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# **Comfort, identity and fashion in the post-socialist city: materialities, assemblages, and context**

*Mark Jayne and Slavomíra Ferenčuhová*

**Abstract:** This paper works at the intersection of three bodies of writing; theories relating to fashion, identity and the city; debate relating to urban materialities, assemblages and context; and cultural interventions advancing the study of post-socialism. Drawing on empirical research undertaken in Bratislava, Slovakia, we unpack a blurring of public and private space expressed through clothing. In contrast to elsewhere in the city, in Petržalka, a high-rise housing estate from the socialist period, widely depicted as anonymous and hostile since 1989, residents are renowned for wearing ‘comfortable’ clothes in order to ‘feel at home’ in public space. We describe the relationship between fashion, identity and comfort as an everyday ‘political’ response to state socialism and later the emergence of consumer capitalism. We argue however, that by considering materialities, assemblages and context that studies of fashion and consumer culture can offer more complex political, economic, social, cultural and spatial analysis. To that end, we show how personal and collective consumption bound up with comfort and city life can be understood with reference to changing temporal and spatial imaginaries and experiences of claiming a material ‘right to the city’.

**Key words:** post-socialism, consumption, assemblages, materiality, context, fashion, comfort

## **Introduction**

This paper shows that study of consumption and consumer culture focused on materialities, assemblages and context has much to offer theoretical and empirical understanding of the ways people claim a ‘right to the city’. The concept developed by Lefebvre (1968) in the late nineteen-sixties has been recently rediscovered by critical urban theorists and has also become a rallying call for transformative political and social movements (Harvey 2008; Brenner et al 2012). Schmits (2012:58) for example suggests that the legacy of Lefebvre’s writing on collective action has been to infuse critical urban thinking with an interest in ‘everyday life, the banal, the ordinary ... [and that] changing

everyday life: this is the real revolution ... [where] any point has the potential to become central and be transformed into a place of encounter, difference and innovation'. At the same time, the emergence of writing on materialities and assemblages relating to 'collective consumption' such as housing, water, sanitation and so on has taken a different route towards similar critical ground. The post-structuralist writing of theorists such as Latour (2005) and Deleuze and Guattari (1988) has highlighted how human and non-human actors come together in urban political and social struggles (McFarlane 2009, Farias 2010, Dovey 20011, Farias 2011). In this paper, we work at the intersection of this writing and in doing so we also engage with Lefebvre's (2009: 148) argument that 'limiting the world of commodities is key to the advancement of radical democracy' (Lefebvre, 2009: 148). Focusing on 'individualized' clothing consumption we investigate the extent to which productive 'collective' social relations and experiences allow citizens to claim a material 'right to the city'.

More specifically we focus on the relationship between fashion and identity in public spaces in Petržalka, a high-rise housing estate in Bratislava, Slovakia. We show that wearing 'comfortable' clothing by diverse socio-economic groups and across generations in Petržalka is a way that citizens make public spaces more 'homely', an expression of collective local identity and 'belonging', formulated in opposition to individualized 'petit-bourgeois' consumption dominant elsewhere in the city. Ethnographic evidence is presented from participant observation in public/private spaces and fifteen in-depth interviews with Petržalka residents, as well as five with residents from elsewhere in Bratislava. To ensure anonymity respondents have been allocated pseudonyms.

Interviews were recorded and were analysed using conventional qualitative techniques. The quotes used in the text are verbatim and editing is highlighted.

The interviews were completed and transcribed by Ferenčuhová, in Slovak. Working across two languages was a challenge to the authors and significant time was spent in developing an understanding of the detail, nuance and ‘context’ of the empirical evidence and its use as part of an overall argument presented in this paper (Smith 1996; Birbili 2000). The findings from the interviews were triangulated with reference to evidence collected through participant observation. The respondents were selected to mirror the socio-economic profile of Petržalka (SNS, 2010) and were recruited through the participant observation. Respondents from beyond Petržalka were recruited via Ferenčuhová’s existing research networks. Semi-structured interviews took place in respondents’ homes or commercial venues such as cafes and pubs. The interview schedules were designed to generate findings relating to a broad range of geographies of consumption, including shopping, food, alcohol, home decoration, leisure activities and so on, associated with domestic, commercial and public spaces and places in Petržalka and beyond (see Ferenčuhová and Jayne 2014). However, the findings presented here focus on the consumption practices identified by residents, and recognized by non-residents, as a mundane practice but nonetheless a defining characteristic of everyday life in Petržalka, the wearing of ‘comfy clothes’ in public space.

The paper begins by reviewing theoretical and empirical writing from across the social sciences relating to fashion and identity. We then argue that a focus on fashion and urban

identity through the lens of assemblages, materiality and context offers more complex political, economic, social, cultural and spatial analysis. To that end, subsequent sections engage with the wearing of comfy clothing during both the socialist era and the emergence of variegated capitalism since 1989. We conclude by discussing how the wearing of comfortable clothing is an everyday ‘political’ response to changing temporal and spatial imaginaries and experiences of political and economic change as citizens claim a material ‘right to the city’.

