

PROBLEMS OF POLISH CITIES. THE INFLUENCE OF SUBURBANIZATION PROCESSES ON SHAPING SPATIAL STRUCTURE

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Abstract

The paper presents processes which have been taking place in Polish cities since the time of the political transformation in 1989. It shows changes in spatial and social composition which have impact on the life and dwelling quality in a city. It ponders on problems of suburbanization, disappearing city centres and public spaces as well as social stratification.

Keywords: Suburbanization, public space, social relations

Introduction:

Recently in my hometown there was an exhibition 'Gliwice in old photos' and I admirably looked at postcards and photos with views of my city from the long-gone years, the period of its splendor: beautiful public spaces, streets, squares and buildings, well-tended greenery, parks and lawns, hotels, cafes, the theatre, the palm house, walking grounds, bike paths, the airport and a lot of people everywhere. The viewers' eyes welled with tears. Today my eyes well with tears when I think about not so long gone eighties and nineties of the previous century. Zwycięstwa Street was full of life, crowds of inhabitants were swarming the pavements. Every older inhabitant still remembers the cafes 'Agawa', 'Warszawianka' or 'Delicje' – a small bistro with the Sultan's dessert. Wonderful bookshops, a music shop, 'Stare' and 'Nowe' delis, which existed even in the times of the 'Big Crisis', when the name 'deli' was not associated with empty spaces on shelves.

The happy picture was complete with leather stores, clothes shops, furniture shops. There were also groceries and greengroceries, bakeries, simply everything could be bought on a single street. Various offers for everybody, not only for either the rich or the poor. Such an environment created an opportunity to meet friends, take a walk, do the windowshopping....

And what can one see today walking along the high street? There are certainly people, but just passing by, walking without stopping, their presence is somehow forced. Mainly, those people have to get somewhere. The term 'Let's go to the town' is unclear today because most people will ask 'what for'? The street seems to be deserted and sad. Shops are scarce although there are a few offering cheap products, so the importance of the city's high street is decreasing. Banks and banking institutions prevail everywhere. There are no cafes and restaurants, only cheap eateries and diners. Many places on ground floors are closed. The city's high street has lost its charm.



Fig.1. Zwycięstwa Street



Fig.2. Closed shops in the main street



Fig.3. Banks on the Zwycięstwa str.

Recently, in the heart of the city there has appeared a huge gap-breach between buildings caused by constructing the fast traffic line DTŚ. It intersects Zwycięstwa Street near the railway station, breaks into the main axis – the city's backbone, destroys urban structures formed throughout the centuries, changes substantially the city's image. Such solutions are necessary for the region's functioning and creating its modern image, but unfortunately they destroy a part of the landscape shaped historically. Thus, valuable buildings and urban complexes, which guarantee the city's historical continuity, disappear. Such a view is one of examples of Polish cities which die in front of our eyes.

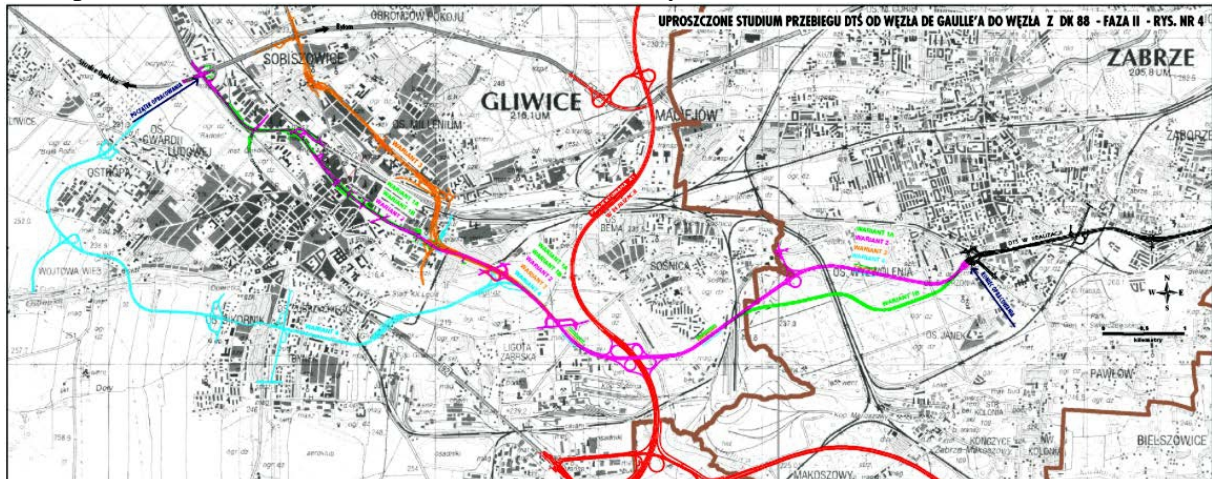


Fig.4. Fast traffic line DTŚ



Fig.5. Fast traffic line DTŚ



Fig.6. View from Zwycięstwa str.



Fig.7. View - east side

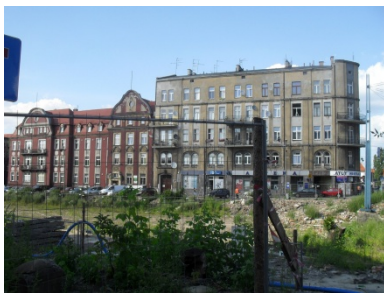


Fig.8. View from Zwycięstwa street



Fig.9. View - west side



Fig.10. View from Zwycięstwa street

I:

There is no doubt that nowadays cities, in which 2/3 of European population live, undergo a serious regress. This is a result mainly of inhabitants' escape from the centres. It is influenced both by suburbanization as well as a phenomenon called 'shrinking cities', which is a serious problem in Eastern Germany [7].

