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The Specificity of Urban Sprawl in Poland: The Spatial, Social, and Economic Perspectives

Abstract

Objectives: The purpose of this article is to show and highlight the selected development-related trends of urban areas in Poland, with particular emphasis put on the phenomena that constitute urban sprawl, and taking into consideration historical aspects of the urban sprawl.

Research Design & Methods: The object of the study was Poland. The important base of the analysis was the historical evolution of the urban sprawl in Poland. The main research method is a comparative analysis based on historical examples in order to show the “roots” of the development processes of the urban sprawl in Poland as well as their characteristic features.

Findings: As a result of the research, the authors have determined that the Polish urban sprawl is specific and results from historical changes, the mentality of Polish people, economic processes, and legal conditions (too liberal laws on spatial planning).

Contribution / Value Added: This research adds to knowledge about the circumstances of the phenomenon of the urban sprawl in Poland, its evolution, and – above all – the degree of the individualisation of the causes and consequences of the Polish urban sprawl, which will allow decision-makers to adopt appropriate tools to support local development.

Implications / Recommendations: Polish urban sprawl is specific due to the high degree of suburban urban chaos (disorganised, spontaneous development), which has negative economic, social, and environmental consequences. In connection with the consequences of urban sprawl, action should be two-fold: on the one hand, it is about organising stretched suburban areas, giving them new spatial, social, cultural, and economic values. Here, an important role is played by spatial and social planning: the search for axes crystallising the organisation of space, i.e. places around which development could concentrate, creating more focused and ordered areas. There is also a need for centres of social concentration that could create centres of social life. This role could be played by cultural institutions (e.g. libraries), educational institutions, or religious institutions. On the other hand, it is necessary to create conditions for a ‘return to the cities’ for those whose life situation has changed, e.g. if their children are of legal age and independent, or who grew up in the suburbs. The latter is very complex. It would be difficult to identify existing cities that have ‘recovered’ their inhabitants from suburban areas on a large scale. Infrastructural preparation is needed, i.e. some sort of the rebuilding of cities, especially their centres. What is needed is the development of services and recreational spaces as well as the creation of new opportunities and possibilities.

Keywords: urban sprawl, metropolitan area, spatial planning in Poland, urban development policy

Article classification: research article

JEL classification: R1-1, R5-2, R5-8

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Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Professor Aleksander Böhm for his significant substantive input and invaluable help, without which this article would not have been created.

Introduction

One of the most important contemporary spatial processes which affects the economic and social spheres is the so-called amorphous growth of the cities (urban sprawl). When characterising this process, it should be noted that it relates to an uncontrolled (by the authorities) drain of the social, economic, and cultural resources from the city core towards its surroundings which does not belong to the city in the administrative sense. This is a negative phenomenon from the point of view of a metropolis' authorities and it weakens the quality potential, including the financial quality, of a city centre. The purpose of this article is to show and highlight the selected development-related trends of urban areas in Poland, with particular emphasis put on the phenomena that constitute the urban sprawl. The authors' intention is to present the specificity of the Polish urban sprawl by means of referring to certain traditions (both at the conceptual level and at the practical-actions level) in spatial planning, the functioning of the society, and economy. Our thesis here is that, paradoxically, urban sprawl should not be given an unequivocally negative assessment, as it provides a response to important social needs and aspirations which, due to political and cultural circumstances, could not be met otherwise. Another significant thesis stated in this article concerns the main reason of the "Polish" urban sprawl, which – in the authors' opinion – is the passiveness and sometimes also helplessness of authorities on all levels. This is related to the particularity of interests and the lack of collaboration and coordination of actions both on the vertical plane and on the horizontal plane.

An important element of this article is to underline the likely consequences of the urban

sprawl for the social, economic, environmental, and cultural potential of these systems in Poland. The paper is, to a large extent, of a theoretical nature; it is an attempt to answer questions about the causes of the amorphous sprawl as well as about the scope of the impact of this process on the potential of urbanized centers.

The first part of the article is a historical analysis of the phenomenon of urban sprawl, with particular emphasis put on its evolution process and the way of understanding the suburban space along with the way of its development. In the second part, the authors analyse the problem of the urban sprawl in contemporary Poland. The Polish urban sprawl has a number of characteristic features resulting from the legal framework and the historical conditions alike. The whole analysis ends with a relevant conclusion.

The outline of the history of urban sprawl in Poland

Urban sprawl can be defined as a 'cultural response' to specific needs and aspirations of various social groups. Forming the wealthier strata of society, the middle class is looking for new opportunities to pursue their aspirations and, to some extent, the processes of suburbanisation that are associated with these new social expectations.

However, it should be noted that the real living conditions in the suburban areas still do not meet those high expectations. Also important is the fact that Poland is going through a period of "acute crisis" in planning; therefore, it is difficult to carry out important tasks in order to reconcile the interests of different groups of residents and users of different areas as well as deliver space to reconcile the different development, economic, social, and environmental goals (Radziejowski, 2002, p. 20).

Thus, in Poland, one of the causes of urban sprawl development is the spatial chaos caused by the lack of control and coordination of development planning. It is primarily due to the lack of a good law and some kind of social culture and tradition

space management in Poland since the Middle Ages (Kudłacz, 2016, p. 249).

In Poland – in contrast to English-speaking countries – this type of landscape degradation which we refer to as sprawl does not have its fixed beginning, which is an answer to the question: when did it start? Most often it is said that in the recent past – perhaps at most dating back to the time of post-war illegal building or the so-called “spontaneous urbanism”. In fact, however, it is a process of much older roots, reaching the Middle Ages. As Henryk Samsonowicz (1970) has pointed out, municipalities that received municipal rights often closed access to offices or professions for newcomers. This resulted in the formation of new centres, often poorer and not fortified, sometimes cooperating with the municipality, sometimes remaining in opposition (Samsonowicz, 1970, p. 39).

