in public sector	4	3	7
Renters in private sector – still regulated	5	3	1
Renters in private sector – de/not-regulated	1	0	2
Members of cooperative	0	3	1
Years in the current house (number of interviews):			
Less than 20 years	5	1	7
20–49 years	3	4	4
50 years and over	4	5	1

Notes: The number of responses in each category does not correspond to the overall number of participants due to non-response. 1. Participants were asked to place themselves within the ten-point scale, 1=very good, 10=very bad.

(Gillham 2000). For the individual interviews, the opening research question was: 'Which street do you live in and what is your neighbourhood called? Could you tell us the story of how you came to live here?' For the focus group, the opening question asked more broadly: 'What is it like living in Prague/Brno/Ostrava? And how do you get on living in this neighbourhood?' The subsequent questions focused particularly on the perception of neighbourhood and inner-city change in terms of built-up environment, mobility and walkability, housing affordability, accessibility of shops, services and leisure activities, as well as urban greenery, perception of social

networks, perceived security, empowerment, local attachment and feeling of belonging. The order of questions during the interviews was different depending on the flow of the conversation and it was modulated in compliance with topics raised by the participants themselves or arising from collective discussion. In the focus groups, the formulation of questions was aimed more at generating a discussion and sharing experiences within the group, such as 'Do you think that life in this district of the city is easier or more difficult for senior citizens than it is for others and why?' The format of the individual interviews allowed a deeper insight into the everyday life of participants, asking for example: 'Could you describe for us a typical day?' During the interviews and focus groups, special attention was paid to the autonomous position of the interviewee: confidentiality and the voluntary nature and purpose of the research were covered by an informed consent form (Seidman 1998). Both the focus groups and the individual interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The research data were then completed with detailed field notes, including a brief analytical summary.

Transcriptions of the interviews were repeatedly read and coded in open coding mode and the main themes or patterns were identified for each interview, neighbourhood or city (Braun and Clarke 2006). The issues addressed in this paper are based on the thematic analysis of the material during which the main topics and patterns were identified, according to the paradigmatic model proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1999).

Results

Physical or spatial changes in town

For the participants, life in Prague, Brno and Ostrava does not mean experiencing 'institutional isolation' (Gans 1972), *i.e.* neither a substantial reduction in or qualitative changes to *living space* nor a significant decrease in personal autonomy as a result of the significant outflow of services in the context of restricted mobility. The negative characteristics of town and neighbourhood and the impacts of urban change were perceived as *limited spatially* and *temporally*: basic shops and services – in particular, health-care services – continue to remain 'on hand'; criminality is seen as concentrated in certain streets or around bars and gambling houses, for example, or in the evening or at night. In addition, these negative characteristics do not always have an effect on individually significant needs or activities (the mainten-ance of health, social contacts) and are quite *manageable* by means of various personal strategies (Sýkorová 2007). For most participants, *mobility* seems to be the main condition and requirement for avoiding spatial exclusion. If they are mobile, the participants could independently satisfy their needs

and perform everyday activities – in other words attach to their neighbourhoods and cities on an instrumental level (Wiles *et al.* 2012).

This finding relates to a strategy of self-help: the will and ability of older people to mobilise their own resources. In this respect, the results demonstrate the importance of reliable public transport, which enables ageing residents to maximise their practical living space – *i.e.* the area of overlap between living spaces and the local neighbourhood. Good systems of transport are also important for maintaining strategies such as economical housekeeping, as they allow access to cheaper goods in distant super- and hypermarkets. The strategy of social integration is also facilitated by reliable public transport as it allows social contact with relatives and friends outside the immediate locality and thereby supports older residents' autonomy (*see also* Birren 1969; Lawton 1980; Lawton and Kleban 1971; Musil *et al.* 1985).

If the participants interpreted the transformation of their neighbourhoods in a negative way, it was often with respect to *public interest*: whether the goods sold in shops or services provided were changing and whether new shops were emerging; whether shopping, office or entertainment complexes were built at the expense of older existing buildings; or whether functioning and financially accessible facilities or familiar remembered places (Collins 1981; Gieryn 2000) were deteriorating or vanishing. A very negative perception of change also occurred if changes were made at the expense of greenery or spaces designed for relaxation and informal meetings. Deterioration and depopulation of the city centre were perceived in stark contrast to the regeneration of some buildings and public spaces, particularly in Ostrava. The closing down of familiar, traditional places, old cafeterias or affordable popular sandwich bars in the city centre, was contrasted with the opening of a new shopping mall (Nová Karolina) next to the central zone.