Many cities follow the example of American cities, which have already been affected by this process. In the 20th century there occurred a deurbanization period in the United States. The development of the middle class, which began to leave crowded cities and move to dream houses in suburbs, started the movement of the city centres residents to suburbs. It brought about an increase in the network of roads, overpasses, fuel stations, parking places (necessary but not friendly spaces). Suddenly there was a need for places in which one could do the shopping near the house and that is how shopping malls came into being. They followed inhabitants, meeting their needs and taking advantage of the boom of cheap suburban areas.

Meanwhile, city centres started to decline, an empty space was left, many houses deteriorated and the surrounding areas became more and more dangerous, Heavy traffic required a bigger capacity, so large highways arose, which traversed a city structure ruining the 'existing tissue' at the same time.

Such a state of matters lasted until the 60s in the USA, when the Housing Act was introduced, which included the Urban Renewal concept. Since the 70s there has been a comeback to cities. Actions have been taken in order to revitalize them, a number of different programmes have been put forward (services, trade, entertainment, catering) entering the open structure of a city [9]. Such a situation happened because new structures turned out to be foreign to inhabitants, they did not provide a space identity, it was noticed that it is necessary to care for urban structures and cities' monuments. A longing after the world gone-by arose.

In Poland the problem of deurbanization and suburbanization did not exist for decades, rather outsiders craved to live in cities, which opened new opportunities, offered workplaces, enabled an access to culture, education and healthcare. The changes occurred after the political transformation in 1989. In the new democracies of Central Europe have launched a free-market economy mechanisms. In terms of urban planning has resulted in a chaotic privatization of space.

Currently, we notice in Poland all unfavourable elements described above – suburbs are growing, there appear large shopping malls with stretches of parking spaces nearby. A great number of areas are devoured by huge junctions, passovers, highways, petrol stations.

This growth is completely out of control. Monofunctional architecture is haphazardly located without space management plans. It does not offer anything to inhabitants but dwelling and a network of roads. The culprit here was, according to Anna Drapella-Hermansdorfer, 'a non-binding character of a study on conditions in municipalities, basic documents of self-governing definition of a local space policy, as well as allowing for an administrative mode of issuing decisions on building conditions independent from the study conclusions, which regressed our policy and practice of space management a hundred years backwards to the times of land speculation' [3].

In cities the centres are being deserted, the number of inhabitants is dropping, there is a slow degradation of the environment and whole districts. Public spaces are disappearing. Streets, pavements, squares, green areas are being devoured by traffic and parking spaces. Cities are jammed as a car is indispensable nowadays. There appear many lost places, empty zones which undergo devastation for many years to come, pathology and crime are prevailing.

Gentrification of cities centres and an increase in flats rents make it for a large number of people more difficult to find a decent flat for a reasonable price. In many Polish cities, especially in metropolises, there arise closed housing estates – in Warsaw itself there are over 200 of them. Fenced estates contribute to space fragmentarization, they create disconnected

enclaves, ruin the urban structure, close spaces, privatize public space. They make it impossible to move freely around the city, shatter urban integrity and cause neighbourly conflicts.

The situation is getting worse because of the economic crisis, which affects all inhabitants but especially the poorest ones. The globalization process brought about unemployment, which is especially painful in the production sector. Not everyone can get a job. The market is changing, a part of the population which is still employed has in the best situation low-paid posts, which do not allow them to live a decent life.

Property and financial disproportions are getting bigger, poor inhabitants are still getting poorer, there are more disproportions visible in bad living conditions, a difficult access to services, healthcare and so on. The economic drop, especially in industrial towns, caused problems connected with unemployment and that in turn causes extinction of life in cities, people leave in search of a job (that is a situation, e.g. in Bytom, the neighbouring town in Upper-Silesian agglomeration). That is another symptom of deserted cities. Inhabitants emigrate because of work. They help their families and towns by coming back for a short time or sending a part of their income. Unfortunately, we also observe the fact that more and more people decide to leave the country permanently and not just temporarily.

It is an extremely important problem as current demographic, social and economic tendencies influence the distribution of settlers. The issue may concern both people living in poor conditions as well as those who can experience lower incomes. Among them we may count those who have lost their jobs, single parents, pensioners, but also young people who are unemployed or work for a low salary which does not allow them to be independent.

Negative population growth may cause a lot of problems for an already difficult situation in many cities and for their central and housing areas. There may appear deserted buildings and degradation of unused areas as well as an increase in dangerous places.

It is very unsettling that in the case of such tendencies going on, we will witness a bigger social exclusion together with spatial segregation, which will be more and more troublesome and may include an increasingly bigger number of regions and towns. At the same time the number of people living outside the society is growing, which in turn may lead to the occurrence of closed subcultures which show a hostile attitude towards the rest of society. Whole poverty zones will come into being and with them new problems will arise.

Conclusion:

Thus, the significance of suburbanization processes in Poland for the city structure has a multi-aspectual meaning:

- spatial,
- social,
- economic,
- environmental.

Unfortunately, it is noticeable that the process is going on and is completely uncontrolled, and the lack of coordination may hinder an effort to stop a number of negative phenomena described above.

Many cities experience significant withdrawal of inhabitants' engagement, the phenomena of social exclusion, segregation and polarization are gaining in strength.

Housing conditions are deteriorating and yet they have a key significance for the attractiveness of cities and life comfort

It is necessary to restore the importance of space planning in order to stop the process of space fragmentation. Integrated actions are needed to improve the current situation. The main feature of modern 'cities in a nutshell' of the 21st century is to restore the unity of the places where we work, live and rest. In turn, the appropriate population concentration will

help to reduce the number of cars and other appurtenant elements. A careful attention should be paid to social and economic aspects.

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