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PERCEPTION, EVALUATION AND SOCIAL VIEWS OF SAFE SPACE

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Abstract. Space accounts not only for its constituent elements, but also for the emotions experienced by people who come into contact with space. When surrounded by space, our senses register the impressions related to our perceptions of space. Space is perceived with the involvement of various channels for communicating impressions. The information accumulated by different receptors is used by the observer to identify with and habituate space. Subject to the qualities of space, the observer may experience various emotions, ranging from fear and anxiety to a sense of freedom and safety. The paper discusses spatial thinking mechanisms which are involved in our perceptions of safe space and man-space relations. It analyzes spatial elements that contribute to public perceptions of safety and the factors that shape them. The paper also examines the concepts of urban stress and safety culture.

Key words: safe space, safety culture, urban stress

INTRODUCTION

People like to feel safe – this is a natural defense mechanism that prompts humans to settle in safe territories. Safety is a quality feature of the environment we inhabit. Fear is a direct response to the presence of threat factors, it lowers the quality of the environment and, consequently, the quality of life.

Through his perceptions of the environment, man formulates impressions about the quality of surrounding space, and based on those impressions, he arrives at conclusions regarding environmental safety. Physical surroundings can be identified with the elements of space that surround us, including buildings, structures, infrastructure, green areas, etc. The elements of managed space make up our direct neighborhood, and the quality of surrounding areas determines the level of safety in the environment, the perceived safety of property and, consequently, its value. The value of space is closely correlated to the

perceived level of safety in a given environment. Our sense of safety is directly determined by social perception and awareness (the existing threats, the source of threats, possible preventive measures).

Personal qualities play an equally important role in our perceptions of space. Every observer is a unique individual who has different character traits (is more or less susceptible to anxiety) and bases his perceptions of reality on the senses that are best developed. Character traits determine the way an individual responds to stimuli, they are responsible for the unique cognitive style in which an individual evaluates the environment, plans and acts out intentional behaviors in the surrounding space [Bańka 2002].

CONCEPT OF SAFETY

According to Korzeniowski [2008], safety is an objective condition that is marked by an absence of threat, and it is experienced subjectively by individuals or groups. Some authors distinguish between positive and negative perceptions of safety. A positive perception of safety implies a guarantee of survival, property ownership and the freedom of individual growth. In a negative sense of the concept, safety is regarded as an absence of threat. Korzeniowski [2008] also observes that ever since man became aware of his place in human society, safety has become the most treasured need and value. The cited author also remarks that civilizational development prompts man to generate new threats of unprecedented magnitude. Despite technical advancement (security, warning and monitoring systems), civilizational growth leads to alienation and contributes to a growing sense of danger. Danger is perceived as a potential cause of an undesirable state. Man naturally searches for “peace and quiet”, therefore, every threat is an undesirable state. The destructive effects of a threat are experienced individually. Threats can generate negative consequences because every entity (man, system, organization, nature resource) is characterized by a unique level of susceptibility or resilience that can transform a potential threat into damage. For a threat to be generated, specific possibilities have to exist in the affected individual, his environment or his relations with the environment. Potential threats to human existence may be posed by inanimate nature, living organisms, artifacts (objects produced by human activity), man and society [Korzeniowski 2008].

Quality of life is a broad concept where personal and group safety are important issues. Maslov’s hierarchy of needs is a theory in psychology that was proposed decades ago [1990]. This hierarchy is portrayed in the shape of a pyramid where the most fundamental, biological needs (that guarantee survival) are placed at the bottom, and the more complex needs for self-fulfillment, personal growth, development of creative and cognitive potential are found at the top. Starting from the bottom, the basic layers of the pyramid are represented by: physiological needs, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualization. Safety is a basic need that ranks directly after biological needs. As a core value, safety is closely related to social and cultural perceptions. Safe space is not only an objective technical fact, it is also a cultural fact that draws upon the individual’s and the society’s prior experiences [Bańka 2002].

Safety is a concept that originates with human core values, and it is determined by the level of social and cultural awareness.

There are various categories of safety. Narrower categories apply directly to people and their environment, including personal safety of inhabitants (road infrastructure and traffic safety), building quality, theft and robbery prevention, property protection against theft, vandalism or natural disasters, such as fire. In a broader sense, safety may entail prevention of natural disasters (fire, flood), quality of buildings and structures, technical infrastructure, geopolitical situation, etc. To a lesser or greater extent, every category of safety has a reference to space (ranging from personal safety to national safety, from the safety of individual territory to the safety of public territory).