The participants' critical interpretation of urban change was based on their perceptions of irrationality, waste and unrestraint, which they saw in the continuous construction of new buildings regardless of the 'abundance of available offices', 'only partly used buildings' and 'finished, beautiful, large' but still empty flats, that were left unoccupied because of their financial inaccessibility. Doubts about the value and usefulness of the construction of new offices and shopping complexes were raised by many of the research participants, in line with Davis' view that urban areas should be oriented towards the efficient use of rare natural resources and the development of public resources (libraries, museums, parks, *etc.*) as 'real alternatives to privatised consumerism' (Davis 2002 in Phillipson and Scharf 2005: 73). Many participants raised questions about whom these complexes were meant to serve; answers to their comments reflect *class-differential* perceptions of the effects of urban processes rather than age-based inequalities.

The participants nearly always identified changes in districts and neighbourhoods with the regeneration of houses or flats. They proudly pointed out 'beautified houses' as well as 'finely repaired blocks of flats'. This emphasis that was placed on regeneration is probably strengthened by the perceived contrast between today's colourful facades and the grey environments of the same towns during the period of state socialism. Indeed, this analysis suggests the importance of satisfying aesthetic, emotional, symbolic and psychological needs (Carp 1975; Lawton 1978; Phillips *et al.* 2005). In the words of the research participants: 'colourful houses influence people', 'care of an exterior ... cultivates the citizens', appearance helps identification with a place and nourishes a feeling of pride (Musil 1967; Musil *et al.* 1985).

However, the regeneration of houses or flats has a meaning other than just aesthetic improvement. Houses are 'nice' also because of the economic aspects of improvements in their physical state (after thermal insulation of the buildings and the installation of airtight windows and various meters, the occupants 'get so much money back' in comparison to the situation before reconstruction). Considering the decline in physical strength and increase in health problems that can accompany ageing, when 'climbing even one floor or mezzanine can present a great problem', the renovation of buildings, including barrier-free arrangements and the construction of lifts, *etc.*, supports mobility and, thus, independence.

However, older people still living in older unrenovated apartments, especially those from the pre-First World War period, report increasing difficulties with their everyday mobility. They also apply different strategies to cope with this situation – by activating their financial and social resources and competencies to change the situation within a *strategy of self-help*, or by applying the *strategy of economical house-keeping* or the *strategy of the distribution of force*, changing their everyday habits and practices to limit the costs resulting from the unsuitable conditions that they cannot change. These strategies usually lead to *environmental centralisation* of activities (Rubinstein 1989 in Peace, Kellaher and Holland 2006), such as turning off heating in some rooms, preparing food in advance to limit the time spent in cold kitchens, wearing more clothing on cold winter days and even 'taking old newspapers' with them so that they can sit on stairs and rest when no lift or bench is available.

Changes in home ownership

The housing conditions of older Czech people living in the three cities and their ability to control their immediate environment also vary according

to their home ownership status. Private or co-operative ownership, as the older residents in our research emphasised, brings 'peace of mind', 'safety in old age'; it is a 'great benefit'. Home ownership allows them to actively participate in decision making regarding the quality of housing, *e.g.* whether to carry out repairs and reconstructions in houses and flats, 'to renovate the house', because 'we'll spend the rest of our life here, so that it should be nice here, it should have a nice façade'; 'we willingly did everything ... to live well'. It also means *control* over housing costs, including efficiency of investment in the regeneration of houses and flats contrary to tenants, especially in restituted houses, determined more by fiat or rather licence and ignorance of their owners. It is also worth mentioning that the participants account for the difficulty of becoming a home owner to age-based discrimination: 'older people can't get a loan anywhere'. In a similar vein, Steinführer, Pospíšilová and Grohmannová (2009) relate the possibility of controlling financial investments in renovation to greater self-confidence among householders, and stabilisation through ownership is also stressed in other studies on the impact of urban change on older people (*e.g.* Burns, Lavoie and Rose 2012).

On the other hand, some participants viewed the process of privatisation more critically and step out from the 'ideology of ownership' (Lux and Mikeszová 2012), pointing out that many co-operatives and owners' associations have accrued debts to cover the renovation work on former municipal estates:

It's a time bomb ... the municipality just conveniently got rid of their responsibility, right? There have always been anxieties about the flats, but they just transferred them to the people ... and they passed on to the people complicated relations under complicated conditions.

