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## Dimensions of urban degradation in Poland

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## DIMENSIONS OF URBAN DEGRADATION IN POLAND

**Abstrakt.** *As a result of research conducted by the author, there were 120,200 hectares of areas identified in Polish cities that require regeneration, which constitutes a little more than 21% of all invested and urbanized areas. In terms of surface area and frequency of occurrence, the main problem is the one, which concerns old downtown districts. Drab prefabricated towerblock housing estates which, according to many municipal authorities are in a crisis, occupy a much smaller surface area of 14,000 hectares, yet the number of their residents approximates that of the old downtown districts and amounts to ca. 2.1 million people. The conducted research shows that there are 4.4 million people, who live presently in degraded areas and in areas that need to be regenerated. Also 24,000 hectares of post-industrial areas were identified. Other estimates indicate that there may even be twice as much of those post-industrial areas (40,000 hectares) but due to their contained nature and limited accessibility municipal authorities are not always aware of their existence. Based on the estimates of PKP S.A. Railways authorities one can assume that already today ca. 15,000 hectares of post-railway areas might be subjected to regeneration and reuse, including 100 multi-mode railway stations, which are critical for urban development. In 140 Polish cities and towns there were ca. 11,800 hectares of post-military areas identified, the majority of which have already been developed or adapted for urban purposes. Still there remain ca. 4,000 hectares of areas that require specific actions.*

**Key words:** cities and towns, regeneration, old downtown districts, drab prefabricated towerblock housing estates, post-industrial and post-military areas

### Introduction

The issue of degradation of urbanized areas exists in almost all cities and towns in Poland. The problem, which is perceived by city dwellers and local authorities to be the most acute one is the degradation of areas that perform residential, and residential and service functions, especially those in downtown districts that were constructed before 1945. In reaction to the crisis, the greatest number of regeneration programmes and projects are focused on those areas. The issue of degradation of large housing estates concerns a considerably smaller area, yet also a large group of the population. Generally, the situation in those areas is better than that in city centres, and many problems can be solved through either specific investment projects (e.g. thermal insulation programmes), or social projects (e.g. supplementation of social infrastructure).

Post-industrial areas, although presently often inaccessible and in a way "excluded" from the urban space, constitute a significant development potential. A wider utilization of those areas is related to the necessity to limit the possibilities of investing on "green" areas. Post-railway areas, due to the fact that they still remain within real estate resources of PKP S.A. Railways, are now very rarely covered by regeneration schemes. However, within a dozen or so years' perspective, there is a possibility of rebuilding of about 100 largest

railway stations to form multi-mode transportation interchange points, around which urban "life" could concentrate again. Post-military areas, located mainly in the west part of Poland, are being gradually developed. Property left by the Soviet troops has already been developed or degraded in majority of cities and towns, and now it poses a smaller problem to their local authorities.

### **1. City Centres – Main Urban Problem Areas**

Extensive studies carried out under an ordered research project demonstrates that the greatest problem related to regeneration concerns old, pre-war downtown districts which, at the same time, are city centres (cf. Jarczewski, 2009).

After 1945, old, pre-war districts were generally neglected. There were several reasons for that:

a) Efforts related to the construction of new technical infrastructure were directed mainly to newly built housing estates (waterworks, sewage systems, gas pipes, roads, sidewalks, etc., district heat networks). In downtown areas "some" infrastructure still existed, so unless especially necessary, the responsible authorities settled for repairs or only fragmentary modifications and improvements of it.

b) The pre-war tenement houses had complex ownership structures. Flats in those buildings were partly rent-free privately owned ones but following the so-called decree on compulsory quartering from 1945, the rights of flat owners were considerably reduced and many (still) private tenement houses were occupied by council tenants. Owners of many tenement houses were killed or vanished during the war, were dispossessed or displaced, and their properties were taken over by the state. Consequently, owners and other residents of those tenement houses did not constitute uniform groups, did not hold any strong position within the city and often, when competing for resources or investment projects, they lost to housing cooperatives or housing estates built by various enterprises.

c) With time, the difference in standard of flats in new towerblocks as compared to that in quickly declining city centre districts was becoming bigger and bigger. More affluent and more enterprising individuals and families began to move to those new housing blocks. As a result of that increasing process of negative selection people who remained in downtown areas were only the elderly, helpless, as well as all kinds of dregs of society, or also not infrequently large families. Such a social structure impaired even more and more downtown areas in the municipal struggle for resources and funds.

d) Difficulties with exchange of municipal flats, low rents, attachment of the elderly people for "their" flats impeded the effective use of flats. It often happened that single persons occupied flats of more than 100 sq. m. in surface area.

