

Actors on the Urban Stage



Professor Szczepański uses his sociological background to analyze changes in urban space

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The shape of the city and its spatial arrangement depend upon the key actors on the urban stage. In the pre-1989 era this meant the Communist party and the professional groups that were encompassed in the institutions of real socialism. In today's Poland the party has been replaced by the market

Empirical research being carried out on the processes transforming urban space under conditions of real socialism (1945-1990) and in the contemporary "Third Republic of Poland" era, meaning the period of laying down market economy foundations (1990-2004), relies upon two theoretical concepts: firstly the concept of the social creation of space, and

secondly the concepts and ideas of dramaturgical sociology associated with Erving Goffman.

The Athenians of real socialism

The point of reference in spatial and social terms is chiefly constituted by the cities of Upper Silesia and the Zagłębie industrial region. Many years of research carried out there, both during the period of real socialism and after its demise, allow us to formulate more general conclusions and remarks about urban space and the changing cast of actors. Sociological studies on cities that were performed during the period of real socialism aid in reconstructing a certain specific ideology and doctrine of urban planning and architecture that have been dubbed "socialist," but were in essence a modification of the modernist ideology and doctrine of the capitalist city. This last point is most fully documented by the Athenian Charter (1933). The Athenian Charter exposed the city's tripartite function: it was supposed to guarantee the best possible conditions for housing, recreation, and employment.



Krzysztof Biewiaczonek

Downtown Katowice in Silesia. New buildings are interspersed with prewar buildings and buildings from the real socialism era

Communist party's
leaders visiting a new
housing estate
in the 50s



Archiwum Dokumentacji Mechanicznej

Party secretary and sophocrats

The Athenian Charter explicitly questioned the logic behind creating a capitalist city, understood as a nest of all the inconveniences of the industrial epoch. By proposing an urban revolution, it was in essence proposing a social revolution, ascribing key functions therein to a new sophocracy. The Platonic ideal of government by people who cherish wisdom – the “sophocrats” – was supposed to be realized by urbanists, architects, and planners.

But it was not the city planners or architects of real socialism that were the most important actors on the urban scene. A direct influence upon their spatial and also social projections was exerted by the functionaries of the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR) on all levels, starting with the local, proceeding through the regional (voivodship), and ending on the central level (the Politburo and Central Committee). It was specifically they who approved or corrected the norms and standards prepared by professional urbanists and architects. The multiplicity of these regulations, frequently absurd (the number of sculptures per 1 hectare) and irrational (7m² per resident in newly-erected houses), nevertheless had an impact on the nature of urbanist and architectural projects, and fettered the imaginations of the “sophocrats” of real socialism.

The catechism of socialist Industrialism

Another important and instrumental spatial actor was the socialist industrial lobby, which engaged in cooperation with urban planners and architects, although the framework and nature of such cooperation was set forth by instrumental representatives of the political establishment. The most

influential interest groups were chiefly associated with mining, steel mills, the chemical industry, and the machine (including motor) industry. Their bargaining power was guaranteed by the ranks of the industrial working class employed at the large industrial plants of real socialism. The mobilization capacity and numbers of these groups had a direct impact upon the position of party and local establishments and upon the supra-local configurations of power. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that many influential party representatives endeavored to have successive big investment projects of socialism built within their home territory, even if such a location ran counter to economics, the state of the environment, or even common sense.