Ownership then is seen as the delegation of financial insecurity to the residents, instead of the performance of a public duty by the municipality.

There was also strong difference in the perception of the fear of displacement by the residents in Prague compared to those in Ostrava, as the local conditions and housing markets differ. While in Ostrava, people frequently moved with a landlord's help (under Czech legislation, the landlord has to provide assistance to tenants when a contract is terminated due to the overall reconstruction of the building), their chances of finding a different and suitable flat to rent were perceived as quite high due to the depopulation of the city and the general availability of affordable flats to rent; however, in Prague, strong feelings of insecurity were reported, and inhabitants were involuntarily displaced from their flats, sometimes by illegal means (to worse ones in the same building or to sheltered municipal housing when it was available, after struggling with new 'foreign' owners).

Change of inhabitants – weakened local social networks?

Regarding the transformations of 'their' neighbourhoods, the participants pointed out changes in the inhabitants of buildings or neighbourhoods, but they usually did not describe such changes as the displacement or relocation of older people and their 'replacement' by newcomers of a higher social status. (Prague city centre is an exception, as mentioned above.) Changes in demographical composition are regarded mostly as 'natural circulation': the departure of their peers was explained by the need to move closer to, or in with, other relatives or by death – 'when the old die the young sub-let the flat or move in'. Participants living in the historic centre of a town expressed their concern about its 'ageing': '[we] the elderly want to stay and spend the rest of our lives here ..., the new people ... don't want to move to the centre of the town', or cannot do it due to financial reasons.

In Prague, Brno and Ostrava, a particularly sensitive issue for participants was the sub-letting of purchased flats. 'Perfect strangers' who use such flats present a 'problem' to older people because of the encroachment of different lifestyles and behaviour that does not meet seniors' traditional ideas of responsible, committed communities and neighbourly solidarity ('it's not possible to agree on anything with them' regarding 'the maintenance of the house, tidiness, they don't give a damn'). The strong normative evaluation of new neighbours revealed moral expectations about what a good neighbour should be, which 'the new ones' generally did not meet. The participants claimed that they '[could not] find anyone among them who would offer help'; newcomers were usually seen as unreliable: 'you can't rely on them'; the category of 'good neighbour' did not match with someone who 'cares only about herself/himself'. For some participants, the image of a good neighbour was constructed within the framework of *nostalgic* feelings about past communities (Phillipson 2007): for past common interest in 'public matters', a willingness to co-operate, social cohesion, times when neighbourly relations 'were a bit better', children were better mannered, *etc.*

Some newcomers neither fit into the socio-cultural order nor meet the expectations of 'proper' behaviour, but they also represent new entrants to the housing market, with an ability to pay the higher costs of renting larger flats with deregulated rents using the *strategy of co-habitation*. There was no direct and only one case of indirect evidence of senior non-institutionalised co-housing for social reasons, in which seniors would apply for the same scheme as students within the *strategy of economical housekeeping*. Institutional co-housing for older people in the Czech Republic has never been realised, but the idea is increasingly being discussed (*cf.* Bamford 2005).

In this context, the participants reflected on the limited opportunities to enter into neighbourly relationships. Fast or frequent changes in the

composition of residents, in combination with the physical–spatial dimensions of homes (Lawton and Simon 1968 in Wahl and Lang 2003), reduce their chances of meeting new neighbours and developing closer relationships. In high-rise buildings people get in the lift on the ground floor, get out on the top floor; the participants did not even notice there is someone 'new', or they noticed only those with inappropriate behaviour. The results reveal a feeling of losing control and the perception of a threat from 'strangers'.

The research findings support the thesis of the *selectiveness of social relations in later life*, or an actively applied selective strategy: older people choose non-family contacts and relationships which support their positive conception of self-identity and its continuity, and these relationships resemble those with their closest relatives. With the help of long-term personal relationships and familiarity, 'they can still be the same unique and competent persons for the significant others as they used to be' (Sýkorová 2007: 214). As a consequence of this selectivity, the participants expressed greater satisfaction with neighbourly relationships. These results demonstrate that there can be advantages to urban life, consisting of the 'possibility to control the desirable level of social interaction', as pointed out by Musil (1967: 223) and others.