Against the backdrop of modern European urban planning, especially in regions such as England, Northern Italy, the Netherlands, or supra-regional network of Hanseatic cities, Polish cities were economically weak and underdeveloped in terms of urban planning. From the 17th century, the rejection of urban culture typical of Western Europe in favour of the return of feudal relations (the return of a grange) became more pronounced. The deepening incapacitation of urban administration and the development of privileges of the nobility and the church – and then of the so-called *jurydyki*, i.e. areas that were not subject to the laws of the city and did not pay taxes – badly affected the condition of the cities. They made the body of the city barren from the inside and disrupted its development from the outside. The scale of this phenomenon is illustrated by the fact that in the 17th century in Kraków alone, on the municipal grounds, 20 new monasteries were established. In the era of elected kings, the nobility led to the enactment of an anti-burgess legislation, namely, among other things: the prohibition of lease of land in 1538, an attempt to liquidate guilds in 1538 and 1552, or a ban on practising active international trade

for the Polish merchants in 1565. As a result of these measures and of the deepening atmosphere of dislike for the middle class and urban life, city autonomy was severely restricted (*Encyklopedia Historii Gospodarczej...*, 1981, p. 525). The resource of contemporary urban structures depleted qualitatively and quantitatively, and was only complemented by not very successful – with the exception of Zamość and later of Rydzyna – private towns and a completely botched action of colonisation of the Borderlands in the 17th century.

The suburban or rural character of a quasi-urban space – i.e. of sprawl back then – was the result of two different processes: suburbanisation and ex-urbanisation. They are as old as city itself, but stronger under the Polish conditions (Figure 1).

The Polish native urban form in the 18th century was generally tightly “porous”, i.e. not yet finished and already deformed. Dim clarity and the blurring of boundaries were usually accompanied by a small-scale building, often one

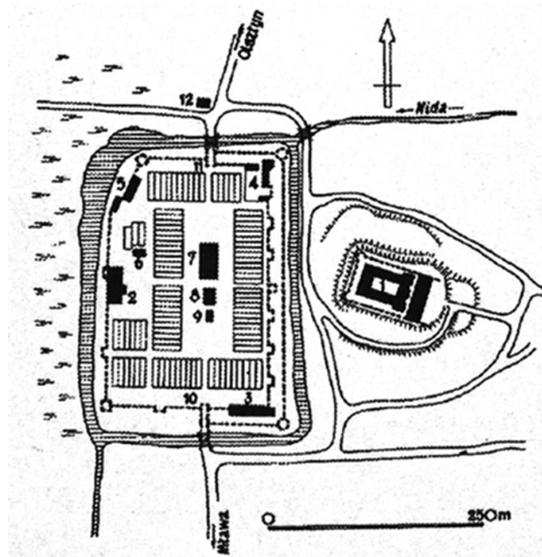


Figure 1. Nidzica – an example of a city founded by the Teutonic Knights

Source: *Zabytki urbanistyki i architektury w Polsce. Odbudowa i konserwacja, Tom 1. Miasta historyczne* (1986) (cited in Kudłacz & Hausner, 2017, p. 35).

of a semi-rural character. It was created around the disproportionately large squares and wide streets – urban-like – and then continued along suburban outgoing roads (Figure 1).

Despite some achievements, e.g. new industrial cities in Mazovia, Poland of the 19th century lacked both economic and socio-cultural opportunities to try to implement the concepts developed in Western Europe, where the demolition of fortifications created a new urban-like architecture (e.g. the new plan of Barcelona from 1855 by Ildefonso Cerdà). Distorted proportions between the new urban form and an amorphous background with the majority of that quantitative background – were the main and traditional differentiator of Polish cities. It is worth noting that in economic terms, the city remained the pole of development and exchange (merchant trails were passing through sites capable of the concentration of a multipurpose potential), and

the said spatial “slouch” had its spatial boundaries, namely that a scattered society remained at a great distance from the city-core, which guaranteed the possibility of using its resources.

The model of a modern society – open and pluralistic – which emerged in the 19th century in Western Europe was based on burghers. At the same time, on areas of Central and Eastern Europe, a “tribal” model of society developed, where national identity was shaped and perpetuated on the basis of the cultural, ancestral community (Kubicki, 2011, pp. 6–7). In this way, much more closed wholes were formed, building a social “inbred” tying capital. In the specific circumstances of society living under occupation, urbanity was identified with ‘strangeness’, which was supported by the saturation of the city space by foreign (Russian, Prussian, Austrian) symbols, works of architecture, institutions, etc., as well as by

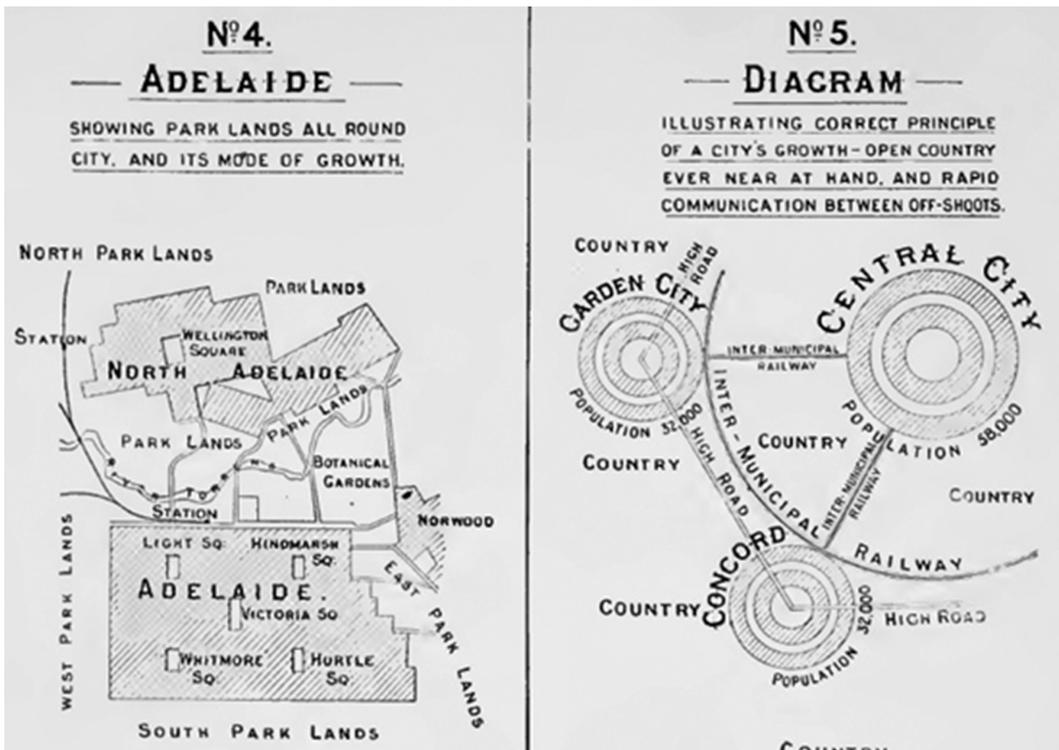


Figure 2. Garden city by Ebenezer Howard

Source: Howard, 1902, p. 129.

the domination of foreign models in the organisation of social life and foreign ‘official’ language. The city was present in the 19th century in the Polish literature almost exclusively in the role of a “villain”, i.e. a bad environment in which positive values could not be shaped (Jedlicki, 1988, p. 207).