### **Theorising urban fashion, consumption and consumer culture**

It will be of no surprise to fashion, consumption or urban theorists that wearing ‘comfortable’ clothing in public spaces; pyjamas, sportswear, and other clothing most often thought as only being acceptable to wear ‘at home’, is a feature of urban life around the world. For example, in Shanghai, Iossifova (2012: 202-2003) describes how local customs such as ‘wearing pyjamas in public, drying blankets on the street and spitting, for instance [are] being portrayed as backward or rural ... [edit] ascribed to the residents of ‘old residential areas, by the Government and the media’ (see Figure 1) . In the UK there have been numerous examples of ‘comfy clothing’ causing controversy. For example, in Liverpool it is popular for women, in preparing for the weekly ‘big night out’ on Fridays and Saturdays, to wear comfortable clothes *and* walk around the city with ‘curlers in their hair’ (see Figure 2). In Middlesbrough (BBC 2011) parents who wear pyjamas when taking children to school and who attend school parent/teacher meetings in their nightwear have been criticised, with it being noted that they ‘drop them [their

children] off in the morning and are collecting them wearing the same pyjamas’ suggesting that this practice is creating a ‘bad impression’. In Belfast, jobseekers have been banned from wearing pyjamas at the local social security office, and in Cardiff a supermarket has outlawed ‘night ware’ in its aisles (*Irish Central* 2012). The trend of wearing comfy clothing in public spaces is also prevalent in the affluent upper east side of New York City with fashion conscious women and teenagers parading their Louis Vuitton and other designer pyjamas on the streets of Manhattan. This fashion is not however new, with a headline in the *New York Times* in 1929 highlighting, ‘Court sanctions pyjamas in the street’. The article discusses how a man was arrested only to be released by a judge who warned the police that, ‘Neither you nor I are censors of modern fashion’ (Manjoo 2012). While negative moral values assigned to these consumption practices are generally articulated around the lines of class, gender and ethnicity the geographies relating to wearing comfy ‘clothes’ in urban public spaces clearly resonate around the world and requires further consideration.

**[Figures 1 and 2 near here]**

Figure 1: A scene from the past? Wearing pyjamas in public spaces in Shanghai  
(Source: Deljana Iossifova)

Figure 2: Scouse women ‘at home’ in Liverpool City Centre  
(Source: Bethan Evans)

Writers such as Veblen (1899), Simmel (1957), Benjamin (1982), Hebdige (1979), Wilson (1985) and Maffesoli (1996), to name but a few, have long articulated the social and psychological processes relating to bodily adornment. Fashion has been described as

‘decadent and frivolous’ but nonetheless part of a ‘civilization’ process, that Simmel, describes as ‘dialectic performance of fashion’, a continual search for ‘newness’ (1957: 106). More recently, theorists have debated ‘the end of individualism’ and the emergence of a ‘time of tribes’ where membership is not necessarily orientated around traditional social structures but consumption, fashion and lifestyle (Maffessoli 1996). This work has signposted the relationship between fashion and specific urban cultural and historical contexts and the importance of pursuing ‘comparison, emulation and differentiation [that] are most noticeably apparent in the rapid changes that characterize systems of industrial production’ (Cannon 1998: 23).

Elizabeth Wilson (1985), for example, considers fashion as essential to modernity, spectacle and mass communication. A key focus of Wilson’s (1985) work has been to identify how fashion emerged in archetypal modern cities. In nineteenth century Paris and twentieth century New York, Wilson describes how industrialism brought about new complicated bourgeois ‘codes of dress’, available to buy in arcades and department stores, and later in decentred suburbia, where ‘exclusivity and chic belonged to metropolitan life; dowdiness to the provincial backwaters’ (Wilson 1985: 154). Wilson maps out histories of fashion from the pre-industrial world, through the excesses of aristocrats, and the diverse range of trends associated with the ascendancy of urban middle-classes. In terms of the latter, Wilson describes the emergence of a range of materials (including cotton, calico and muslin) related to ideals of thrift, work and sobriety and particularly the wearing of black suits by men as well as the work of designers such as Coco Channel and Claire McCardell, who from the 1930s onwards

revolutionized the way that women dressed through the use of design and fabric. In particular Wilson (1985: 41) highlights McCardell's use of 'tights, flat shoes and soft easy styles', as being key points in the emergence of more 'comfortable' ways of dressing.