All those factors caused that in 1990, at the threshold of local government democracy, downtown areas of Polish cities and towns were in a crisis which, in the years to come, was enhanced by the following, additional elements:

a) unclear ownership structure – the legal situation of many tenement houses and apartments has been and still is not clarified, which substantially impedes, and often prevents any investment activities;

- b) a relatively strong (after 1990) protection of tenants. For many years, owners of tenement houses could not request market rents from council tenants.
- c) the progressing process of ageing of residents and depopulation of city centres, also due to the fact that more and more residential space was taken over and occupied by various businesses;
- d) a very strong ownership right, stipulated in the Polish Constitution, combined with the relatively weak economic power of many residents of old downtown districts impedes, and often prevents any regeneration projects unless owners express such a will.
- e) still not strong but quickly developing processes of suburbanization, which additionally weaken the central areas in cities.

Those negative trends in old downtown areas were enhanced or weakened by the overall social and economic situation of the city and of its major workplaces. Undoubtedly, the scale of degradation of pre-war districts in the town of Stalowa Wola (e.g. the district of Rozwadów) is now much more serious than the degradation of the districts of Kazimierz or even of Podgórze in Kraków. Nevertheless, neither quick economic growth of Kraków eliminated degraded city districts in Kraków, or growingly poor condition of steelworks in Stalowa Wola became a direct reason for the degradation of the district of Rozwadów. One should also mention that the still very severe shortage of flats in Poland causes that there is no problem of empty, uninhabited flats or buildings and that free flats are relatively quickly re-occupied, which protects many districts against quick degradation.

Bad situation in city centres improved, to some extent, after 1990 as a result of enthusiasm on the part of inhabitants and local governments in some cities and towns for restoration and regeneration of their historic districts, and especially marketplaces, important squares and shopping streets (e.g. the towns of Bielsko-Biała, Tarnów, Bydgoszcz, Dzierżoniów, as well as the cities of Poznań, Łódź, Wrocław, and others).

From the viewpoint of local communities and authorities it turned out that downtown areas were particularly predisposed to regeneration. They constitute *areas of concentration of social, technical and material problems. They are also elements of the city's identity, carriers of its historical continuity, and evidence of its significance. The functional crisis strikes just those areas, especially in large cities, or provides a potential threat for them. In turn centres of medium-sized and small towns are places of concentration of exogenic contacts and functions (except for industrial ones). The prevention of degradation of those areas is a task, which conditions maintaining by those cities and towns of their role in the competitive environment* (Muzioł-Węclawowicz, 2009).

Regeneration is not always an appropriate instrument for solving troubles in cities (areas) suffering from the problem of a major weakening or decline of the economic base. Without healing the economic system (e.g. through the location of new investment projects, development of new service sectors, like tourism), regeneration will not yield any satisfactory results, will not release synergy processes, and the regenerated facilities may fall into decline again. In such areas one should focus rather on preserving the most valuable elements of their material and spiritual heritage as bases for future development processes.

## **2. Drab Prefabricated Towerblock Housing Estates – Regeneration Through Increasing the Number of Tenants?**

Results of performed research (cf. Gorczyca, 2009) show that Polish prefabricated towerblock housing estates are not threatened with physical and social deprivation processes to the extent that similar, large housing estates in the West Europe are. Such a situation results mainly from the gap on the housing market, counted in millions of missing flats, and a high demand for relatively inexpensive flats. Therefore, vacant houses, one of main "killers" of less attractive city parts, practically do not exist in Poland.

