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Contemporary Public Space – Views and Discussions

Abstract. *The purpose of the following paper is to present a few significant aspects concerning contemporary public space. This study pinpoints how important public space is and that it requires a very specific attention on the part of authorities. Its value for local communities, as its availability and quality cannot be overestimated in terms of life quality, is stressed in the paper. The study deals also with the public space “conflict-rising” nature, taking into consideration interests of various users and groups of users and their involvement in the so-called “space game.” Nowadays non-governmental organizations together with city movements are beginning to play a more and more important role in shaping the public space. It is mostly their activity that has brought about changes in the policy towards public space, the result of which was the government’s announcement of National Urban Policy. The following study is based on the articles published in scientific journals, reliable Internet sources and government documents.*

Keywords: *public space, public goods, planning and spatial development, local communities, non-governmental organizations, city movements, third sector, placemaking*

Introduction

Nowadays the role of public space is becoming more and more appreciated and recognized. This space accessible to everybody is considered a determinant of life quality of individuals and local communities. With that respect public space determines social and economic development. However, space is limited and whatever is limited is subject to competition between subjects for whom this resource is

useful. This leads to conflicts between the stakeholders of space, among whom are public authorities, entrepreneurs and local communities. While referring to the public space competition, one should consider the fact that non-governmental organizations, including city movements are becoming more and more important. This process is especially noticeable in highly developed countries [Harvey 2012], and is becoming important in less developed countries, including Poland. The representatives of so called third sector participate in administrative proceedings concerning planning and spatial development in order to keep spatial order and create tourist attractiveness by so-called placemaking.¹ They also initiate or support grass-roots initiatives realized by inhabitants in public space. Therefore, one can assume that organizations dealing with public space play a very important role from the point of view of public interest.

1. Space as strategic good for local communities

According to Anna Cudny the notion of public space has become very popular and even fashionable in recent years. The author notices that: “[...] mentioning the term in various contexts makes the conversation smooth and is used as the evidence of egalitarianism.” It turns out, that as a result – according to the author – the notion of public space is becoming too ambiguous. For a sociologist or social activist it means social space, for a journalist it is a media space while for politicians it is an equivalent of society. Anna Cudny strongly rejects such broad understanding of the notion in question. She calls for treating the notion as purely urban again. [Cudny 2014: 39], which is in accordance with what is expressed in Spatial Planning and Land Development Act of 2003. According to this definition, public space is “[...] area of particular significance to satisfy the needs of inhabitants, their life improvement and fostering social contacts due to its location and functional and spatial features. It needs to be determined and referred to in the study of conditions and directions of spatial development of a particular municipality.”²

A much more significant role of public space is referred to in the Charter of Public Space adopted at the Third Congress of Polish Urbanism: „Public space is not only a good characterized by a set of particular useful features, but also a place of transmission of multiple material and nonmaterial goods which satisfy various needs. Therefore, public space should be considered a strategic good for local communities” [Charter of Public Space 2009: 1].

¹ www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/ [access: 11.08.2016].

² Ustawa z dnia 27 marca 2003 r. o planowaniu i zagospodarowaniu przestrzennym, Dz.U. nr 80, poz. 717, ze zm. [Act on Planning and Spatial Development of 27 March 2003, Journal of Laws no. 80 item 717, as amended], <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/DetailsServlet?id=WDU20030800717> [access: 12.08.2016].

A relatively broad understanding of public space is due to its definition by Elena Madison, vice-chairman of American organization Project for Public Places (PPS) – a world leader in shaping and revitalization of public space. According to her: „Any space that is not your home or your workplace (in most cases), is public space. Public buildings, such as: town halls, libraries, schools, hospitals, university campuses, museums, theatres, markets and social centers together with the land they are built on should be considered public spaces” [Madison 2013]. According to PPS, such broad view of space is necessary in order to understand the value of public space.

The definition by Mariusz Czepczyński, on the other hand, emphasizes its egalitarian aspect: „Public space [...] is a common good that is supposed to serve local community and is used by all the inhabitants in the egalitarian way, which means that no one is excluded and it is financed by public funds and available free of charge” [Czepczyński 2012: 12].

From the presented above short overview of definitions of public space one can infer explicitly that various authors present different opinions on the proper scope of the meaning of this notion. However, one cannot notice discrepancies concerning the extremely significant or even strategic role that public space plays for local communities.