Recent writing has built on these ideas in order to consider the relationship between fashion production and consumption in specific spaces and places (see for example, Entwistle 2000, Breward et al 2006). Studies have focused on a diverse array of contexts and topics, for example, fashion in junior schools in UK (Swain 2002), fashion in late Qing period in Shanghai with reference to sexuality, desire and mixing of 'western' and Chinese styles (Zamperini 2003) and 'postmodern' style in Milan (Bovone 2006). Bernard (1996: 65-66) considers the pleasures of feeling clothes on the skin and Colls' (2004) discusses the ways women feel comfortable in their clothes and in store changing rooms. However, while a diverse range of writing about fashion and identity located in specific urban spaces and places exists there has been a relative lack of engagement with the symbolic, material, emotional and embodied relationships between fashion *and* the city. A notable exception is the work of Borden (2001) who focuses on skateboarders' baggy jeans and hooded tops which allow ease of movement facilitating a material relationship between their bodies, skateboarders and urban infrastructure. Holliday (1999), Moran and Skeggs (2004) also discuss the consumption of comfortable clothes in domestic spaces for lesbians and gay urbanities, who not always able to visibly express their sexuality through fashion in public spaces (see Shove 2003; Miller 2008). Such



work compliments Mort's (1996) depiction of hidden (and not so hidden) codes of fashion which constitute masculinity and sexuality in urban spaces and places.

It is against the backdrop of this writing on fashion and consumer culture that we respond to calls to re-materialize urban studies. Latham and McCormack (2004: 703) suggest that a focus on assemblages of human and non-human actors can 'multiply the pathways along which the complex materialities of the urban might be apprehended'. Drawing on the post-structuralist writing of Latour (2005) and Deleuze and Guattari (1988), work on urban networks, practices and spaces have sought to speak 'not to static arrangement or a set of parts, whether organized under some logic or collected randomly, but to processes of arranging, organizing, fitting together ... where assemblage is a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims to a territory' (McCann and Ward 2011: 12). Engagement with this writing has been argued to have dramatically 'changed urban research' (Farias and Bender 2009), allowing focus on interaction of human and non-human actors in order to better understand the complexity and openness of cities and the ways in which cities are assembled and disassembled. Theorists have thus started to engage with 'the multiple spatial networks that any city is embroiled in, and to ... [allowing consideration of] the full force of those networks and their juxtaposition in a given city upon local dynamics' (Amin 2002, 112).

For example, Colin McFarlane (2009) considers composites of place-based exchanges of ideas, knowledge's, practices, materials and resources. McFarlane (2009) describes 'collective consumption' such as housing and sanitation in terms of re-assembled socio-

material practices that are diffuse, tangled and contingent being constituted by a diverse number of groups, collectives and by extension agencies in order to conceive of ‘power as multiple co-existences ... [and that] assemblages denote not a central governing power, nor a power equally distributed, but power as plurality in transformation’ (2009: 562). McFarlane (2011) focuses on group exchanges involving people, materials, resources, histories and struggles, and calls for an approach where multiple concerns of space and power are understood as open to multiple spatial imaginaries and practices.

Theoretical and empirical progress in studying materialities and assemblages has not however been without controversy. For example, in calling for assemblages research to take seriously underlying logics and inequalities of capitalist accumulation, Brenner et al (2011: 227) welcome the ‘innovative, intellectually adventurous impulse behind recent assemblage-theoretical interventions’; is cautiously optimistic about the empirical foci, but suggests that assemblage writing downplays the ‘context of contexts’ and thus fails to adequately grasp how capitalism shapes contemporary urbanization. Other writers have offered varying levels of support for assemblage thinking and its critics. For example, Dovey (2011) applauds the possibilities that assemblages has to ‘nudge’ critical urban theory outside a political economy framework, asserting that understanding of urbanization is more complex than focusing on capitalism as a root cause of all urban practices and processes. Dovey further argues that assemblage urbanism seeks to overcome tendencies in critical urbanism to resort to hierarchies of scale which valorize the large (e.g. global capital) over the small in a manner that grasps the complexities and messiness of ‘the urban’. Simone (2011a: 330) similarly argues that capitalist logics do

not provide exhaustive accounts, and that writers must consider how urban life in specific sites takes place and ‘gets done’, ‘through a lens of domination, commodification and dispossession ... [via concern with] iterative and opaque processes of adaptation, hesitation and collaborations’.

In response to Brenner et al (2011), McFarlane (2011) suggests that study of materialities and assemblages does not sidestep or displace political economy, pointing to ‘artificial divisions’ in Brenner et al’s critique of a divide between political-economy and post-structural thinking that they impose in their review of assemblages writing. McFarlane further points to the ways in which assemblages offers a set of approaches to challenge capitalism by understanding the effect of socio-material practices rather than as an underlying or essential logic, in short engaging with the ‘context of contexts’ without erasing the complexity and contingency of urban change and struggle. To a large degree, Brenner et al are overly quick to criticize a body of writing that is at a relatively earlier stage of development in comparison with the traditions of ‘geopolitical economy’ research that they speak from. Moreover, Brenner et al (2011) sidestep the work of theorists such Rao et al (2007); De Boeck (2011) and Simone (2011a) who have been interested in urban assemblages as a vital component in understanding spatial tactics of capitalist accumulation. These theorists focus on the coming together of architectural materials and the re-assembling of urban imaginaries through practices of construction and occupation, production and consumption, forms of sociabilities, social relations, and politics in terms of specific spaces and places and their broader ‘contexts’. For example, Simone (2011a: 364) highlights how ‘ports, municipal administrations, bus terminals,

‘offshore’ industrial plants, back office processing zones, large-scale low-income and middle class housing developments and universities ... [are] domains where politics, culture, economy and techniques are potentially folded in many different ways and as sites of possibility to take urbanism in different directions’. In the remainder of the paper we contribute to this theoretical and empirical terrain.