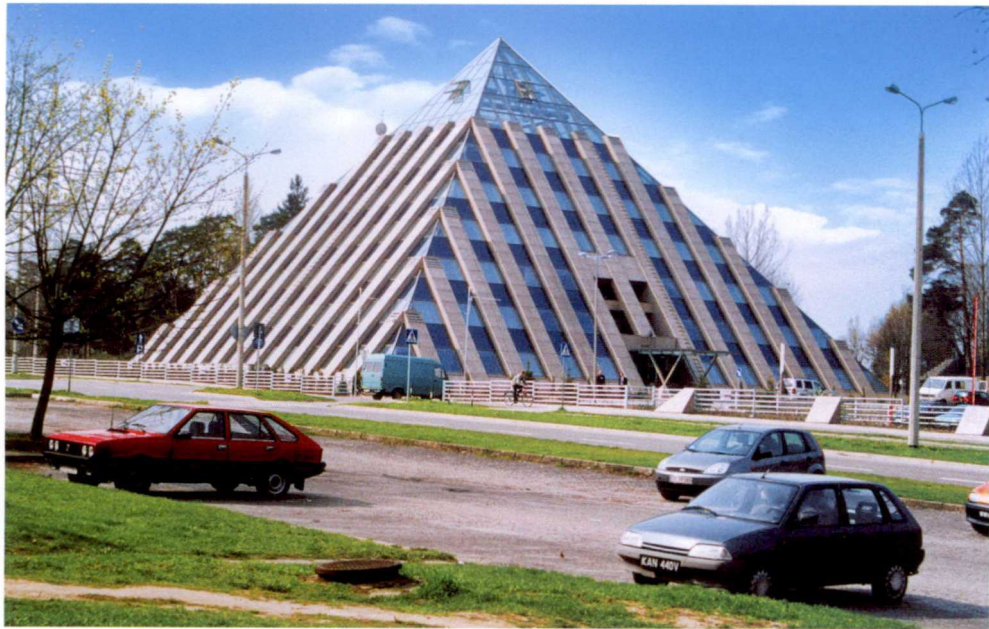
The builders of real socialism, designers, the political establishment and contracting companies were focused upon maximizing their output figures – such as the cubic meters of buildings that had been completed, or the number of apartments, rooms, or sites that had been turned over for use. It is no wonder, therefore, that the dominant thinking was about collectivism and its superiority over individualism, and about the replicable module, whereby successive sites could be constructed at a rapid pace. An ideal module and a huge aid (or so it seemed during real socialism) was found in the large prefab concrete slab method. It had been utilized several decades earlier by Le Corbusier and was applied in Poland and other socialist countries. This marked the outset of the wide expansion of large-slab housing estates. For the thousands of people who took up residence in them, they were symbols of modernity and civilizational progress. But in essence they were an attempt at collectivist, careless construction, with low standards and low symbolic merits. Using the same modules, the same large prefab slabs, buildings were erected that bore no ties to the tradition of local construction, to the landscape or the environmental highlights, and which are now in critical technical condition, decapitalized and profoundly substandard.

Changing actors

The political transformation and the demise of real socialism fundamentally changed the chief actors and the rules of the

Systemic transformation and cities

A new city icon:
the therapeutic
rehabilitation center
in Tychy, a reduced-
scale replica
of the Great
Pyramid of Cheops



Krzysztof Bierwiazunek

game with regards to space, especially urban space. The principles of market economics, private land ownership, property fees, maintenance rent, and market-dictated prices for apartments and office space reinstated principles that had been almost entirely absent under the outgoing system. Relative freedom of investment returned, the role of the investor was recognized, political influence and pressure on spatial development was reduced (albeit not eliminated) and a group of professional developers appeared. Change also affected the scope of central, regional and local authorities' sway. Thanks to State Treasury ownership and urban planning jurisdiction, central and regional (voivodship) authorities are still able to influence the nature of spatial policy and urbanist-architectural arrangements. Local government authorities have also gotten involved in the spatial game. On the one hand, for example, buildings have been erected under "Social Construction Societies," wherein the *gmina*, or the lowest level of Polish territorial administration, frequently holds a majority stake, while on the other hand, schools and public utility sites have been financed by the local government.