The suburban structure arising in the process of suburbanisation was created by buildings that did not meet the urban standards of health (slaughterhouses, tanneries), fire protection (brick-yards, forges), functionality (water mills, fishing villages), guilds (menial villages, workshops of non-guild craftsmen), and, usually, property (poverty). In turn, ex-urbanisation is a process reaching the tradition of the Roman *villa suburbana* of building habitats outside the city, in a villa, a farm, a manor hunting house, or other suburban residence which provides a higher standard of housing than in the city, also used as a refuge for the duration of an epidemic. In Poland, this form was the domain of the nobility and higher clergy, but it also arose as a result of imitations and inferiority complex encountered among wealthier representatives of other social strata. In a way, it took its toll later on the Polish version of the imported ‘Garden City’ trend.

Striving to balance many dimensions of the city functioning expressed by Ebenezer Howard (1902) seems to be particularly interesting for the debate on the desired shape of the city. It was about the balance between the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ character of both community residents and spatial solutions. Other aspects of this balance include the necessity to maintain an appropriate balance between the number of the inhabitants of satellite cities and a central city; between the number of inhabitants and the number of jobs; between production capacity and the labour market and export markets; and, finally, between the value of nature and the changes necessary in the anthropogenic environment (Karwińska & Brzosko-Sermak, 2014, p. 40). Yet, in Poland, the realisation of the concept of a garden-city did not reflect these ideas. It is enough to compare the parameters and architectural forms used in the Western assumptions of garden-cities with

those encountered in Poland. In England, the norm was 2–3 ares plots and terrace or twin houses, but with a garden in the middle of the building. In Poland, villas in the manor style were built on ten times larger plots and not too close to one another. In England, the idea of a garden-city turned into a movement for the construction of New Towns. Going forward, one can find in it the elements of what today we meet within the mainstream of New Urbanism. Meanwhile, in Poland, colonies of villas were merely created and overly described with the euphonious term ‘garden city’. Their low intensity in comparison with Western Europe is due to the reluctance of organised and compact forms of residential constructions, which resulted from the rustic-nobility tradition rather than the noble one.

In the tradition of spatial planning in Poland, one can indicate examples – unfortunately discontinued – of planned urbanisation of vast areas freed from the rigours of the fortress. These include primarily Poznań and Kraków. The 1903 plan of Poznań was the first concept of zonal development of a city in Poland, distinguishing new districts planned outside of the Old Town, the development of different types of housing, industry, and greenery. This had been thirty years before the Athens Charter promoted the work–housing–leisure triad. A similar solution was brought in 1911 by an urban contest for the design of the Great Cracow [Pol. *Wielki Kraków*].

As indicated by Janusz Żarnowski, most of the contemporary society in the interwar period remained beyond the reach of the modern urban civilisation, but through the expansion of large urban centres which created metropolitan areas surrounding big cities, rural areas have changed under their influence. Those days, the typical urbanisation scenario for backward countries was characterised by a rapid increase in population of “grouping but not assimilated numbers of emigrants from the countryside” (Żarnowski, 1999, p. 355). In Poland of that time, the process of suburbanisation (ex-urbanisation) was not on a large scale, though it began in suburban districts of villas for the wealthy

strata of the society. There was also a larger scale of this pathological process of urban sprawl.

It should also be noted that in the interwar period (1918–1939), despite the absence of a law on spatial planning, by virtue of the building law, it was not allowed to develop areas without land consolidation and the re-parcelling of land layout into the urban structure (according to the so-called land development plan).

The development of these assumptions – one of a great promise for modern urbanisation – was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World

War. Later, i.e. as of 1945, the communist authorities promoted the vision of the new system – *inter alia*, in terms of the planned construction of towns – but it soon became clear that the centrally-controlled economy is an economy of scarcity, which also included housing.

In this situation, the government administration turned the blind eye to the lawlessness – usually one emerging on suburban agricultural areas – because they reduced waiting for the promised housing ‘at no cost’. People had the choice to either wait several years for an allocation of an

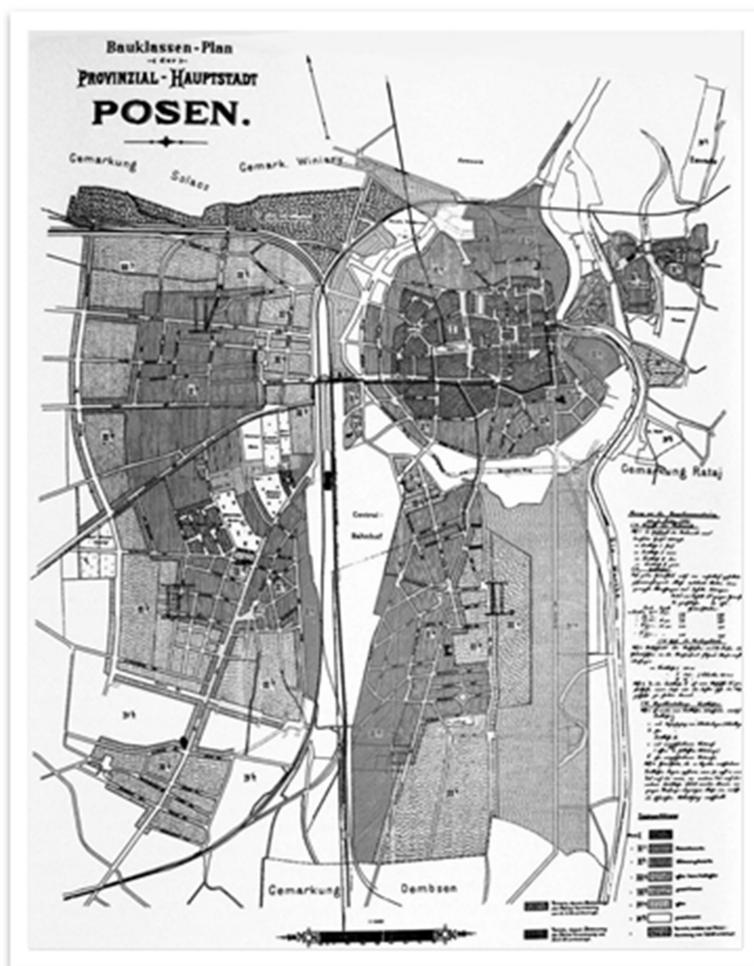


Figure 3. The Poznań development plan from 1903 (by J. H. Stubben) distinguishing between different types of residential buildings, i.e. industry and green

Source: Kodym-Kozaczko & Kozaczko, 2009, p. 105.

apartment in a block of flats, or try their hand and build a house ‘economically’ on their own plot – not always a construction and not always legally.