### **Comfort, identity and fashion: public/private space in socialist Petržalka**

In unpacking interpenetrations of political, economic, social, cultural and spatial practices and processes bound up with wearing comfortable clothing in Petržalka we also contribute to the advancement of social and cultural understanding of post-socialism. Research into post-socialism and post-socialist urbanity has, especially since the 1990s, predominately focused on theorizing political and economic changes associated with the emergence of capitalism. Although offering much to understanding urban change in Central and Eastern Europe and other post-socialist countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Ferenčuhová (2011: 66) argues that local thinkers have lacked ‘ambition to contribute to urban theoretical debates’ more broadly. As Ferenčuhová and Jayne (2014) suggest theoretical and methodological advances through critical Marxism, feminism, post-colonial and post-structural approaches have had little impact on the direction of post-socialist urban thinking. Such comments notwithstanding, a small body of writing has sought to address this imbalance. For example, researchers have analysed changing urban landscapes, focusing on (re)definitions of social and cultural forms and practices in relation to political and economic change (Czepczyński 2008; Stenning 2000; Ferenčuhová 2009, 2011; Bodnár 1998; Bitušíková 1998; Smith 2002). Hörschelmann

and Stenning (2008: 355) have also championed ethnography in post-socialist studies in order 'to answer some of the difficult demands of researching the trans-local flows and connections in which most lives are enmeshed globally, but can none the less *locate* itself along particular intersections, thus maintaining awareness of positionality and not eroding the difference that space makes'. When read together this work shows how complexities of post-socialism can be productively considered through 'lived experience' (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008: 345).

In these terms, while Petržalka has attracted academic interest as an archetypal Central Eastern European Socialist era mass housing estate built during the 1970s (Stenning et al 2010), it is important to note Boroš (2010) view of Petržalka as a symbolic site of nation building following the unification of Slovakia and the Czech Republic after World War Two. During this period, urban planning for the newly unified nation of Czechoslovakia was focused the capital city of Prague followed by attention to Brno, the second largest Czech city and also Bratislava. While development of Bratislava and Brno was underpinned by physical and economic growth, Ferenčuhová (2011) argues that the political imperatives for Bratislava to become the 'second city' of Czechoslovakia, was vital to ensure the involvement of Slovaks in buying into a unified national identity. As part of that project Petržalka became home to 'immigrants' from all over Slovakia, relocated to Bratislava as part of state urbanisation and industrialization planning programmes. Young people and families from diverse socio-economic backgrounds populated the newly built high-rise apartments of Petržalka and while the current population of 116,993 inhabitants can be characterised by increasing numbers of

residents who are economically less well off, the demographic structure of Petržalka still reflects the socio-economic mix of residents that characterised the early years of the housing estate (SNS 2010).

Our findings show that the wearing of comfortable clothes in public spaces in Petržalka, was an attempt by newly arriving residents to make public spaces ‘work for themselves’. Informality and appreciation of personal ‘comfort’ was noted by respondents are being related to physical separation from the rest of the city (by the river Danube and a motorway) and because of the ‘estates lacks of architectural beauty’ (see Figures 3 and 4). This point was made by Babeta (Female, 60, Professor) who then went onto describe her own surprise when, while moving into an apartment in Petržalka witnessed a conversation between two neighbours dressed in negligees ‘shouting’ across the street, from the window of one high-rise building to another and František (Male, 65, retired) who recounts how residents claimed the newly built quarter ‘as their own’:

people present themselves as ‘being in Petržalka’ and they behave accordingly [edit] ... They have to try and feel at home in Petržalka and they often behave as if in their own kitchen. [edit] ... because everyone knows each other and lives so close together in the flats that all look the same ... [edit] they have no scruples to go out in tracksuits, or in shorts, to the street, or to the shop [edit] ... Petržalka, its public spaces, are part of their home [edit] ... If they went downtown [to the city centre], they wouldn’t dress like that, but here, they do [edit] ... Here whether it is school kids, middle-class, or loafers it doesn’t matter [edit] ... They think this is their place and they set the rules...

This quote highlights an expression of comfort as a key part of a ‘collective’ identity in Petržalka and the ‘fuzziness’ of the public and private space. The wearing of comfortable clothes thus represents and is performative of a boundary crossing, a ‘moral’ logic of

encroachment, rather than being ‘taking possession of public space in a selfish way, it’s more like extending that you give your own space to the public space’ (Bromley 2004: 294). Public and private thus do not emerge as neatly exclusive or exhaustive categories but where ‘popular meanings can be produced through dialogical encounters ... [with people looking to] the material form of the site, and its location, in order to discern the intent of the space and thus shape a moral and aesthetic response to it’ (Bromley 2004: 294).