Cheops in Silesia

Transnational corporations (TNCs) and their local representative offices have proven to be crucial investors in Poland

during the transformation period. Their role can be studied based on the example of the Katowice Special Economic Zone and its four sub-zones. They have become home to Opel, Isuzu, Delphi, VAB, Agora and other companies. Investments by such companies, which are significant on the national or even global scale, do not bring interesting spatial solutions, as they have dominated the area of such economic zones with cubist factory buildings of negligible symbolic or cultural value. Nevertheless, they do employ a large number of individuals, which is of particular importance in the Silesian Voivodship, with its 320,000 formally registered unemployed individuals (July 2004). These companies are usually associated with mass production, chiefly auto production, and thus do not generate technical or technological innovations, but rather consume them. They are also, just like throughout Europe and the world, functionally and spatially isolated from local communities and cities. Only rarely is such aloof isolation overcome, and even when it is, the role of the TNC usually boils down to institutional sponsoring.

We can also consider the cast of new actors on the urban scene to include private investors, who may have great financial capabilities or rather limited resources. The former, who are motivated in terms of business and prestige, implement significant investments, while the latter usually build

private single-family homes. A separate group is made up of developers, who are now present in many Polish cities as the creators of apartment blocks, office space, and single-family housing complexes. Such new spatial actors can be much more plainly perceived in cases that involve atypical projects, which spark open discussion about space in Polish cities during the time of transformation. In Tychy, such public debate was touched off by a certain bio-energy therapist, who has erected the "Piramida" therapeutic rehabilitation center, designed as a reduced replica of the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

Nimby and Lulu

The Third Republic, or modern-day Poland, has seen the appearance of resident-organized social movements that wield considerable influence over special planning decisions. These come in two types: NIMBY and LULU. The former is an abbreviation that stands for "Not In My Backyard," which chiefly refers to social movements or groups that object to having burdensome (in their opinion) investment projects, mainly of a social nature, built in their vicinity. There are quite numerous examples of such movements, which are oftentimes extraordinarily spectacular and expansive, and by the same token aggressive, and which usually arise in response to attempts to set up correctional facilities, social homes, drug and alcohol abuse treatment centers, or institutions for the re-socialization of the mentally ill. In these cases, nothing oftentimes comes of government insistences that these institutions are not socially burdensome or dangerous,

and that, to the contrary, they will generate new jobs for the local communities.

The second type of social movement is termed LULU, an abbreviation for "Locally Unwanted Land Use," which refers to social fears against having burdensome institutions of an industrial, service-providing, or transport nature located in the vicinity. This type of investment, in opponents' opinion, leads to the degradation of the space, a drop in real estate values in the vicinity, and the degradation of the landscape and ecology. Most frequently, this type of social movement appears almost immediately after special planning projects are announced, which contain plans to build trash burning plants, crematoria, highways or main roads. These are most frequently protest movements; rarely are they movements of affirmation with the chief aim of securing benefits from such investment projects, primarily via the favorable sale of land, properties, or advertising space. Sometimes such movements try to extort eco-ransom.

Marginalized in the city

In the lineup of key actors involved in spatial change, it would be hard to overlook people in the underclass group, i.e. those who are socially, politically, culturally, and economically marginalized. Processes of social exclusion are encompassing an ever-wider group of Poles, giving rise to a dangerous and exceptionally undesirable social situation. If almost half of the people of this medium-sized European country are living under a constant existential threat, the accumulated tension will sooner or later have to find a means of release. Most of these individuals are characterized by a deep-seated conviction that they are unable to have any impact upon the course of public affairs. Most of these people live in degraded and substandard city neighborhoods, frequently decapitalized and in a state of technical demise, where successive generations repeat the same life path, consolidating the processes of social structure reiteration. ■

Further reading:

- Haus M., Heinelt H., Stewart M. (Eds.) (2004). *Democratic Choices for Cities*. London: Routledge.
- Szczepański M.S., Thomas M. (Eds.) (2004). *Regional Actors and Regional Contexts of Action*. Tychy: Śląskie Wydawnictwa Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Zarządzania i Nauk Społecznych.

The Katowice Special
Economic Zone



KSSE/Sulzane Glinice Archives