In Poland after the Second World War, some of the cities on heavily industrialised areas rapidly expanded their borders, often just by locating large housing complexes on the outskirts, later (after 1989) referred to as “bleak apartment buildings”, as well as undergoing the process of humanisation and spatial recomposition. In the post-war years, they were not called unpermitted buildings, but “**spontaneous urbanism**”. What is worse, after a short period of building carefully-designed first settlements in Nowa Huta or in Nowe Tychy¹, the period of the so-called “**poor urban planning**” began. The failure of the economy deepened, which in urban planning was accompanied by a reborn trend of functionalism in the most primitive form of overmuch free compositions. Furthermore, ‘ministerial arbitrariness’ – i.e. the construction of large housing arrangements beyond spatial plan – overlapped. This happened under the pressure of orders to increase production and of the shortage

of housing for the new workers coming from the countryside to work in the industry. Residential blocks built in the middle of nowhere had many features of sprawl, except that they were multi-family and built on a larger scale. The effects are still visible on both sides of the administrative border of the city.

Centralised control of settlement processes was characteristic for the early periods of the Polish People’s Republic; some cities were of a closed character and residency restrictions facilitated the control of social processes. City dwellers did not have any free choice within the city; they often did not have influence on what part of the city and what type of building they lived in. For the purpose of developing industry, homogeneous estates were created (the so-called company construction). The process of intensive industrialisation also enforced certain ways of organising social life (such as activities of employees during the day or week, strictly subordinated to the needs of industrial distribution). All this did not promote the formation of local communities within urban communities, but, rather, contributed to the process of atomisation

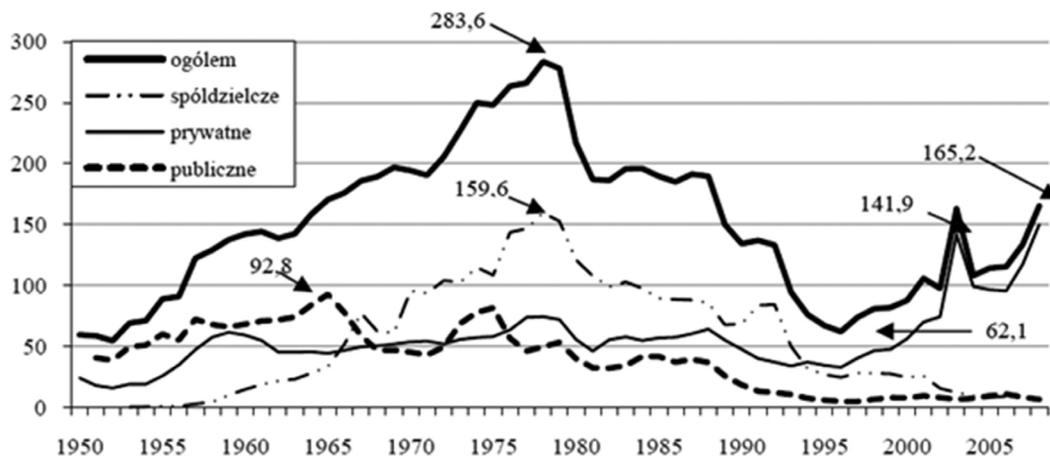


Figure 4. Flats put into use in Poland in 1950–2008 and changes of their investor structure (in thousands) (the key in the chart reads, respectively: in total, cooperative, private, public)

Source: Frąckowiak, 2010, p. 119.

¹ These two examples relate to the so-called ‘socialist model cities’, emerging not in the process of evolution, but holistically designed and implemented within a relatively short time.

(*Raport wprowadzający Ministerstwa Rozwoju Regionalnego*, 2010, p. 10).

The processes of social life underwent significant modifications, if one compares different stages of the period of the Polish People's Republic. However, an inherent feature of this system was a significant atrophy of the social fabric. One of the most well-known concepts explaining the peculiarities of the "socialist" Polish society, formulated by Stefan Nowak, appealed to the concept of "sociological vacuum" (1979, pp. 155–173). This meant the creation of spaces which were socially "empty", appropriated by the authorities or institutions associated with the government. There were no conditions for the formation of citizenship, which, contrary to the ideological declarations, the socialist state did not need for its functioning. A large number of members of the society withdrew into the sphere of privacy, expressing the lack of confidence in the government. At the same time, the state was almost the exclusive distributor of goods and services necessary to meet everyday needs, which created an attitude of patronage, but also somehow prevented the formation of aspirations for greater freedom, willingness to co-decide, etc. (Wnuk-Lipiński & Bukowska, 2008, pp. 9–10).

The period of the Polish People's Republic did not contribute to inculcate thinking about space as a valuable resource. Poland has come to discover this truth only recently, i.e. in a situation where a large part of urban areas could be described as chaotic and degraded spatially, socially, and environmentally. Moreover, in democracy – and with a very low level of the development of civil society at the same time – actors of the "game of space" at all levels contribute to that degradation. This started from the parliament (inappropriate laws), through local governments (decisions geared to short-term profit), to citizens who do not recognise the need to respect the common good and who act in a selfishly understood own interest (Wycichowska, 2012, p. 434).

Along with the development of certain areas of an autonomous civic activity, since the early

1980s, Poland began to debate on the possibility of the formation of a civil society, initially mainly in the context of illegal or semi-legal institutions, in closed artistic and intellectual environments. After 1989, legal and political barriers to the development of civil society were removed, quite a rapid rebuilding of the existing institutions and organisations started (so that they could become 'democratic'), which often was very superficial anyway, sometimes constituting merely a cosmetic reorientation of behaviours and actions. However, the natural basis of the agreement and the creation of bonds that were "fighting communism" began to fade relatively quickly (Mokrzycki, 2000, p. 23). The practice of democracy, the need to make decisions and bear the consequences, taking into account the different needs and expectations, etc., proved to be much more difficult than it had seemed in the first period of enthusiasm associated with the change of regime.