**[Figures 3 and 4 near here]**

Figure 3: The Motorway that connects/divides Petržalka with/from the rest of Bratislava  
(Source: Mark Jayne)

Figure 4: The River Danube, a boundary between Petržalka and the rest of Bratislava  
(Source: Slavomíra Ferenčuhová)

Reflecting on everyday life in the socialist era, respondents also talked about the ways in which clothes were too expensive, less fashionable than western clothes, that there was a lack of choice and moreover that clothes were often ‘uncomfortable’ to wear:

in the 1960s and 1970s [edit]... When I bought Italian shoes for 400 crowns, unfortunately I couldn’t afford to buy trousers at the same price, jacket at the same price, shirt at the same price, tie at the same price, raincoat at the same price so I only could buy some of these. Very few people at this time could afford to buy a whole outfit [edit] ... Then, more things became available in seventies and early eighties but were even more expensive ...[edit] to afford fashionable clothing meant not begin able to afford something else. If you had a good salary you could afford eating and some clothes, or, if poorly paid, some people bought clothing only, and didn’t eat ...

František (Male, 65, retired)

women did not have boutiques here, but we always had fashion magazines. I used to make clothes for my kids and for myself [edit]... when my sister went to

England [in the 1960s] they said – yes, Slovak girls are very beautiful, but they wear very ugly skirts

Babeta (Female, 60, Professor)

Babeta also commented on the texture of clothing fabrics suggesting ‘the dress used to bite’, and that being able to dress in ‘comfy’ clothing when back ‘at home’ in Petržalka was ‘something of a relief’ from having to wear ‘biting’ clothing when at work. In these terms, the wearing of comfortable clothing in Petržalka can be understood not only as a ‘local’ response to the assemblages that constituted the symbolic, built infrastructure of nationalistic Socialism and materialities everyday life in a modernist housing estate, but to what McFarlane (2011a: 219) calls cosmopolitanism as a kind of ‘worldliness’ which takes four relational forms:

as ‘a *knowledge*, of how difference might be negotiated or how mutuality across differences might operate; as a *disposition*, either as progressive orientation to urban cultural diversity or as regressive exclusionary sensibility replied in relation to other cultures; a *resource* as means of coping and getting by, surviving and managing uncertainty in the city; and finally as, an *ideal*, openness to and celebration of urban diversity and togetherness to be worked towards

These relational forms are clearly present in imaginaries and experience of living in Petržalka, acknowledged both locals and non-residents and performed through materialities of ‘comfortable’ clothing.

For instance, respondents suggested that elsewhere in the city, such informal dressing in public spaces was frowned on as a signifier of ‘lack of culture’ or ‘rural-like character’



but in Petržalka familiarity and informality expressed via ‘comfy’ clothing was celebrated as a marker of identity:

Well, yes! That relaxed attitude. Everyone knows each other. I find it fantastic [edit] ... if one guy is on drugs and the other has a university degree and a good job they still know each other. They might have different social backgrounds but people have something in common [edit] ... everyone is so close to each other ... [edit] living together in the flats everyone lives on top of each other amongst the concrete.

Lukáš (Male, 28, project manager)

Respondents also pointed to the specific human and non-human relations of physical isolation from the rest of the city, socio-economic mixing, the ‘newness’ and concentration of the blocks of flats, as being different to other parts of the city:

Of course, when you are at the estate and you go to the grove or by the lake, you wear sporty clothes [edit] ... You don’t go in high-heels [edit] ... from the perspective of the inhabitants, with everyone living near each other in flats, meeting on the stairs and all the concrete that surrounds, you don’t need to dress up and wear those high-heels [edit] ... You wear the two-piece, or skirt when you go elsewhere, because it is part of the game in the city ...

Anna (Female, 50, secretary)

Here in Petržalka, no one takes notice of me, of course, why should they [edit] ... look at the buildings that surround you, it is not a fashionable place ... [elsewhere in the city] they pay attention to what they are wearing. [edit] ... Here, when you find someone dressed up decently, you would think he is going downtown

František (Male, 65, retired)

The ‘game’ as noted by Anna and alluded to by other respondents acknowledges how local residents individually and collectively rejected bourgeois ‘distinction’ practices that have played out in urban public spaces since the late eighteenth century, discussed in detail by writers such as Veblen (1899), Simmel (1957), Benjamin (1982), Hebdige (1979), Wilson (1985) and so on. All of our respondents noted how consumption cultures

and practices of ‘dressing to impress’ were not part of everyday life in Petržalka. For example, as Lukáš commented when discussing clothing and fashion elsewhere in Bratislava, he contrasts *Korzo* (promenading in the city centre) with the ‘comfort’ of Petržalka defined as ‘opposite of that perfect look’.