According to quoted above Czepczyński, it is those public spaces which due to their rank and function become „material and nonmaterial representatives of local communities” that are of particular significance. A good example is the city center that fulfils multiple functions exhibiting in that way the power of a particular square or street. The central square is often identified with different historic contexts indicating the advantage of a particular historic central or city-forming function:

- agora, that is the place of political disputes and manifestations,
- piazza, the meeting place for inhabitants and visitors designed to exchange information and cultural life,
- market, the place of commercial exchange, being for most cities the basic factor of location,
- street, dominated by transportation functions, but also used as traffic intersection and center of city transport,
- place used for representative function, where local communities visualize their images and needs of urbanity [Czepczyński 2012: 10].

Other experts pinpoint that public space consists not only of prestigious places, but also streets, alleys, parking lots, pavements and paths. Specialists assume that in the face of strong influence of the surroundings onto people “it is important to create such spaces that would have positive and stimulating impact onto the people who are there” [Wantuch-Matla 2009: 374].

The aspect of health benefits resulting from the access to proper public spaces has been developed by Alojzy Kiziniewicz [Kiziniewicz 2013: 1-3]. He presents, among others, the example of Japan. According to Japanese findings the above average life span in this country results to a large extent from people's contact with nature, especially the access to parks and public greenery. The Japanese estimate that such access prolongs the life span by at least 10 years, which is approximately 10%. Simultaneously, the lack of the access to public space together with the change in the lifestyle (computer, TV, the world of virtual meetings) results in obesity and problems connected with insufficient movement. This mainly concerns the young generation.

The same author presents also significant economic consequences stemming directly from either proper or improper access to public space. He mentions that high quality public space fosters to a large extent local development. Well-designed parks and squares attract both well-off owners and companies and workers and customers. Nice surroundings influence the development and profitability of commercial units and the development of local tourist products. Therefore, attractive open spaces located in the direct neighborhood of existing or future building complexes are becoming more and more often parts of marketing strategy adopted by the local authorities. As a result, adjacent locations gain in value, which, in turn, makes local authorities even more interested in "revitalization and proper management of public spaces [...]". It becomes quite obvious that the adjacent pond or park can lead to at least 10% increase in the property value. It is only the view or neighborhood of such spaces that can positively influence the value of nearby premises. On the other hand, the lack of such attributes can result in the decrease in the property value by 10% or even more. Therefore, one can argue that the minimal accumulated influence of the public space quality onto the property value is about 20% [...]. This is confirmed by the empirical research on the basis of transactions, the object of which are premises located in the direct neighborhood of well managed public spaces" [Kiziniewicz 2013: 2].

The essence of the role of public space (public places) for local communities is presented in the book *How to Turn a Place Around* published by PPS. Therefore, it is worthwhile to present here a passage from this book: "Public spaces are the arena of our public life. These are parks where we celebrate, where marathons finish and where children acquire their first sports skills, where we see seasons turn and where cultures get mixed. These are streets and pavements near apartment buildings and companies, where people meet for social and economic purposes. These are the gateways of public institutions – town halls, libraries and post offices – where we get into relations with other people and offices. When cities and housing estates take care of the quality of public space, inhabitants have a strong sense of community. On the contrary, when these spaces are scarce, inhabitants are more loosely related to each other" [*Jak przetworzyć Miejsce* 2009: 19-20].

2. Space as multilevel area of contradictory interests

The quoted above Charter of Public Space emphasizes that “The large number and the meaning of various functions of public space leads to a lot of developmental pressure and its appropriation. Space is subject to a global market game. Due to unregulated competition between territorial units the appropriation of public space is accepted and it is the local communities that are encumbered with social costs” [Charter of Public Space 2009: 1]. The phenomenon of intensification of public space privatization has been widely discussed by Łukasz Pancewicz. [Pancewicz 2010: 80-91] In the conclusion of his article on the genesis, forms and consequences of this phenomenon he states that space privatization is the expression of the global influence of liberal ideology. He also stresses the weakened involvement and inefficiency of local authorities when it comes to satisfying the needs of inhabitants, which, in turn, results in strengthening private subjects interested in public space for their commercial purposes. Private sector, being more efficient, entrepreneurial and swift in its actions is even invited to realize ventures in public space. However, this leads to intensified commercialization and “loss of primary features that form egalitarian space of streets and squares: social diversity, public control, free access for everybody regardless of their wealth” [Pancewicz 2010: 90].