CONCEPT OF RESIDENTIAL SPACE

Residential space consists of various types of information which is continuously perceived by the observers. The constituent elements of living space are identified and classified [Majer 2010]. Residential space is the territory we inhabit, it is a fragment of space that we have “identified” and “habituated”. In a narrower sense, residential place can be defined as an apartment, home, yard, plot, whereas in a broader perspective, it may denote our neighborhood, residential estate, district or city. In a residential territory, man and his spatial environment can be bound by various relations, including man-home, man-immediate neighborhood, man-residential estate, man-city. According to Baňka [2002], a territory can be defined as fixed space which is completely independent of man, but which affects man’s actions. The concept of protective boundaries is essential to understanding the definition of a territory. Boundaries guarantee safety and they determine specific territorial behaviors in a given location.

Space may be defined as a collection of physical elements or a product of man’s visual imagination because spatial imagination is a reflection on the human senses [Tuan 1987]. Space accounts not only for its constituent elements, but also for the emotions that it evokes in human observers. When surrounded by open space, i.e. outdoor space, or closed space that is limited by structural partitions, our senses register the impressions related to our perceptions of space. Space is perceived with the involvement of various channels for communicating impressions: sight, hearing, smell or touch. The information accumulated by different receptors is used by the observer to identify with and habituate space. Subject to the qualities of space, the observer may experience various emotions, ranging from fear and anxiety to a sense of freedom and safety.

Sensory perception is the first stage in the process of “perceiving” space. We pick up information from our surroundings with the involvement of sight, hearing, smell and touch. The acquired information is ordered and classified, and this process ends in the valorization of space. Valorization supports valuation and assessment of individual territory. It may give rise to actions or behaviors that aim to implement changes in the surrounding residential space. If space is perceived to be dangerous, man makes attempts to avoid the resulting threats, and he initiates actions that could improve the level of safety. In extreme cases, when he is no longer able to function in space characterized

by a low level of safety, an individual may choose to relocate to a different area of residence. On the other hand, the perception of space as a safe environment prompts the decision to settle down in this particular location.

Perception is a process of continuous verification of information delivered by the observer's senses. In the thinking process, the observer relies on the supplied information and makes decisions based on the acquired data. The perception process has three distinctive stages: selection, analysis and interpretation. The way in which space is perceived may, therefore, differ significantly from its physical attributes, because the observer performs a subjective evaluation of space during the thinking process. The multiplicity and repeatability of subjective evaluations of space lead to an objective assessment of its safety. The degree to which space is considered to be safe affects the quality of life of an individual or a group in a given territory, and it contributes to the fulfillment of human needs (sense of safety).

SAFETY CULTURE AND URBAN STRESS

According to Studenski [2000], safety culture is a collection of psychological, social and organizational factors that initiate or maintain life- and health-protecting activities. It is associated with the general notion of culture as a set of traits that reflect the "society's personality". The elements of safety culture are the values attributed to health and life, therefore, safety culture can be expressed by social attitudes to safety – a society's safety culture. An individual's safety culture is a reflection on individual beliefs and values relating to one's own life and health as well as the required protective measures. Attitudes to safety are shaped by the level of social development and affluence. Communities attach different weight to various values – sustenance needs are met first, and higher order needs are satisfied last. A high safety culture results from the placement of emphasis on the high value of life and health, and its practical implication is the search for a safe residential environment. A more developed safety culture is characteristic of higher social classes and high income earners who are accustomed to safe living space. Safety has a price, and members of wealthy social classes can afford the relevant costs (for example, by buying property in a safe neighborhood). The representatives of poorer social groups are "historically" used to higher threat and risk because they have been raised in dangerous areas.

Safety culture is closely related to the concept of urban stress, a category of environmental stress which encompasses a large and varied number of physical and social stimuli to which city dwellers are exposed. Manifestations of urban stress involve psychovegetative reactions, such as fear, the feeling of being lost, changes in behavioral patterns and competitive drive that results from inhabiting territorially restricted areas [as cited in Bańka 2002]. The specific features of highly urbanized areas are a source of stress for the inhabitants who experience anxiety and, therefore, have a reduced sense of safety. Urban crowding, which involves dense concentrations of people as well as buildings and structures, is a powerful stressor due to an absence of private territory that can be used exclusively by an individual. In urban areas, residential locations are

never completely secluded – noise is ever present in a city and buildings are separated by small distances. Due to urban sprawl, urban stress increasingly often affects suburban areas.

SAFETY AND SPATIAL STRUCTURES

The concept of safety is a combination of elements that are both dependent and independent of human activity. Human-dependent features include spatial arrangements, architectural solutions, structural objects or security systems. Some of those elements are created through human behaviors, attitudes and man's relations with the residential environment. Human behaviors also influence the ambience of a given location in space.