These findings offer interesting parallels and contrasts with the work of Holliday (1999) and Moran and Skeggs (2004) who describes how, at home, lesbian and gay urbanites perform a ‘politics of comfort’ by using clothing to express a leisure-time based identity at home. In contrast to masking sexuality completely, or expressing sexuality through hidden codes due to pressures of being ‘out’ at work or in particular spaces and places in the city, Holliday (1999: 481) shows how ‘at home’ in a queer context ‘comfort might be read as embodying *resistance* to hegemonic discourses of ‘proper’ behaviour and attire’. The similarities and differences of such critique with our research can be further understood by engaging with the notion ‘comfort as detachment’, a separation from others ‘which implies a lack of necessity to worry about the world or one’s position within it ... comfort as an easy unthinking state’ (Holliday 1999: 490). Also reflecting on the relationship between public and private performance of identity through fashion, Moran and Skeggs (2004) describe comfort in terms of inclusion and exclusion; as defining features of identity and community, of commonality and belonging. In the first instance they argue that comfort is associated with the domestic, but it can also be linked to public and semi-public spaces such as the street, a pub, or a friend’s house (2004: 83-4). Moran and Skeggs’s (2004: 84) argument that ‘the private and the public significance of comfort make it appear to be ambiguous and contradictory’. In these terms, the

wearing of comfortable clothing by residents in Petržalka can be seen as a 'political' response to re-location to this new housing estate as part of a strategy of state socialist planning and national identity formation. Moreover, the material fabric of this new late-modern form of living, of everyday life in a de-centered socially mixed 'concrete' high-density housing estate, which markedly contrasted to dominant bourgeois city centre consumption cultures based around social distinction strategies, generated individual and collective expressions and performances of comfort and belonging.

If we develop this point with reference to McFarlane's (2011: 209) interest in 'the intensity and excessiveness of the moment', it is possible to argue that wearing of comfortable clothing in Petržalka represent a 'disruption of pattern ... [which] generate new encounters with people and objects, and invents new connections and ways of inhabiting everyday urban life ... [and in doing so represents] the potential of urban histories and everyday life to be imagined and put to work differently'. Particularly useful in elaborating this argument is McFarlane's (2011a, citing Hardt and Negri, 2009 124) use of 'commons', as a process of becoming, a doing that constitutes 'an assemblage of affects or ways of being'. In these terms, the wearing of 'comfortable' clothing in Petržalka across diverse social groups and generations can be understood as 'a kind of gathering or multiplicities through the political work of assembly ... an experimentation with cooperative spaces, processes and possibilities across multiple differences, and emerges both in relation to and in excess of assemblages of enclosure' (McFarlane 2011a: 212).

However, it is important to draw attention to the agencies of such materialities of comfort in more detail. McFarlane (2001a: 221), for example describes how materiality can ‘shape inequality and the prospects for resistance and alterity [and how a focus on] assemblage asks us to consider how critical praxis emerges through socio-material interaction rather than through a separation of the social and the material’. For example, the relationship between fashion, identity and urban life usefully described by Sennett (2003: 39) in terms of an interchange between people and things and ‘conflicting influences of individuality and conformity, change and continuity, past and future’ relates to comfort, materiality and public/private in a number of different ways’. To put it another way the relationship between comfort, fashion in Petržalka can be theorized as a ‘political response’ that is an:

approximation of cosmopolitanism, the assemblage imaginary recalls the concern that the ‘rights to the city’ but does so through a politics of recognition that has the potential implication of generating new urban knowledge’s, collectivities and ontologies. Assemblage’s imaginary of gathering and composition is one vehicle through which the rights to the city might potentially be realized, whereby assemblage extends the rights to the city as a process of antagonistic composition

(McFarlane 2011a: 221)

Seeking to understand the relationship between comfort, fashion and identity thus demands what Farias (2011: 365) considers as a challenge to ‘notions of power as a resource of the ruling class classes and of knowledge as an ideological construct that needs to be unveiled – such a thought runs the risk of silencing the heterogeneity of human and non-human actors involved in the object of critique’. As our case study research and other writing on comfort and fashion show there is a need to investigate both the nature of, and limits to, a ‘political’ project bound up with assemblages, materiality

and public/private space as imagined and experienced in relation to ‘comfort’ as ‘a right of access to participation’ (Amin and Thrift 2002). In the remainder of this paper we thus question the extent to which the wearing comfy clothes in Petržalka can be theorized with reference to democratization of (non)human interactions that emerged in relation to changing temporal and spatial ‘context’.

### **Changing context, consumer capitalism, changing clothes? Petržalka since 1989**

Following the revolution in 1989, it is important to note that housing estates such as Petržalka came under a spotlight in new ways, no longer celebrated as an ideological and infrastructural success story of state socialism, but rather through critical depictions of the lives of people forced to live in ‘rabbit pens’ and defined as places of chaos, disharmony and discomfort (Václav Havel cited in Czepczyński 2008: 98). Unemployment, increasing poverty and criminal gangs in Petržalka and elsewhere in Bratislava ensured that for a short while after 1989, for some residents the wearing of comfy clothes became a way to avoid social distinction, rather than as a marker of belonging. More broadly, the extremes of wealth and poverty that emerged as capitalist accumulation took hold were made visible through the growth of spectacular buildings in the city centre, an influx of tourists to Bratislava’s historical city centre and the rise of gated communities and affluent suburbs. Such spaces and places contrasted to Petržalka, and other quarters, now increasingly blighted by poor maintenance of buildings (due to withdrawal of state funding of infrastructural maintenance) and ‘un kept’ and decaying public spaces (see Figure 5). While everyday life and concrete materialities of Petržalka had been long derided by its residents, the growing characterization of the estate as representative of the

worst kind of state-socialist urban planning from ‘outside’ challenged and problematized local pride in comfort and informality.