The significant element that makes it possible to understand the essence of public space as the area of contradictory interests is identification of stakeholders and the ways and motives of their actions. A few years ago, during a seminar on public space in Poznań an experiment called “space game” was conducted [cf. Kaźmierczak & Pazder 2009]. The purpose of the game was to investigate the intentions of various players with respect to decision concerning space that they took. The game was played in three teams: “social team” – inhabitants, associations, foundations; “authorities” – councilors, public officers; “investors” – developers, estate agencies, designers. All teams worked in separate rooms and could not observe other teams working. The results of the experiment were very interesting in each of the teams. The “social team,” which was the largest, presented the point of view that “nobody wants to talk to us”. They were frustrated which resulted from the distrust towards the other groups of stakeholders together with the lack of faith in real opportunities to decide on public space. The interesting thing was that this team viewed the authority representatives as major opponents. Moreover, the decisions taken by the “social team” did not result from objective discussion, but were opinions presented by some leaders who dominated the discussion by imposing their own points of view. The decisions regarding suggested activities concerning public space were based on particular interests of particular

individuals. The team did not attempt to create one common concept based on the opinions of all the members of the team. The “authorities” team expressed the opinion of the impotence in the decision making process that resulted from the binding legal regulations. This team expressed their conviction of their self-righteousness regarding the decisions which were often taken in an arbitrary way. Suggested solutions were usually supposed to satisfy the immediate needs and did not take into account the long-term horizon and a broader scale. This team concentrated on solutions referring to residential and service functions and they often neglected the open space areas – greenery and recreation areas. The members of the “investors” team presented a very professional attitude towards the game taking into consideration mainly economic aspects. The decisions that they took resulted from informed discussions, exchanging different opinions and experiences among the members. The willingness to cooperate with other members of the game could be observed. Generally speaking, it could be concluded that this team acted in the way totally opposite to the actions of “social team”. In most cases they decided to use the most attractive areas for residential development leaving, however, a considerable share of open, recreational areas. Open spaces with a lot of traffic were designed for investment connected with public functions as they were not within the area of interests of developers.

The conclusions of the “space game” comprised the expectations of particular groups of stakeholders. It turned out that the members of the “social team” depended upon the support from the authorities in the pursuit for their needs to be satisfied, the “authorities” team did not take the role of a mediator or a partner in the game, although that was expected of them by other groups of stakeholders; and, finally, the “investors” team noticed social problems but mostly in terms of costs in the investment process.

Psychologists stress that conflicts are natural in the social life [Chelpa & Witkowski 1999]. Conflicts in public space result from what is the essence of the value of this space. According to Izabel Mironowicz this value is commonality understood as “the lack of individual right to the place together with the everybody’s right to use this space” [Mironowicz 2010: 41]. The author further discusses what this right to use the space really means. She presents three possible interpretations of the right in question “the right to use”, “the right to make decisions on the use” and “the right to decide on space development” [Mironowicz 2010: 42-45].

In the case of “the right to use” the users of the public space realize the right resulting from the common access to public space. The author, however, stresses that this right is limited to certain extent, by, for example the system of civilization values. “The right to use” does not indicate total freedom, but only the freedom limited by legal regulations and customs. Although the issue of legal norms is quite clear, when it comes to “custom” some doubts are expressed. Mironowicz gives the example of incomplete outfit of sunbathers walking down public places.

In Poland, it seems totally acceptable and is connected with the holiday character of the space. However, in France, whose inhabitants are very strict in terms of customs, such behavior would not be accepted. What is interesting, the French accept much more freedom of sunbathing in the places designed for that, that is the beach itself [Mironowicz 2010: 42].

“The right to make decisions on the use” of public space is the right to conduct particular activity there. Here more questions arise. Can the person use the place just as it is? (for example, taking a bath in the fountain)? Does he or she have the right to “change the structure of the space (for example by putting a stall, a deck-chair or setting up a garden)?”³ Who is to decide whether a singer can perform in the public but the old lady cannot sell parsley? And finally, the most important question concerning human right to freedom, do the restrictions to the use of space not infringe these rights?. All these dilemmas concerning „the right to decide upon the use” are undoubtedly connected with the fact that „the conflict of interests in public space is its immanent part and its integrated component” [Mironowicz 2010: 43].