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes a place as new definitions and attributes are assigned to space. Nameless objects scattered in space do not define a place. Buildings and streets do not create a sense of belonging, and an awareness of a place is developed only when those structures take on distinctive features [Tuan 1987]. We shape space, and space shapes us. Space that has been organized as a result of human activity affects the persons who occupy it, its creators. The process of structuring the elements of space is very important in imparting order to space. The constituent elements of space will be organized differently, and they will have various meanings in different environments. The elements which are considered to be valuable in one place may distort spatial organization in a different location. The selection and incorporation of various elements into space affects its quality. A human habitat represents the skill and the art of organizing the space occupied by man. The majority of existing solutions for designing living environments rely on the physical attributes of space, and they disregard other important aspects, such as safety [Bać 2007]. Humans have an emotional response to the environment in which they live, and progressing globalization and the ever-increasing speed of life lead to a sense of disorientation in man's search for a safe and friendly environment.

Space is composed of private territories occupied by individual inhabitants. Private territories and public space are connected by a mutual feedback loop. The quality of public space affects the quality of private space [Bańka 2002]. To illustrate, the "quality" of a residential estate translates directly into the quality of private space, namely a home and the plot of land. In turn, the quality of the surrounding environment affects the quality of life. There exists a cause-and-effect relationship between the structure of space, its organization, constituent elements and the social phenomena observed in that environment. Public space supports the formation of social bonds, interpersonal relations and connections between the users of space. Positive social interactions foster the development of user-friendly space where we feel at ease. The users of collective space shape positive interactions through their attitudes, relations with the environment and level of personal culture – positive spatial behaviors contribute to the formation of social bonds. Negative attitudes displayed by space users have adverse consequences, such as social pathologies that affect the quality of life in space and the level of safety. According to Mordwa [2009], spatial prevention

measures should focus on shaping the space as well as the social environment. Efforts should be made to eliminate antisocial behavior in public space and to instill a sense of territoriality and responsibility in the residents.

The following elements contribute to spatial safety [Gronostajska 2006]:

- separation of public space from private space (functional disambiguation, the two functions do not overlap);
- good visibility of streets and shared areas;
- high number of people using streets and pavements;
- variance in the ages of residents (social and demographic aspects);
- elimination of nobody's space (the responsibility for managing shared space becomes blurred);
- preserving the features of a residential neighborhood (limiting the size of buildings and social groups).

Hauziński [2003] points to a sense of connection and identification with one's place of residence. A residential location is characterized by its unique architectural, spatial and social factors. Architectural space is governed by a set of norms and values. Semi-private collective space supports the formation of social bonds, whereas no such relations are established in placeless space.

RESIDENTIAL SAFETY AND HUMAN NEEDS

The contemporary determinant of residential comfort is a sense of safety in the place of residence which should be characterized by a legible spatial layout. The above is manifested by clear borders, environmental esthetics and a corresponding scale. The management of shared areas (courtyards, squares, streets), which integrate the local community, is equally important. "Integral space should be clearly separated from its surroundings, and it should merge a social group's core values, in particular in the area of ideology, general outlook on life, religion, prestige, esthetics, occupation, social class and nationality, into a synthetic whole. Collective space is characterized by a permanence of basic functions, shapes and structures which are subordinated to the structure, functions and culture of the social group creating that space" [Kobylarczyk 2010].

A territory is space which shapes human behavior, and the above applies particularly to territories where man spends most of his time (residential territory). The key function of residential estates is to satisfy man's basic sustenance needs, namely housing and relaxation. According to Dehneider-Skalaska [2006], a residential environment should guarantee a sense of safety that lowers stress and fosters well-being. In broader terms, safety implies the protection of life, health, well-being and property. Space also has situational value which is manifested by a sense of physical and psychological safety. The value of residential space, measured in terms of quality of space which is closely related to safety, determines prices on the housing market. Social awareness constitutes "shared" knowledge which is translated into practical action. If popular belief has it that a safe territory delivers a higher quality of life, then this is precisely the type of residential space man searches for. The conviction that a guarded

estate is a better place to reside in affects our practical actions. Firstly, it is a place where we want to live (and we search for property in such areas), and secondly, we look for methods and solutions that maximize our sense of safety (security measures and systems). A residential location should guarantee psychologically adequate conditions for life and personal growth, in particular a sense of safety and stabilization [Majer 2010]. This is why we prefer to reside in socially-friendly places that deliver a satisfactory level of safety.