**[Figures 5 near here]**

Figure 5: Public space in Petržalka

(Source: Slavomíra Ferenčuhová)

However, it is in this changing structural context that the continued importance of comfortable clothes for individual and collective identities in Petržalka since 1989 can be understood with reference not only to historic associations of ‘homeliness’ and ‘belonging’, but also to changes in the consumption landscape beyond the quarter. As the following quotes show the discursive construction of spatial isolation and socio-economic mixing in Petržalka was re-imagined with reference to new consumption spaces that had appeared elsewhere in the city. Lukáš, for example, talked about the proliferation of consumer culture with reference to city centre shops and suburban shopping malls, which represented growing presence of international chains and global brands and increased ‘choice’ in clothing available. In a similar vein, Anna pointed to the increases in the opportunities to promenade in the city and an intensification of social differences expressed through fashion elsewhere in the city:

After 1989, *Korzo* became even more popular [edit] ... more and more people started to go and get dressed up, and not just on the weekends [edit] ... now you see so many events in the city centre ... Christmas markets, concerts, open air cinema, New Year’s Eve, or so ... [edit] but now its is much easier to see differences in social background ...

Anna (Female, 50, secretary)

I left Bratislava when I was 18 [edit] ... When I came back I felt that Bratislava was dressing very chic and that people go out dressed up, girls wear make-up, men dress in fashionable shirts and suits even to go out to a pub, where it is not really necessary to dress that well [edit] ...

(Lukáš, 28, project manager)

Responding to a question as to whether Petržalka had changed in similar ways, Lukáš suggested that:

[Petržalka is] everything behind the Danube, everything south of the Danube. There is a clear division, us and them, and we are separated by the river. Petržalka has always been different [edit] ... We always understood it as different and they always understood it so, too [edit] ... we are still known for wearing comfortable clothing

Such responses show that while increasing social differentiation expressed through fashion had proliferated throughout Bratislava, collective identity across socio-economic groups and generations in the wearing of comfortable clothing nonetheless remained an important marker of collective identity in Petržalka (see Figure 6). As such, while Maffesoli (1996) argues that ‘postmodern’ consumer culture has led to the emergence of fashion ‘tribes’, that people are free to join regardless of social-economic background, in Petržalka collective identity of ‘comfy clothing’ initially promoted as a response to economic and material conditions of socialism was now re-articulated because of increased social divisions associated with the emergence of consumer capitalism.

**[Figures 6 near here]**

Figure 6: Contemporary wearing of ‘comfy’ clothes in Petržalka

(Source: Slavomíra Ferenčuhová)

Ash Amin's (2008: 5) post-humanist account of urban public space is useful in understanding the changing context of comfortable clothing in Petržalka, and the ways in which 'human dynamics in public space are centrally influenced by the entanglement and circulation of human and non-human bodies and matter in general, productive material culture that forms a kind of pre-cognitive template for civic and political behaviour'. Drawing on the notion of 'situated surplus' which is 'manifest in varying dimensions of compliance, as the force that produces a distinctive sense of urban collective culture and civic affirmation in urban life', Amin (2008: 8) challenges us to re-think the ways 'in which public spaces are produced and experienced through the situated multiplicity and social practice that encapsulate the rhythms of daily life in urban public spaces, by considering the resonance of collective repetition and endurance'. In these terms the blurring of public/private spaces in Petržalka can be understood by the resonance of 'situated surplus, formed out of entanglements of bodies in motion and the environmental conditions and physical experiences of tacit and neurological and sensory knowing quietly contributing to a civic culture of ease in the face of urban diversity and the surprises of multiplicity' (Amin 2008: 11). Such observations in the context of Petržalka highlight how:

the iconography of public space, from the quality of spatial design and architectural expression to the displays of consumption and advertising along with the routines of usage and public gatherings, can be read as powerful symbolic and sensory code of public culture. It is an active code, both summarizing cultural trends as well as shaping public opinion and expectation, but essentially in the background as a kind of atmospheric influence

(Amin 2008: 13)

Moreover, in order to understand the changing imaginaries and experiences of wearing comfortable clothing in the public spaces in Petržalka in terms of structural shift there is a



need to respond to Brenner's (2009: 1999) call to address the 'myths, reifications and antimonies that pervade bourgeois forms of knowledge ... [and that] outcomes on the ground are a matter of context, shaped by material dynamics and historical legacies of individual public spaces' As such consumption of 'comfy' clothing in Petržalka can be understood with reference to pre and (post)socialism in terms of the interpenetration of political, economic, social, cultural and spatial re-scaling(s) These include for example, the building of a housing estate to celebrate Czechoslovakian national socialism and the response of its new residents to defining belonging and local identity; political, economic and social and cultural restructuring associated with post-socialism and outside attacks on everyday life in Petržalka, as the new Slovak nation emerged into consumer capitalism, European cosmopolitanism and proliferation of global brands and so on. In this 'context of contexts' considering the human and non-human relationships between changing discursive and differential constructions of 'comfort' and ideologies of public/private space, our research allows understanding of how a socially mixed housing estate was a site of 'civic becoming' under both socialism and consumer capitalism (Amin 2008: 22).

