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## The restructuring of Bulgarian towns at the end of the nineteenth century

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**Abstract.** *The paper explores the morphological transformations of Bulgarian towns at the end of the nineteenth century. These transformations occurred as a result of massive restructuring of existing towns through the implementation of new modernist principles of town planning popularized during that period. Informal rules that governed development patterns for centuries based on continuing cultural and building traditions were abruptly replaced by rational ideas about a new spatial order imposed by a centralized authority. Features specific to the Balkan region and those occurring more widely are noted. Variations between the plans are investigated in terms of their response to the realities and unique characteristics of existing Bulgarian towns subjected to large-scale redevelopment. A range of planning approaches employed at the time is outlined. While some plans ruthlessly imposed a new spatial order, others attempted to integrate the existing fabric into the new spatial framework advanced by the plans. The paper explores further the rationale shaping these various responses. A comparison is made between the plans as a manifestation of idealistic design principles and the extent of their implementation within a turbulent period of dramatic economic and political transformation.*

*Key Words: Bulgaria, planning, Sofia, redevelopment*

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Urban settlements in the Balkan region have a long and rich history which spans more than two millennia of extensive and diverse city building practices. Urbanization processes in this part of Europe have been characterized by dramatic historical events resulting in a succession of broad political, economic and social transformations which have left an indelible mark on the urban structure and fabric of the settlements. While the history of urban

evolution in Western European countries has been extensively studied, literature on patterns and processes of urban development in Eastern Europe, and particularly in the Balkan region after the period of antiquity, has been rather limited (Staddon and Mollov, 2000). Yet the analysis of the urban evolution of cities in south-eastern Europe is a fascinating topic of research. Due to historical circumstances, the various periods of urban form transformation

in the region are rather condensed in time and well articulated. Within a little over a century, for example, Bulgaria has made several successive sweeping social transitions: from a feudal colony of the Ottoman empire to an independent nation rebuilding itself as a capitalist society; to the imposition of a communist regime; and, recently, towards the restructuring of its political and economic system as a re-emerging democratic state.

This paper explores the morphological transformations of Bulgarian towns at the end of the nineteenth century. Within a period of several decades after its liberation, the newly-established Bulgarian state embarked on a massive programme intended to radically transform its urban environment. The large-scale restructuring of the existing towns was guided by a desire to break away from the past as a colony of the Ottoman Empire and reconnect Bulgaria with the cultural traditions of Europe by introducing new modernist principles of town planning. In the 30-year period between 1878 (the year of liberation) and 1912 (the year after which Bulgaria became involved in three consecutive and devastating wars), 105 town plans were developed, adopted and implemented to varying degrees of completion (Ganchev and Doychinov, 2001). Prior to this period of restructuring, Bulgarian towns were characterized by what could be considered a typical medieval fabric. This paper describes the nature of the morphological transformations which took place during this 30-year period. The city of Sofia is used as a main case study and is complemented by examples from other Bulgarian cities. Commonalities with other processes of restructuring of European towns during the second half of the nineteenth century are explored within this historical context, highlighting differences specific to the Balkan region. Further variations between the plans are investigated in terms of their response to the realities and the unique characteristics of existing Bulgarian towns subjected to large-scale redevelopment. The paper outlines a range of planning approaches employed at the time. While some plans ruthlessly impose a new spatial order, others show an attempt to integrate the existing fabric into the new spatial framework advanced by the plans. The paper

explores further the rationale shaping these various responses. A comparison is made between the plans as a manifestation of idealistic design principles and the manner and intent of their implementation within a turbulent period of dramatic economic and political transformation.

### Urban form during the Ottoman period

The urban form of Bulgarian settlements is a product of complex overlaying of cultural traditions and city building practices of several civilizations. By the time the Ottoman Empire took control over the Balkan region in the late-fourteenth century, settlement patterns in the territory of Bulgaria had been established and transformed for almost 2000 years by the Thracian, Greek, Roman, Early Bulgarian, and Byzantine civilizations. Each one of these cultures set up an urban system by building new towns and redeveloping existing ones, connecting them with a road network and erecting monuments, some of which have outlived their civilizations. By various degrees, the material and cultural legacy of these civilizations has been continued in the elements of the built environment, which have been preserved and adapted over the centuries of urban evolution. The city of Sofia, the modern capital of the Bulgarian state, exemplifies the long and winding path of urban evolution in the Balkan region.

The earliest traces of human occupation on the site of the city of Sofia date from the Neolithic Period (Gutkind, 1964). A major factor in the establishment of the first settlement in the area was the presence of a mineral spring. During the eighth century BC, the site was fortified and occupied by the *Serdi*, a Thracian tribe who developed a town around the spring located in the heart of what is now Sofia's central business district (Staddon and Mollov, 2000). References to the town have been found in Greek inscriptions but, unfortunately, the limited amount of archaeological excavation does not allow a reconstruction of the settlement's layout. During the first century AD, the Romans destroyed the town and built a new settlement on the same site, following the strict principles of Roman city planning. The