In contrast to many new projects sold by homebuilders, large housing estates seem to be paradoxically "good" places for living. Close proximity of recreation areas and much greenery, long distances between particular buildings, playgrounds for children, usually quite good public transport services in the area, rich provision of social infrastructure, shopping and service outlets are all elements, which cause that large towerblock housing estates are still attractive for their present and new dwellers. In addition, those areas are relatively safe: first tenants of flats are often retired people, and their children are usually level-headed families. Youngsters, often perceived to be the main source of threats, are relatively few in there.

One can hardly disregard major drawbacks of living in those towerblocks, which include low quality of housing resources, small surface areas of flats and low flexibility of their spaces, dark kitchens with no windows, poor workmanship, old and worn out elements of technical infrastructure (services, lifts, rubbish chutes, etc). Quite common are problems with parking places, not speaking of garages. For part of residents (both potential and present ones) there is a certain barrier in the form of the social structure of local community, especially in the case of old, homogenous housing estates attached to specific workplaces or enterprises. Despite those problems, communities in Polish cities have not rejected large prefabricated towerblock housing estates as such. Usually those estates are not equated with "bad" addresses. Only single housing estates have acquired a bad fame (e.g. Nowa Huta in Kraków, Widzew in Łódź, or Bemowo in Warsaw), which anyway usually greatly overestimates the scale of danger.

Contrary to the situation in the West Europe, in Poland one can find no, practically speaking, daring modernization activities, such as e.g. rebuilding of flats, adding extra floors, or reducing the number of floors. Regeneration activities in large housing estates are usually nothing but provision of extra thermal insulation, replacement of single elements of technical infrastructure, and refurbishment of staircases. In general, relatively inexpensive projects are implemented, consisting in area clearance, provision of minor landscape architecture elements, renewal of playgrounds and extension of car parking areas at the expense of green areas.

Seeing that their customers appreciate prefabricated towerblock housing estates, homebuilders follow their interest, and locate new projects in those areas or in their close vicinity. Such an increase in population number within a specific area often becomes a hotbed of conflicts, especially in the context of the insufficient number of parking places or the fashion for fencing land plots, which contributes to breaking original, overall functional structures.

By turning the perspective a little upside down, one can discern in that entire chaotic, yet more and more common tendency for increasing the number of residents in a given area just a chance for those large housing estates. This is a Polish way to protect many of them against degradation. New, successful investment projects within large prefabricated housing estates demonstrate to local communities that those places still live. New, relatively affluent residents of those buildings elevate their usually poorer neighbours, provoking them to formulate a statement that *if "people like that" move in here, I am not going to move out of here*. Children of residents of those new blocks fill the gradually emptying schools. The aesthetic and new buildings, spruce and neat surroundings become a counterpoint for grey, drab towerblock estates. Residents of blocks that date back to People's Poland now begin to watch their known for years surroundings in the mirror of modern architecture. They begin to see that something can be changed, and improved.

Bringing about such a social mixing in residential districts threatened by deprivation in West European countries requires tremendous outlays and efforts on the part of local authorities and often the results are not satisfactory. In Poland such processes take place without any pressures but only in well-located large towerblock housing estates. Further, controlled supporting of that process, with the simultaneous supporting of refurbishment and thermal insulation projects in those old residential blocks may become the Polish recipe for preventing the degradation of prefabricated towerblock housing estates.

In cities, which are less attractive in terms of housing, in areas of poorer economic basis, and also in city districts located in far away suburbs those processes do not take place, or their dynamics is not sufficient enough. In those areas, regeneration processes focus on renovating minor landscape architecture elements, caring for green areas, and providing thermal insulation to old housing blocks.

### **3. Post-industrial Areas: a Burden of the Previous Epoch or an Unutilized Potential?**

Post-industrial areas in Polish urban space began to appear as a common phenomenon only after 1990, which was the result of wider economic changes, including the fall and relocation of many enterprises, technological changes leading to the decrease in surface areas and numbers of industrial works, as well as the depletion of natural resources. As indicated by B. Domański (2009), the essential feature of areas used for industrial production purposes is their inaccessibility and exclusion of space from the local residents' activeness. Local authorities and populations often do not discern those areas within the city space or minimize the scale of the problem. It is estimated that there may actually be even twice as much of such areas (in excess of 40,000 hectares) than it might appear based on information provided by the cities for the needs of a questionnaire survey (cf. Jarczewski, 2009).