The importance of safety in a place of residence is illustrated by the results of a survey carried out by CBOS (Polish Center for Public Opinion Research) in 2005. The respondents were asked the following question: “Let’s assume that you have decided to change your place of residence for a variety of reasons. What would be the most important factor determining your choice of a new home?”. As many as 61% of the polled subjects pointed to a safe environment. Social infrastructure and landscape were less important considerations. Low cost of living was an important factor, but it often stands in contradiction to a safe residential environment [Kalwińska 2008, CBOS survey, 2005, commissioned by the Chamber of Polish Architects]. An opinion poll involving 150 Metrohouse & Partnerzy agents produced similar results – 93% of the respondents claimed that residential safety was an important factor determining real estate purchase decisions, 85% admitted that clients avoided districts of questionable reputation, whereas 58% of the polled subjects pointed to the importance of anti-theft devices in the apartment and security systems in the building.

The report developed by CBOS Warsaw in May 2011 (BS/60/2011), entitled “Sense of safety, criminal threat and attitudes towards the death penalty”, states that most people have a higher sense of residential than national safety, probably because a living environment provides them with practical experience. In a survey carried out in May 2011, 88% of the respondents declared that their neighborhood was safe and peaceful, whereas a contrary opinion was expressed by 11% of the subjects. The CBOS report concluded that the number of people who felt safe in their living environment remained stable over the past four years, and that perceptions of environmental safety were influenced by the size of the respondents’ place of residence. The highest level of safety was reported by inhabitants of villages and small towns, and the lowest – by city dwellers. The respondents’ financial situation was also an important factor – individuals with a lower material standing were more likely to regard their neighborhood as unsafe. The reported results indicate that a high number of respondents who perceive their residential environment to be safe had made a conscious decision to live in that particular area.

“EXCESSIVE” SAFETY

“Excessive” safety could lead to a crisis in a residential location. As noted by Bańka [2002], homelessness is the loss of one’s home, namely individual space that gives an individual a sense of identity. The more a residential building and its immediate surroundings are “guarded”, the greater the feeling of threat among its inhabitants (due

to isolation and loneliness). The traditional concept of “home”, namely a location that is defined in terms of unquantifiable values (e.g. ambience) and immeasurable relations between neighbors, has been reduced to a technical product. According to Bańka [2002], the above is synonymous with homelessness. The devaluation of the concept of “home” also results from the construction of large housing units, characterized by high population and building density, as well as the steady erosion of public space. Ghettoization is a new phenomenon observed in contemporary housing estates. It particularly applies to downtown districts as well as districts with old housing resources. Members of the middle class move to suburban areas, leaving less-affluent residents in downtown locations. Ghettoization also results from the construction of gated residential complexes, the “ghettos” of the rich. Although various security systems are installed in the estate and individual apartments, most residents do not feel safe. They experience a sense of alienation due to an absence of social bonds and the formalization of interpersonal relations. Other authors have also noted that most attempts to instill a sense of safety in residents by implementing physical security systems rather than social and spatial solutions are relatively ineffective, and that intensified security measures could lead to the fortification of living space [Jasiński 2009, Kantarek 2007].

CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary man makes conscious attempts to choose his place of residence. One of the criteria that determine his choice of location is a sense of safety. Areas which are a source of stress are generally perceived to pose a threat to the life and health of their inhabitants, therefore, they are of low market value. In search of core values, including the protection of life and health, people migrate to potentially safer areas or they introduce improved security measures in their existing place of residence. Our activities, behaviors and attitudes towards the surrounding space largely affect the quality of the environment in which we live.

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PERCEPCJA, OCENA I SPOŁECZNY ODBIÓR PRZEŚRZENI BEZPIECZNEJ

Streszczenie. Przestrzeń to nie tylko elementy ją tworzące, ale i emocje, które odczuwamy w zetknięciu z nią. Podczas przebywania w przestrzeni zmysły rejestrują doznania związane z jej odbiorem. Następuje percepcja przestrzeni różnymi kanałami przenoszenia doznań. Gromadzone poprzez różne receptory informacje są następnie wykorzystywane do osvajania przestrzeni, identyfikowania się z nią. W zależności od cech przestrzeni odbiorca może odczuwać różne emocje – od strachu i zagrożenia po poczucie wolności i bezpieczeństwa. W artykule przedstawiono mechanizmy myślenia przestrzennego w odbiorze przestrzeni bezpiecznej oraz relacje człowiek–otoczenie. Omówiono także elementy przestrzeni wywołujące poczucie bezpieczeństwa w jej społecznym odbiorze oraz obszary ich kształtowania. Poruszono zagadnienia stresu miejskiego i kultury bezpieczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń bezpieczna, kultura bezpieczeństwa, stres miejski

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