These attitudes and the related behaviours and choices affected all spheres of social life. Within the scope interesting to us, they were also reflected in the ways of managing space and in attitudes towards the common good (including public spaces). The feeling of a lack of influence had been accumulating for decades and resulted in 'selfish' decision-making, aimed at the realisation of private interests without regard for the common good. That attitude did affect the behaviour of not only individual citizens, but also representatives of local authorities and businesses.

The picture of future Polish cities outlined in 2000: "The scenario in which, as a result, they become similar in form and structure to the provincial, average American, Latin American or East Asian city, with its skyscrapers, buildings along routes, unbridled expansion of space, amorphous shape and investments sprawling endlessly, is not impossible" (Kochanowska & Kochanowski, 2000, p. 53). However, also today, in 2021, it is alarmingly likely. In a way, this meant the continuation of the above-mentioned dysfunctional "spontaneous urbanisation".

Urban sprawl in contemporary Poland

A few or a dozen years ago, many researchers as well as practising town-planners, drew attention to the shortcomings of regulation and legal planning, organisational solutions, as well as the lack of cooperation between various entities in the sphere of the organisation and management of urban space. As Adam Kowalewski ironically commented as early as in 2005, in Poland there is a high level of a “cross-party agreement” to *not* deal with urban policy and urban issues (2005, p. 19).

Urban sprawl in Poland as well as in other parts of Europe stems from exuberant market processes and from controllable activities consisting primarily in creating conditions for municipalities located in the metropolitan area in order to attract external capital (Karwińska, Böhm, & Kudłacz, 2018, pp. 29–30). What is equally important, the decisions taken by entities (units) on leaving the metropolis and functioning in the metropolitan area can be conscious, rational, economic, but at the same time also non-economic and not conscious. This depends on the motives for taking the decision to move to the city. In turn, motives and expectations are linked to the characteristics of the entities and individuals making the decision to change the place of residence or investment. The most conscious and rational in this matter are, of course, entrepreneurs, whose business it is – in simple terms – to maximise financial profits. The location of an office infrastructure of international companies in the central part of the metropolitan centre is a matter of business profitability and prestige. This trend had persisted since the middle of 20th century and only slightly has changed its direction and strength, i.e. for some, metropolitan service and office infrastructure becomes too expensive, while for others it is too small, hence there is a tendency to move business premises to specially-designated sites on the outskirts of the metropolis – or outside its borders – while remaining in the immediate vicinity. This, among other things, resulted in the breakdown of spatial compactness of the metropolis and

the growth of significance of metropolitan areas. However, it is worth adding here that circumstances favouring the spatial chaos in Poland include too liberal laws regarding zoning as well as selfish attitudes of entrepreneurs, local governments (manifesting in tearing away potential from each other, unwillingness to cooperate, etc.), and people (‘my plot/home must be the most beautiful, let the others worry about that later’) (Bhatta, 2010).

The phenomenon of an amorphous development of the suburban space relates primarily to the citizens and users of metropolitan centres. Decisions taken by individuals are most often rational, but sometimes not fully conscious. The phenomena of amorphous growth of suburban space are related to the behaviours, needs, and value systems of people belonging to several different groups: rich city dwellers looking for peace and quiet as well as space; young citizens of the metropolis in the process of enrichment and looking for a flat on mortgage, cheaper than it would be in the centre of the city, but still offering good standards of living for the family; new citizens coming from non-urbanised areas, who ‘for starters’ choose to live more in the periphery; and, finally, different categories of users (e.g. students commuting to work and using specialised services). All these groups wish to tap into the resources of the metropolis, which in the long perspective results in the need to clear communication channels, but also to raise various costs related to everyday commuting to the core-city.

Under the Planning Act of 2003 and as a result of the introduction in 2015 of a new construction law under the slogan “freedom of development”, some bad practices of the communist period were eventually addressed. Too liberal “WZ”² – or simply an exemption from a building permit – is a step reaching even further and resembles the erstwhile *jurydyki*. The laws of the 17th century released

² In Poland, conditions for land development implies an administrative decision which practically equals a building permit (or its lack) and constitutes a substitute for a local spatial development plan.

the favoured investors from urban legislation. Current regulations exclude certain investments from the rules of the spatial order and will degrade the landscape on a larger scale. Under the populist attitude of the legislator, they sanction the priority of the right of ownership over local law. The border of a city regulates nothing. Thus, the phenomenon of **internal sprawl** and **external sprawl** emerged, unknown elsewhere. Today, the same thing can be observed in new circumstances. The so-called *departmental sprawl* died, but its place has been taken by *developer's sprawl*, i.e. investments on land purchased by individual developers and usually not coordinated with the basic document defining the directions of urban development (requiring a study of the conditions and directions of spatial development).

The development of technical and transport infrastructure encourages one to live outside the city in homes where standard equipment is no different than housing in the city (and often higher). The prices are competitive and the Internet allows a high degree of remote work and studying, not to mention other services which ease the discomfort of commuting. However, they are only contemporary accelerators of an old phenomenon.

Today, the traditional passion for independence and being on one's own is also motivated by environmental conditions (naturally better outside the city), an increasingly higher level of wealth, as well as hopes associated in some cities with the development of the suburban railway network. When analysing the substrate and the development of this phenomenon in the last two decades, the following factors should be taken into consideration:

- the ethos of individualism and the dominant role of property rights;
- the liberalisation of planning and construction regulations;
- growing areas of set-asides as well as the baby bust;
- the oversupply of building land ('raw' – agricultural until recently).

This combination of conditions must result in extensive building – not just housing – on both sides of the administrative border of a city. Demographic forecasts are relentless, and the absurd surplus of building land in depopulated cities and around cities becomes increasingly obvious.

An extremely important role is played here by the level of social capital, especially sensitivity to common good, compliance with recognised standards and rules, as well as trust in others and in institutions. For at least thirty-five years, in countries with a higher level of social capital, sprawl which has been negatively evaluated by professionals is evolving and changing – owing to their work – into a more acceptable form. In the wake of a better-composed planning character of this building, it is sometimes described with new, ennobling adjectives that invoke the concept of "new urbanism", namely 'smart sprawl' or 'smart growth' cities. In Poland, these are exceptions, and yet most people still prefer "construction guerilla" than "new urbanism". It is a paradox that results from the clash of a village-noble tradition with technological progress.