However, reflecting on the political project of public space Amin (2008: 8) describes 'situated surplus', such as comfort and informality, as being 'politically modest (as sparks of civic and political citizenship) but still full of collective promise [and Amin] locates this promise, however, in the entanglement between people and the material and visual culture of public space, rather than solely in the quality of social interaction with strangers' (2008: 8). To put it another way, in suggesting that an emphasis on 'democratic politics ... actual urban situations [which] define the space of intervention for an urban

democratic public, not capitalism at large' (Farias 2011: 372) allows us to understand the wearing of comfortable clothing in Petržalka as part of a 'symbolic projection', aligned with a 'strong sensory, affective and neurological response' (Amin 2008: 15). This could be criticised as being 'solidarity in a minor key' (Amin 2008: 15-17) and based on consumer culture which the quote at the beginning of this paper by Lefebvre suggests, as working against 'radical democracy'. However, while the wearing of comfy clothes in Petržalka may indeed be 'politically modest', our research has nonetheless highlighted 'political' practice, performance and progressive social relations.

## **Conclusion**

In questioning the contribution of studies of materialities and assemblage to critical urban theory, Brenner et al (2011: 243) argue that human and non-human interactions are 'highly polysemic and promiscuous. Graffiti paint, unadorned brick, dirt in the backyard, gardens, corrugated metal ... [edit] each can be seen as an expression of precarious impoverishment of dominating, aestheticized, prosperity'. Brenner et al go on to suggest that while 'meanings are transformed by context and again by the 'context of context' ... [and] the hegemony of scale ... [he challenges us to ask] how are these districts, fragments and scripts, compounds, escarpments and waterfronts must be seen and understood within the broader social spatial field of the formal city. While we broadly agree with the need to work towards such a goal, by focusing on the wearing of 'comfy clothes' in Petržalka we nonetheless follow Dovey's (2011) contention that assemblage thinking is more complex than finding root causes. We therefore support McFarlane's assertions (2011: 38-382) that 'the possibility of what *can* be understood by paying close

attention to what happens at particular sites, before skipping over to pre-given analytical frames that might encapsulate something ‘bigger’ ... [and allowing] a focus on everyday materialities of urban sites can provide insights into the nature of poverty, inequality and urban political economies’. As such while there is more work to be done on understanding the wearing of comfy clothes and urban life in specific spaces and places in cities like Shanghai, New York, Middleborough and Cardiff, we agree with McFarlane (2011: 383) that it is important ‘not to lose a focus on tendencies [which] occur across multiple space-times. Here, assemblage thinking locates causality not in wider underlying contexts but *within* particular contexts [edit]... understanding multiple sites allows is to see how the ordering of urban life operates across differences and enables certain possibilities over others’.

Our findings from Petržalka are thus underpinned by the understanding that that ‘context of contexts’ is relational and that the wearing of ‘comfy’ clothing in public space makes a generative contribution, for example, to ‘political unity through difference’ (McFarlane 2011: 385). As such, while Amin’s (2008) view would suggest that the wearing of ‘comfy’ clothing in urban public space is ‘politically modest’ our research into the changing political, economic, social, cultural and spatial ‘context’ of the materialities and assemblages of informality and ‘comfort’ in Petržalka highlights the complex ways that ‘practices, subjectivities and forms of identification do not *necessarily* resist ... (although they may under certain circumstances) but are attempts – sometimes unsuccessful ones – to find ways to make material life more tolerable’ (Smith and Rochovska 2007: 1175). As Simone (2011b: 356-359) suggests:

the city may be the familiar form, but it is also a ruse ... urban life is more a matter of what can be made relatable at any point in time, what can transverse established notions of the 'near and far' or 'here and there'; mobilities that leave in their wake a fabric of uneven concentrations of capacity and opportunity. In landscapes of vast inequality, of enforced conjunctions and detachments – choreographed by a variegated capitalism – life is also something rigged together from whatever is at hand

Focusing on comfort, fashion and clothing in Petržalka, and cities and urban spaces and places elsewhere, thus offers much towards 'surfacing in plain view' changing materialities, assemblages and 'context' bound up with political, economic, social and cultural geographies of urban life. By working at the intersection of theories of fashion, materialities and assemblage we have shown how a focus on individual and collective practices thus offers fruitful insights into the ways in which people claim a material right to the city in a manner that enriches both critical urban theory and understandings of consumption and consumer culture.

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