The reuse of those post-industrial areas is impeded not only by ownership and infrastructural barriers, environmental pollution, etc. but also by serious problems with combining private interests with public ones. The majority of regeneration projects in Poland have been implemented in whole by either private, or public entities. The specific nature of regeneration of brownfield sites requires usually cooperation between both parties, and the lack of such

cooperation holds up many projects.

The experiences of France, Germany, or the United Kingdom clearly show that there can be no serious regeneration of post-industrial sites without limiting investment expansion into green areas (Domański, 2009). As long as occupying green areas is easier and more profitable than investing on previously utilized industrial areas, there can be no chance for a more common regeneration of brownfield sites. It is obvious that in addition to legislative solutions, one must provide financial and institutional tools for the whole process. Competent agencies, supported by public funds, would be able to regenerate low-attractive sites through purchases of real estates, land integrations, demolitions, elimination of contaminations, and also through developing basic elements of technical infrastructure for the needs of future users. Investing on post-industrial areas is one of key instruments for the prevention of the uncontrolled urban sprawl.

#### **4. Post-railway Sites Owned by Railways**

Speaking of post-railway sites is an attempt at guessing, which parts of properties owned by PKP S.A. Railways are no longer needed for their railway transport purposes, or simply which railway sites are actually post-railway sites. Data resulting from various estimates show that such post-railway sites may amount to 15-20% of all PKP S.A. real estates, i.e. to ca. 15,000 hectares (Załuski, 2009). Those areas, located often in attractive parts of cities, can be used for the provision of services, less often for production activities, and also for housing and road construction purposes.

An especially interesting potential is that of about 100 largest Polish railway stations, with the number of their passengers exceeding 300,000 people yearly. Those facilities, usually located in city centres, constitute (with adjacent land plots and infrastructure) a major development potential. As a future, multi-mode transportation interchange point, expanded by shopping and service infrastructure, an office part and even a residential part, the railway station may again become one of places around which the city's life can crystallize. In many countries in the West Europe railway stations are rebuilt and modified with an unprecedented momentum and on a grand scale.

Unfortunately, processes of ownership transformations occur in Poland very slowly. To a single, quite well done project completed in Kraków there are very many projects that still cannot succeed (e.g. railway stations in the cities of Warsaw, Katowice, Wrocław, and others). PKP S.A. Railways have a very low motivation for selling and putting to business use their no longer wanted land plots, and have little money for new, spectacular projects worthy of the 21st century, either.

Any funds obtained from selling real estates by PKP S.A. Railways are most often, almost automatically, transferred for the repayment of debt, which the company generated in the early 1990s. Without developing a mechanism, which would make it possible to transfer those sales profits to new investment projects, those resources will not be unfrozen, despite the fact that, following the example of West European countries, it would be relatively easy to find capitals interested in financing such projects.

## **5. Life After the Soviet Army Troops and Without the Polish Army**

Russian (formerly Soviet) Army detachments withdrew finally from Poland in 1993. Property left by them was greatly devastated (sometimes, however, destroyed more by looters than by the Russian soldiers themselves, though much damage and destruction resulted from the activities of the "sister army"), many facilities were built with defects and of poor quality materials – that concerned in particular popular army barracks of the Leningrad type. Numerous military sites were highly contaminated, and training grounds were filled with hundreds of tons of unexploded shells and bombs (Jarczewski, Kuryło 2009). It was not always easy to adjust the facilities, which had been returned to the Polish state to "civilian" requirements. Part of such post-military facilities was successfully developed (including, among others, the former Soviet Army sites at Legnica and Borne Sulinowo). In certain cases, as a result of unsuccessful ownership transformations or lack of any interest, the property was devastated. The State Treasury supported communes, which contended with problems of post-military areas under the *Program of Development of Property Taken Over from the Russian Federation Army*. The Programme is slowly coming to an end (2011). It is assumed now that everything that has not been developed so far had been so extensively destroyed that it is not worth trying to save it. Therefore, the problem of property left by the Soviet Army detachments has generally been solved on the national level.