When indicating the social causes of urban sprawl in contemporary Poland, one should recall the three levels of analysis of phenomena occurring in the social, economic, and cultural spheres that were defined by Marek Ziółkowski (2000). These consist in, first, taking into account universal trends observed in all the countries of our cultural circle; second, taking into account regional specificities associated with a particular region of the world; and third, taking into account the individuality (peculiarity) of Poland (Ziółkowski, 2000, pp. 13–15).

Universal trends, which are important from the point of view of the analysed phenomenon, are primarily the processes of civilisational development, i.e. especially the development of new communication technologies, but also changes in the professional sphere; the growing permissiveness of culture and acceptance of various lifestyles as well as alternative values; and changes in the way an individual grows, especially

with regard to the growth of the importance of individualism itself.

Processes and phenomena at the regional level, specific to societies of Eastern Europe, include, above all, the disintegration of the socialist system and the formation of a new type of expectations and needs, with various residues of socialism, both material and mental. Characteristic attitudes include a pursuit of hasty “catch-up” in different fields. In connection with the issue of the sprawl of a city, what should be noted here is the desire to compensate for the lack of freedom and a sense of agency, also in terms of control of one’s own life and making own choices.

Finally, there are phenomena and social processes typical of the contemporary Polish society. One of the features of Poland of the 21st century is the growing social polarisation and widening disparities in various spheres of life, starting with wealth, through access to various privileges, through value systems, to the level of social activity and participation. The increasing regional differences should also be acknowledged (especially in view of metropolises), namely peripherals and cultural differences, including ethnic and religious ones. The wealthier strata of the society is looking for new opportunities to pursue their aspirations and – to some extent – processes of suburbanisation, and they are associated with these new social expectations (Podęworna, 2006).

As opposed to the American urban sprawl, in which the spontaneous growth of the phenomenon was accompanied by the development in technology, in Poland it is the passiveness of the public administration that is conducive to this phenomenon. Public administration is understood here as both central and local authorities. The central administration is responsible for the legislation that should prevent phenomena that are socially unwanted and economically and spatially ineffective. The Act of the Planning and Spatial Management seems to be the birthplace of some disturbing phenomena, which – together with the aforementioned historical conditions of the development of space in Poland and

the specific Polish mentality – result in a gigantic abundance of building space and the spatial chaos leading to various economic and social dysfunctions. The above-mentioned Act seems to be excessively liberal and at the same time vague, especially where it concerns spatial management. It lacks stipulations that would unequivocally introduce standards for the shaping of space in the form of restrictions for all the entities that contribute to the forming of space. Ambiguities in a legal act allow for freedom of interpretation, which is the first step to acknowledging the priority of private interest over the public one. The socio-cultural context of this Act also includes the attempt to repay the wrong and injustice that the owners had suffered for decades of the socialist system, when they were deprived of their rights to the premises they owned. Returning to the legally-guaranteed respect to private property and the owner’s right to dispose of it was a time of putting exceptionally strong emphasis on placing a premium on individual interests and at the same time negating anything that even resembles centrally-steered economy. The terms “planning” or “social interest” became negatively perceived and ‘morally wrong’ due to the abuses perpetrated by the socialist state. This negative ideological burden does not allow some of real-estate holders – who, after many years, regained the right to their property – to accept the necessity to take into account the interests of the city or the local community, and sometimes even to **prioritise** them. The period of the People’s Republic of Poland did not contribute to instilling thinking about public space as a valuable resource. Polish people started to discover this as late as in the 1990s (the beginnings of democracy), when a large part of city space could be described as chaotic and spatially-, environmentally-, and socially-degraded.

The Polish spatial policy is formed and defined in a report which constitutes the concept of the spatial management of the country; this document is of conceptual character, showing directions and describing the vision of the spatial development of the country, as well as where this

development is heading. The said document (The Act on Planning and Spatial Management) is a sound diagnosis of the issues and, as mentioned before, it is the most important legal act concerning spatial planning in Poland. Theoretically, therefore, it impacts the slowing down of the phenomenon of urban sprawl. It specifies the principles of shaping the spatial policy by units of local self-governments, but not the spatial policies of communes. These policies are general enough to allow for different interpretations of the “spatial order” and “balanced growth”. In theory, these principles are of key importance to the establishment of the study of conditions and directions of the spatial development of communes, as well as local spatial management plans, which ought to be paramount in proceeding cases of designating certain space for particular purposes as well as establishing the principles of their management and development. Taking into account the provisions of the Act and the sources that it refers to, these two key definitions should be understood as such land form that forms a harmonious whole and incorporates into ordered relations all conditions and requirements: functional, socio-economic, environmental, cultural, and landscape-and-aesthetic. However, as mentioned before, to some extent these provisions constitute wishful thinking. It is enough to prove to the deciding body that all conditions relevant for the commune’s space were met and one can realise the investment without any trouble. The Act also introduces the “planning permission” term, whose purpose is to substitute local spatial management plans of communes. The solution applied in Poland has been known in Europe (*inter alia* in Germany); however, the sheer scale of its use is shocking. Planning permission – which, in theory, is an administrative decision issued as an exception (in cases where there is no local spatial management plan) – is actually granted to 75% of entities realising investments in Poland, whereas only 6% of planned investments were denied such a permission, which shows that economic calculation is of greater importance to local authorities and investors than the social

and spatial consequences for the general public (Böhm, 2021, pp. 99–118).

This document provides accurate diagnoses of different issues and their remedies based on the spatial development resources of the country, yet it is simultaneously general to such an extent that it would be hard to expect it to have any influence on spatial policy, which is commonly realised at the lowest level of public administration (communes).

The analysed Act states that the local self-government of the voivodeship shapes and is responsible for the spatial policy in the voivodeship, including the realisation of tasks related to establishing the spatial management plan for the voivodeship. Regional self-government authorities have only a limited influence on urban sprawl through this document. Naturally, due to the territorial vastness of administrative regions in Poland, the protection of landscape and cultural resources is fictional. The following are usually analysed in such a document: islands of communication imperfection, other infrastructure deficiencies, directions where the potential residents might migrate, and the socio-economic growth-poles of the region. From this perspective, it is impossible to identify the changes in a commune’s tissue resulting from spontaneous (free-market) processes at the local and micro-local levels.

In compliance with art. 3 par. 2, the spatial policy of a poviats’ self-government (the poviats’ council and the staroste) involves making, within the body’s competences, their own analyses and studies on spatial management at the level of poviats and on issues related to its development. This means that these analyses and studies must be strictly related to the development within a poviats’ territory. In reality, then, spatial policy is not part of a poviats’ self-government’s competences.