Development of democracy, including democracy foundations reinforcement, increases the involvement of individuals in the public life. People are no longer satisfied with their role of voters once every four years. They want to participate in management, including public space management. And this is how „the right to decide on space development”, the right that gives ordinary people the power to decide upon the space development is fulfilled. Mironowicz simultaneously warns against treating the space as the request show and encourages to refer to it as the area for negotiations. The number of conflicts concerning public space is enormous. Competing groups view their arguments as the most conclusive and want to take over the space for their own purposes [Mironowicz 2010: 43-45].

3. Non-governmental organizations and urban movements actions concerning public space

Although the significance of public space is becoming noticeable also in Poland, the perception of this space by the public is still not sufficient. This is quite straightforwardly expressed by Michał Beim, Bogusz Modrzewski and Adam Radzimski in the article under a provocative title *Do we still need public space?* [Beim, Modrzewski & Radzimski 2010]. At the very beginning the authors claim that “The analysis of cultural patterns, information in the press, scientific journals or conversations makes it possible to capture the “ideal” public space of Polish middle class – the customer that has the greatest influence upon the shaping and

³ In the latter case „the right to decide upon the use” may become „the right to take over the place.”

functioning of the city as a product. For the vast majority of young single, well-off people the perfect place to live is a gated and guarded community. For those having families – it is a house in the suburbs with a dog in the garden. And this is the only difference between those who have families and those who are single”. Further in their article Beim, Modrzewski and Radzimski mention other features that describe current “ideal” spaces – the car as the only means of transportation in the city, shopping malls as the substitute of public space, underground garages or parking lots as calling cards of modern office buildings, and the means of satisfying the higher needs. Such an approach has a negative effect not only onto our surroundings and public space but it also leads to unfavorable social behavior. Beim, Modrzewski and Radzimski claim: “On one hand isolation in the place of living together with the use of the car as the chief means of transportation, on the other hand, the very existence of this substitute of public space result in the fact that people no longer feel the urge to go out and have coffee downtown, to walk in the park, to go round small shops; they have forgotten of the old-fashioned custom of exploring the city and subconsciously reading its code. Extreme questions arise: Why should I go for a walk or go running in the park if I can take the car and go to the gym?” [Beim, Modrzewski i Radzimski 2010]. While taking into account formulated in this way expectations toward public space the authors state that a few “strong” questions should be asked: What do current elites want to leave for the next generations? Are steel shopping malls and monotonous and substandard architecture the peak of their aspirations? Beim, Modrzewski and Radzimski are worried about such a change as this may result in the change in “people’s consciousness – the generation of children who have grown in this substandard substitute of “disposable” space.

In the quoted above article Beim, Modrzewski and Radzimski [2010] also mention the significant role of non-governmental organizations: “inhabitants of Polish cities (especially the largest ones) have ceased to be their landlords but have become passive space consumers. Nowadays the need to shape the space, as it does not come from the public, private or professional sectors, is usually expressed by so-called third sector, that is various organizations, associations and societies. They are trying to take the role of local landlords, and although their voice is still quite often neglected, it is the only voice calling for the return to human urbanization” [Beim, Modrzewski & Radzimski 2010].

It seems, however, that in recent years⁴ there has been a change in the balance of power which results in a better climate for public space and which, in the long run, might indicate a change in aspirations and expectations of broadly

⁴ Groups of citizens have become active recently in Polish cities. Their main activities are concentrating on taking a significant part in city creation. Despite being relatively new they have already become a significant participant in local public debate. It has turned out, however, that discussions on a local scale are not sufficient to solve urban problems. Thus, some of these movements have

understood public, including the middle class. The key factors are the city movements whose dynamic development has been observed in Poland recently.⁵ It was the First Congress of City Movements in Poznań in 2011 that turned out to be a real breakthrough, as a result of which 9 theses were formulated, pinned to the doors of City Halls in 9 cities and handed over to the local authorities.⁶ Among the theses were those concerning directly or indirectly public space.⁷ As a result the Ministry of Regional Development prepared Assumptions of National Urban Policy until 2020 [Ministry of Regional Development 2012]. According to the formulated in the mentioned above document definition „National urban policy is targeted territorially action of the state for the sake of sustainable development of cities and their functional areas together with the exploitation of city potential in the national developmental processes. This policy is formulated at the national level and realized by means of investment activities of various public and non-public subjects and also by means of creating optimum legal and financial conditions for the development of cities”. What needs to be stressed is that: „restoring and consolidating spatial order in urban areas and limiting unfavorable effects of sub-urbanization and uncontrolled city overflowing” should be considered key challenges for this policy. Two years later the Ministry of Development published National Urban Policy 2023 [Ministry of Development 2015] which described the issues that have the most significant influence onto the quality of life, including shaping the public space. It was stated, among other things, that „Polish cities have been facing a number of challenges related to the quality and accessibility of public space, which results from, among other things, appropriating the space by, for example, gating large communities, which, in turn makes it impossible for

decided to cooperate on a national level. In this way the idea of Urban Movement Congress has been created. See <http://kongresruchowmiejskich.pl/o-nas/> [access: 11.08.2016].