Property left by the Polish Army is a most recent story. Major transformations in the Polish Army started only around 1996, and the reorganization is taking place in the context of NATO standards and requirements (as Poland joined NATO in 1999). Starting from 1996, any property, which the army does not need any longer, is transferred to the Military Property Agency. The Agency sells it with an intention to gain as high revenues as possible and to allocate them for the modernization of the army. Such a system not always creates favourable conditions for sustainable development of cities, yet it allows to relatively quickly introduce useless real estates into the civilian space. Despite numerous reservations about the Agency, such a formula proved to be anyway much more effective than the system of handling unnecessary real estates developed by PKP S.A. Railways. Presently, the Parliament is working on the act concerning the liquidation of the Agency and the new law would stipulate direct transferring useless army land plots to local governments, free of charge. In total, it is estimated that ca. 4,000 hectares of land in Polish cities are post-military sites, which still need to be developed.

## **6. Dimensions of Degradation**

Research on various types of degraded areas estimate that in cities ca. 21% of invested sites require regeneration (cf. Jarczewski, 2009) and directly concern almost 2.4 million population. The main research method was a questionnaire survey, conducted among local governments. Only in the case of post-military areas it was possible to conduct the actual survey, while post-railway sites were estimated based on PKP S.A. documents. The selected method, in consideration of the lack of databases on degraded areas and the lack of even a uniform definition of a degraded area, turned out to be the only solution, enabling the estimation, at least an approximated one, of the scale of the problem. Results obtained from



the questionnaire were verified by analysing records in more than 200 Local Regeneration Programmes, and similar results were obtained.

One should remember, however, that the said method made it possible to learn the beliefs of municipal authorities and officers on the scale of crisis, and not to learn information based on uniform indexes. It was characteristic of survey results that they did not perceive or they downgraded the scale of problems relating to post-industrial and post-military areas, while simultaneously extending the crisis to many, and in certain cases to all large prefabricated panel housing estates and downtown districts.

**Table 1. Degraded Areas in Polish Cities that Require Regeneration**

Types of degraded sites	Surface areas of degraded sites [ha]	Percentage of degraded sites [%]	Percentage of invested and urbanized sites in cities [%]	Comments
Old downtown districts	62,337	51.8	11.0	Identified by almost all cities and towns
Large blocktower housing estates	14,883	12.4	2.6	Very diversified delimitation criteria
Post-industrial sites	24,034	20.0	4.2	Minimum value – in other estimates amounting even to 40,000 ha
Post-military sites	4,000	3.3	0.7	Plus about 1,500 ha in resources owned by the Military Property Agency
Post-railway sites	15,000	12.5	2.6	Optimistic plans of PKP S.A. Railways, including 100 multi-mode railway stations
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>120,255</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>21.2</b>	

Source: Jarczewski 2009, p. 291.

The analysis of Local Regeneration Programmes, which were collected by the end of September 2009, shows the following:

- almost each city or town establishes an old downtown district or a city centre (market square, main street) as its regeneration priority;
- in many cities and towns those Programmes cover also large prefabricated towerblock housing estates but main activities scheduled for them include thermal insulation projects and, possibly, replacement of technical infrastructure, which usually can hardly be called regeneration in the context of definition assumed in the Project. Housing cooperatives and tenement management organisations display great initiative in seeking financial support;
- post-industrial sites are more and more often considered as crisis areas, often however in the context of projects implemented from private investors' funds. Therefore, only the most attractive (from the viewpoint of their new functions) post-industrial sites, located usually close to city centres, are included in the Programmes;
- there are very few cities and towns, which have scheduled regeneration of post-railway sites (a dozen or so) and post-military sites (a few only);
- the scale of contemplated nationwide projects exceeds several times the relatively small financial capacities of Regional Operation Programmes;

- the system of monitoring projects and programmes being implemented is developed usually on a very low level. Only single cities or towns prepare target product, result, and impact indexes;
- social programmes very rarely concern exclusively regeneration areas. Usually they cover the whole city, and by that they contribute less to the reduction of problems in crisis areas;
- the participation of local communities in programming and implementing regeneration programmes is still very poor.

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