The spatial policy of a commune is determined by a commune’s council through a resolution on the study of the conditions and directions of spatial development of a commune. This document stipulates the directions of spatial development of a commune by means of incorporating key

definitions. As key subjects of realising spatial policies, communes have at their disposal insufficient measures to, e.g., block undesirable investments which distort order, aesthetics, or functions of space, or which lead to irrational management of land resources, which are limited by nature. Ultimately, in case of a conflict between an investor and a local self-government of a commune, it is the court that decides on the matter, and due to the vast numbers of commercial investments or apartment blocks, developers hire teams of lawyers specialised in convincing courts that legal provisions are violated now.

Another dysfunction is worth mentioning, too, namely that the Act lacks effective instruments which would facilitate closer links between different levels of planning and spatial management in Poland.

On the other hand, when watching the kind of entrepreneurial initiatives developed in suburban areas, one can see a kind of “following” the aspirations, since a variety of specialised services is emerging, allowing space to satisfy the needs in a way more suited to expectations. Communities living in suburban areas are characterised by an increasingly high level of social and intellectual capital, which creates demand for valuable jobs that require great skills and competence. It promotes the transfer of entrepreneurial activity beyond the city limits.

Investment possibilities of Polish developers already exceed the boundaries of individual plots, as they enter larger areas. The market – including the housing market – is becoming more and more demanding. A significant part of the price of an apartment is derived from the attractiveness of the window view. There is a growing group of potential customers who can afford a better apartment, looking for an offer that includes not only a garden, but the proximity of services, attractive public spaces, and greenery encouraging recreation. More and more often, they expect environmental certificates for buildings and land use as well as guarantees that next year there will not be a wholesale scrap or incinerator built

in the vicinity. Therefore, developers have to go to the market with complex offers. There is a growing awareness among them of the role of the local plan. They look for areas where there is a plan, and not – as before – places that **do not have a plan yet**, and where you could realise any project having the aforementioned “WZ”.

An amorphous growth of the city causes and strengthens various spatial, economic, and social dysfunctions. They are linked to each other and form a self-reinforced syndromes of unfavourable features characterising socio-spatial wholes. They can generate the phenomenon of maldevelopment (i.e. bad, imperfect development) in all three areas (economic, social, and urban space).

The effects of uncoordinated development around cities considered in spatial terms manifest in the reduced investment availability of suburban areas. It is a paradox, because on the one hand the number of roads and technical infrastructure piped to distributed development increases, but at the same time the texture of this network is so fine-grained that it blocks or limits the possibility of determining the corridor for large investment lines (service roads, motorways, and highways). For the same reasons, the possibility to plan investments’ location of strategic importance for the city (e.g. airports, technology parks, or photovoltaic farms) is limited. In addition to these direct negative consequences, attractiveness is diminished as well, which leads to lower real estate prices, affected by the sprawl. This is due to changes in the passive exposure – i.e. ‘the window view’ – and is especially noticeable in areas of high landscape values, e.g. on the outskirts of legally protected areas such as national parks or landscape parks. As a consequence of uncoordinated development, the expansion of a zone of a disharmonious landscape and unwanted views is usually accompanied by increased atmospheric and acoustic pollution.

Due to the previously mentioned attitudes towards space in – especially the lack of a sense of its value – wasteful practices of managing spatial resources became popular in Poland (in terms of size, attractiveness, and accessibility). This led

to the formation of low-quality urban environments that are not able to compete (Kochanowska & Kochanowski, 2000, pp. 50–51). New urbanised areas have been created quite accidentally, i.e. not as a result of a long-term social policy, but, rather, as a consequence of a game of interests of different actors, often without proper infrastructural facilities and without field reserves (Lisowski & Grochowski, 2008, p. 250).

Reflecting on the social consequences of the phenomena generated by the exuberant and amorphous urban sprawl, dysfunctions should be determined which interfere with the normal course of, first, social life (macro-scale); second, local communities (meso-scale); and, third, individuals and small groups, e.g. families (micro-scale).

It seems that in the Polish reality, one can indicate the following consequences:

- dysfunctions resulting from the strengthening of **social inequalities** in access to desired values (education, health, recreation, implementing the lifestyle);
- a failure to observe the principle of **inter-generational justice** (a spatial reality limiting the possibilities for the future is created);
- dysfunctions associated with the process of building the **local identity** – the disappearance of a coherent “framework of reference” of a community, the lack of (or the loss of) space(s) defined as common;
- dysfunctions related to the provision of the **quality of life** for the inhabitants at the level of psychological, social, aesthetic, and intellectual needs. The needs for familiarity, the feeling of being “at home”, to establish and maintain social contacts (neighbourly socialising), aesthetic satisfaction with contacts with the environment, etc. are more difficult to meet under the conditions of an amorphous sprawl of the city;
- dysfunctions with regard to developing and maintaining **social relationships** (and, consequently, the formation and maintenance of social capital), related to the lack of civic centres of social aggregation;
- dysfunctions relating to building and developing **a sense of citizenship**. It is about being responsible for the city and developing attitudes of cooperation and collaboration; this refers also to prospective thinking, i.e. one not limited to a scale of one generation;
- dysfunctions relating to providing **freedom of choice** (as to lifestyle, the way of satisfying felt needs, etc.); contrary to expectations and hopes, areas of the sprawling city create various limitations associated with shortages of infrastructure, transport problems, etc.;
- dysfunctions in realising the right to the **use and development of space**, which is about creating conflictual areas in the situation of the overlapping of various concepts and conflicting interests. There are no “mediators” or professionals in the field of spatial planning that can be trusted by society;
- dysfunctions relating to the creation and maintenance of **public spaces** – a shortage or poor quality of these spaces has a negative impact on the possibility of the formation of relationships within the community inhabitants, as well as it is often an obstacle in solving local social problems;
- **diversity** – which is a reflection of the historical differences as well as of the diversity of past experiences – disappears. Space which is for everyone and is unified is essentially a space for no one specifically. It is about the disappearance of the specificity of various communities and cultural differences.

However, it is worth looking at the problem of urban sprawl from yet another point of view. One cannot ignore the fact that a significant number of locals choose this type of location. Why is this the case? The new circumstances of the ‘individual’ sprawl and the developer sprawl should be considered. The development of technical and transport infrastructure encourages people to live in houses outside the city, where standard equipment is no different than housing in the city. The prices are competitive and the Internet allows remote work and studying, not to mention other services, all

of which eases the discomfort of commuting. When analysing the grounds of this preference, the following circumstances should be considered:

- the dominant role of property rights and the ethos of individualism;
- the liberalisation of planning and construction regulations;
- growing areas of set-asides;
- the passive attitude of local governments;
- the oversupply of building land (“raw” – only recently agricultural);
- the baby bust.