⁵ See more on city movements, their genesis, global democracy, urban citizenship, right to the city: Mergler, Pobłocki & Wudarski 2013. Article by Beim, Modrzewski & Radzimski was written in 2010.

⁶ <http://kongresruchowmiejskich.pl/tezy-miejskie/> [access: 20.08.2016].

⁷ Theses of I Urban Movements Congress: 1. Inhabitants possess an inalienable right to the city. 2. Participatory budget means that inhabitants prepare budget for the whole city. These are not just procedures but an important social movement. 3. Social justice and preventing poverty and social exclusion are the obligation of urban community. 4. Restoration of historical areas supports urban identity and is the prerequisite of urban development. It cannot be confined to simple renovation but it needs to be an integrated activity that is worked upon with inhabitants. 5. No more chaos and disorder! Spatial culture guaranteed by legal order will result in increased quality of life. 6. Democracy is not just elections. Inhabitants have the right, based on reciprocal respect, to participate in the decision making process in the city. 7. Cities and metropolitan areas should be managed according to the principles of sustainable development and preventing suburbanization processes. 8. Locating national institutions in various cities supports national development. 9. Polish cities and metropolitan areas need support in integrating transportation systems: railway, road, public, bicycle transport and walking in order to attain the goals of The White Paper on Transport and Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities.

others to use the public space, greenery or transport. This leads to spatial segregation, social disintegration and has an unfavorable effect onto communication behavior – using one's car becomes a must – and onto the security of the inhabitants making the access for emergency services impaired" [Krajowa Polityka Miejska 2015: 18].

Conclusion

There has been much discussion on public space recently conducted not only by experts but also by politicians. It has also become the subject matter of the discussions carried out by average inhabitants and it has become fashionable to participate in such discussions. Bearing in mind how important public space is this process can only be regarded as positive. As the notion of public space has started to make the front pages of newspapers and magazines the degree of public awareness has been rising. People start to realize that the way in which the space is developed influences not only the environmental aesthetics, but also determines, in a broader sense, the quality of their lives. They begin to understand that space influences their health, real estate prices and the overall attractiveness of the place of living or a place of work. Due to a rising activity of non-governmental organizations and city movements people realize that they do not need to remain passive recipients of spatial development but that they are entitled to take part in these processes. Recent years have also brought about significant changes in the national policy concerning public space making it more significant and valuable. Therefore, there are growing chances that this "fashion" for public space will continue and will last for a longer period of time.

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Współczesna przestrzeń publiczna – poglądy i dyskusje

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie aspektów związanych ze współczesną przestrzenią publiczną. Przestrzeń dla wszystkich wymaga szczególnej uwagi ze strony władz publicznych. Jest to dobro o wielkim znaczeniu dla społeczności lokalnych, ponieważ jej dostępność i jakość ma istotny wpływ na kształtowanie jakości życia ludzi. Artykuł wskazuje także na „konfliktogenną naturę” przestrzeni, przy czym „gra o przestrzeń” toczy się w wielu wymiarach oraz pomiędzy różnymi użytkownikami i grupami użytkowników. Coraz istotniejszą rolę w kształtowaniu przestrzeni w Polsce odgrywają dziś organizacje pozarządowe, szczególnie ruchy miejskie. To w znacznej mierze dzięki ich aktywności zaczyna zmieniać się polityka względem przestrzeni, o czym świadczy niedawne ogłoszenie przez rząd Krajowej Polityki Miejskiej. Badanie przeprowadzono, opierając się na artykułach w czasopismach naukowych, wiarygodnych źródłach internetowych i dokumentach rządowych.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń publiczna, dobra publiczne, planowanie i zagospodarowanie przestrzenne, społeczności lokalne, organizacje pozarządowe, ruchy miejskie, trzeci sektor, działania miejscotwórcze