A strong attachment to place was also part of the social bonds as the 'native' participants were 'simply glad they live in Ostrava', '[they] like living in Brno', 'we feel blissful in Prague'. Their family or work biography (they got married here, brought up their children, found a satisfactory job in their productive age) and attachment, social anchorage (they have spent all their life 'in one place'; 'they are used to it'; 'you can hardly transplant an old tree') tied them to their places. Thus, urban areas can be desirable places to grow old in. Moving may not be seen by many as beneficial and is 'useless' mainly with regard to their age and capacities. 'It's not worth it', as one Prague resident said: 'I'm 90, so I won't move anywhere now'.

Conclusions

The results of our study demonstrate the capacity of older residents living in inner cities to cope with changes in the urban environment and maintain a level of control through the use of different strategies (*e.g.* the strategy of self-help, the strategy of economical housekeeping, and social integration). Urban older residents refer to dynamic change in their neighbourhoods, but perceive and interpret the effects of this transformation both as limiting as well as limited spatially and temporally. The negative effects are mostly connected with the changing structure of retailing, the lack of affordable goods, the disappearance of familiar and popular places (cafés, restaurants), and the transformation of the local population due to the 'natural' processes

of birth and death, as well as the displacement of older people: 'we are the last ones here'. The key factor that enables urban older adults to actively overcome the negative effects of these changes is mobility, dependent on affordable and accessible local public transport or the social ties of the individual. This points to the importance of agency, but also at the same is a warning with regards to the negative impact on those urban older adults whose mobility options are or will be significantly limited as a consequence of health changes. The level of education of older adults did not make major distinctions among our participants, which is in itself a stimulus for the direction of further research. A more visible differentiation was derived from their family situation, whereas spirituality (Smith 2009), for example, did not play an important part in their narratives.

Nonetheless, older adults were clearly differentiated by tenure status: the impact of post-socialist transformations previously referred to are strongest in the field of housing, as a consequence of privatisation and restitution. The division into segments of 'privileged' apartment owners and 'non-privileged' tenants (Lux and Mikeszová 2012) is strongly evident in the urban population of older adults. Home ownership divides them into those who feel safe and those who are dealing with the financial pressure of the deregulation of rents, not only in private housing, but also markedly in public housing. Nevertheless, many privatised flats and houses have received little investment in the past, and this can put the new owners under financial pressure.

Returning to the last of Kovács's theses on the situation of older residents in the context of post-socialist cities (Kovács 2010), older adults from our research do not appear to be 'unsatisfied trapped' residents (Musterd and van Kempen 2007). Significant key factors include satisfactory, spatially achievable social resources, a long duration of stay in the locality, thereby offering the advantage of close familiarity with the local environment and options for routinely managing it via cognitive resources – that is, those factors, which according to Musterd and van Kempen's research, increase the likelihood of residents being characterised as satisfied stayers. Nevertheless, it is clear that the lower financial resources generally available to older adults and the Czech housing market situation do not allow them to move into homes suited to the needs of the late phase of the household life cycle.

In central Prague, the narratives were focused more on frequent direct or mediated experiences with the negative consequences of urban changes and with a fear of forced relocation, while in Brno the narratives centred on the negative impact of studentification. In Ostrava, the depopulation of the urban centre and the disappearance of local communities based on previous spatial interconnection of work and housing in the context of an industrial

city was a key factor. There is a further dividing line resulting from a comparison of conditions in the contemporary 'post-socialist' city with the city under socialism. Compared to residents of Prague and Brno, older adults from Ostrava perceive contemporary life in the city as worse, exceptionally different in their eyes from that in socialist Ostrava, the once favoured 'steel heart of the Republic'. For many people, the industrial recession and decline in population mean a loss in social prestige for the city, where 'the lights have gone out'.

Thus, the results of our data are mixed, as the process of post-socialist urban change is complex and has diverse impacts on the ageing populations of large towns (Haase *et al.* 2011; Kovács 2010). On the one hand, there are many features of the housing and social environment that enable older adults to stay put and age in place; reconstruction and renovation are having positive effects on the everyday lives of urban older people, producing enabling outcomes in terms of securing more liveable environments (such as the installation of lifts, the construction of pavements, *etc.*). On the other hand, the results call for a deeper examination of the impact of urban transformation on the ageing population, especially in areas of forced housing relocation, which should not be underestimated. In the context of urban ageing, attention should be paid to the accessibility of public spaces, the reduction of pollution, and to the affordability of housing and transport, all of which can enable older adults, especially those who experience increased frailty, decreased mobility, illness or poverty, to stay put or voluntarily move and actively cope not only with the changes brought about by contemporary urban change, but also with the ageing process itself.

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