This mixture of conditions must result in extensive building – not just housing – on both sides of the administrative border of the city. Demographic forecasts are relentless and the absurd surplus of building land in depopulating cities and around cities is becoming more and more obvious.

As Igor Zachariasz (2013) points out, in the existing local plans, the total area of 1,214,945 acres was designed for residential areas, which allows the settlement of 77 million people in the country which has less than 38 million inhabitants. In addition, the obligations of municipalities resulting from the adopted local plans in connection with the necessary buyout of land for public roads in all municipalities of the country amounts to approximately 130 billion PLN (Zachariasz, 2013, pp. 3–7).

According to the Izba Urbanistów’s (the Chamber of Town Planners) estimates (prepared just before its shutdown by the Polish Parliament in 2014), the country has at its disposal areas for development for approximately 320 million inhabitants. It is hard to imagine, just as it is unlikely to undo the liberalisation of the Law on Spatial Planning and Construction, newly implemented as a result of pressures from the society. Thus, large areas of fallow land endowed with the right to development – it is not known for what and for whom – have been left to their fate and will inevitably become a terrain of natural succession.

Controlling re-naturalisation processes would probably provide a chance to take control over this particular element. Such attempts – albeit for

different reasons – have been taken for several years in China for the purpose of maintaining desired levels of ecological safety in certain regions.

In Poland, it remains far beyond the scale of interest in national planning. It is not to be changed soon, because – according to research by the 2010 Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) – 82% of the population is satisfied with the existing level of the spatial order. In addition, 35% of the respondents (in similar studies from 2005 – 40%) expressed the view that the owner of the land should have a complete freedom of choice when it comes to how to build on the plot (CBOS, 2010, pp. 7, 10). Under these circumstances, no politician will risk any legislative initiative which could lower the public support of their group. Under the slogan of the landscape law, the parliament focuses on regulations on roadside advertising at most.

The critique of the current state of spatial chaos refers to the disadvantageous situation in Poland which results from excessive liberalism – both in planning and in management – in the sphere of space, leading, in turn, to the lack of a coherent and forward-looking concept of spatial policy. And yet, correct and responsible management of space has a positive effect not only on the spatial order, but also on the possibility of achieving the social order (good functioning of the society), as well as on the level of economic governance (better use of resources) (Paszkowski, Węclawowicz-Bilska, & Schneider-Skalska, 2014, p. 15).

Conclusion

The contemporary Polish urban sprawl has much in common with the same phenomenon in the USA and the UK, but it also has its own specific features. A common feature is that – in the economic terms – urban sprawl is caused and amplified by metropolisation, and therefore it relates primarily to economically-strong cities and their functional areas. Metropolisation leads to the polarisation of the global space and to the creation of more and less privileged sites

in terms of development opportunities. Forming a communication channel means that metropolises are “nodes” for the movement of goods, services, information, capital, and people. However, even if it is not the intention of the city authorities to develop their environment, an involuntary and spontaneous diffusion of the potential and the qualitative growth of metropolitan areas still occurs.

The Polish legal system is constructed in such a way that access to land as common good is practically inviolable. However, there are no interpretations of what the essence of common good is, or what common good means in the context of various interests, both public and private. Thus, one might venture to conclude that there are no guidelines as to what proprietorship right is, how it relates to the right of use and development of land, and how it relates to higher values, namely the harmony of space and the structuring of morphological and functional space. This, in fact, translates into the continuation of the historical petrification of behaviours leading to spatial chaos, which has negative consequences at both economic and social levels. When attempting to grasp the positive aspects of the analysed phenomenon in Poland, one should mention the economic revival of the suburbs of the metropolis, which is actually common for this phenomenon all over the world. Moreover, one should point at the growing awareness of local authorities of communes that are situated within the realm of the positive influence of the core-city as regards tapping into the resources of the core-city in order to fulfil micro-local public objectives.

Yet, undeniably, it is the negative consequences that prevail. This is due to the fact that the characteristic features of the Polish urban sprawl include: excessively general law regulating spatial management, the priority of the proprietorship right over local regulations, the historically-conditioned social mentality in which there is complete freedom when it comes to forming space, the dependence of self-governments of communes on various groups realising their interests while determining

the directions of spatial management stipulated in local spatial management plans, and, finally, the “sprawling” spatial layout that is conducive to the increase of the phenomenon of urban sprawl.

The consequences of the assessment of the effects of uncontrolled urbanisation are severe. In the opinion of experts, spatial chaos is not just a matter of aesthetics. The outcomes of such a spatial policy include lost profits from the synergy of programmes and functions, which can be achieved only in terms of the planning and coordination of land use. The economic effects have been mentioned above, but one should also mention the effects of a more social nature, namely conflicts associated with different concepts of space utilisation (e.g. in the private and in the public dimensions or related to different expectations of different groups and social circles). The social cost includes also a waste of time due to poor organisation of space and the lack of access to various goods and services. These lead to a lower quality of life of individuals and families, weakening local social contacts as a result (*Raport o Ekonomicznych Stratach...*, 2013, p. 6).

It should be emphasised that the importance of harmonising the ways of organising and using spatial resources is constantly growing – e.g. under the conditions of climate threats – which then increases the importance of problems related to the quality of life, etc. The links between socio-economic and cultural phenomena as well as changes in expectations and aspirations related to the organisation of space require further analyses. Moreover, an important issue for further considerations is also the attitude of indifference to phenomena taking place in spaces which extend beyond the immediate surroundings, which is still noticeable in the Polish society (the ‘NIMBY’ syndrome).

Quite often, the problem of the development of Polish metropolitan centres lies in the attitude of “narcissistic” city authorities, which, in fact, comes down to a way of thinking consisting in the glorification of the tangible and intangible

assets as well as a nonobjective estimation of their efforts to create conditions for the socio-economic development. The negligence of municipalities resulting from this aspect is often the cause of limiting part of its potential. Legal solutions, their ways of functioning in practice, bad functioning of the local authorities, the lack of the efficiency of planning, problems with social participation in decision-making, and, finally, the deficiency of social sensitivity to the lack of a spatial order constitute some of the key issues strengthening the phenomenon of urban sprawl. The relationship between the spatial order and the social order is recognised too seldom.

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