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LARGE HOUSING ESTATES IN POST-SOCIALIST POLAND AS A HOUSING POLICY CHALLENGE

1. INTRODUCTION

Large block housing estates, built after the Second World War, are present in the urban landscapes of many countries all over the world and in nearly all European countries. Their origins are connected with the development of modernism and go back to the 1920s, when the first workers' housing estates were erected in Germany, designed in a spirit of functionalism, existential minimum and maximum healthiness (Rembarz, 2010). The main assumptions of this urban form were formulated in the Athens Charter – a document published in 1943, as the result of fourth CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) in 1933. It stressed the necessity to improve the catastrophic living conditions in cities at that time, which were the legacy of the rapid industrialization and high population concentration in the 19th century. The most important points of this document can be summarized in the following words: the sun, greenery and open space. The design and construction model suggested in the Charter, combined with the idea to provide all the inhabitants with decent living conditions, regardless of their financial status, became the ideological foundation of multi-family housing estates.

Although the ideas of the Athens Charter were noble, they were also completely unrealistic. Not only did their realization fail to bring the expected effects, but by distorting the original concept they also led to building huge, dehumanized housing mono-structures, spatially separated from the historical urban tissue. Today, they are commonly recognized as problem areas in many cities.

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The aim of this article is to take part in the discussion about the future of large housing estates in Poland, and about the chances for their modernization and humanization, i.e. the transformation processes, which aim at providing the inhabitants with housing conditions fully satisfying their needs.¹ These processes are necessary to prevent the negative phenomena leading to the social and physical degradation of these areas, referred to as the 'large housing estate syndrome'.²

2. THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT OF LARGE HOUSING ESTATES IN POST-SOCIALIST CITIES

According to the definition formulated for the purposes of the RESTATE³ project, large housing estates are spatially isolated groups of buildings, comprising over 2,000 flats, built in the second half of the 20th century, planned and fully or partly financed by the state (Musterd and van Kempen, 2005). In other definitions,⁴ an additional criterion is the fact that they are buildings constructed using pre-fabricated technology, and that the minimum number of flats in an estate is 2,500 (Knorr-Siedow, 1996).

Despite a similar physiognomy, the large housing estates built in the post-socialist countries are different from those found in Western Europe (cf. Coudroy de Lille, 2000; Musterd and van Kempen, 2005; Dekker *et al.*, 2007). They differ as regards the time when they were built, the urban planning scale and the function they perform in the housing resources of the cities, the state of repair, the form of ownership, the socio-demographic structure of the inhabitants, as well as their prestige and the way they are perceived, which establishes their status in the socio-spatial structure of the city.

¹ The terms used in Polish literature with reference to the transformations in large housing estates, include: modernization, humanization, revitalization, rehabilitation and renovation. Each of them accentuates a different aspect of the same problem (Chmielewski and Mirecka, 2001). The definition of humanization is quoted after Borowik (2003).

² The large housing estate syndrome is a phenomenon recognized in Western Europe in the 1980s and defined as a complex of spatial-social conditions, producing a negative image of an estate and accelerating the downward spiral and the replacement of the culturally stronger inhabitants by weaker ones. It leads to an increase in the number of vacant flats and structural social problems, intensifying the spatial degradation and devastation. This in turn causes the economic potential of the estate (such as the purchasing power or the market value of the housing resources) to disappear (Rembarz, 2010).

³ RESTATE – the acronym of the international research project Restructuring Large-scale Housing Estates in European Cities, 2005.

⁴ In several European countries, the definition of a large housing estate is a separate legal category, introduced in order to facilitate the realization of special spatial policy, oriented towards transforming these areas and preventing the large housing estate syndrome. In Germany, the legal category of *Großsiedlung* comprises estates with at least 2.5 thousand flats, while in France the *Grand Ensemble* status is given to the housing areas with over 2,000 flats within the premises of Greater Paris and over 1,000 flats on the outskirts of the city (Rembarz, 2010).

The peak of the development of this particular urban form in the socialist countries was recorded in the 1970s and lasted until the early 1990s, i.e. until the fall of communism. In the West European countries, for a change, the idea of building large estates was abandoned in the 1970s,⁵ after they had been recognized as problem areas.

After the Second World War, large housing estates were being built all over Europe, but in the socialist countries they became the predominant type of housing and they appeared on a much larger scale than in the West European countries. According to the data obtained by the IRS (Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning), in the 1990s, the estates with over 2,500 flats, built in the countries between the Elbe River and Vladivostok, constituted 29% of all the housing resources (53 million flats). The estates were inhabited by about 170 million people and contained nearly half of the households. Considering the post-socialist block, except for the countries of the former USSR, large estates were inhabited by about 34 million people living in 11 million flats (Knorr-Siedow, 1996), while the total number for the rest of the European countries (except the former USSR) was 41 million (Węclawowicz, 2007).

The number of flats in large housing estates compared to the number of all flats built in 1960–1990, as well as to their overall number in Central and Eastern Europe was significant, reaching the highest values in former Czechoslovakia and Poland (table 1). In the West European countries, the percentage of these estates in the overall number of the housing resources is estimated at about 3–7% (Kovacs, 1999). For comparison, in the mid-1990s, the large housing estates in eastern German lands were inhabited by every fourth citizen, while in the western lands – by every sixtieth (Rembarz, 2010).

Table 1. The percentages of flats in large housing estates in the socialist countries

Country	% of the number of flats built between 1960–1990	% of the overall number of flats in 1990
Bulgaria	55	27
CSFR	66	36
GDR	48	18
Poland	61	35
Romania	49	26
Hungary	52	29

Source: Knorr-Siedow (1996).

⁵ The symbolic date of the fall of the modernist philosophy behind the idea of block estates is 1972, when the Pruitt-Igoe estate in the USA, consisting of a complex of 14-storey buildings was demolished after it had turned into a crime nest due to the lack of people willing to settle there (cf. Jencks, 1987).

In the East European countries, the flats in large housing estates were meant for an anonymous group of people, representing medium-level needs (mainly families with children), but they were never the social housing type, addressed for the groups with lower income like in most countries in Western Europe.

Despite the numerous drawbacks of these estates, i.e. the monotonous architecture and low aesthetic quality, poor quality of construction and relatively small flats, as well as the insufficient social infrastructure and the shortage of basic services, moving to such an estate in a socialist country (during the socialist period) was usually the only chance to improve one's living conditions. In particular, this concerned the migration of population from rural areas and the population from pre-war sub-standard buildings. In Poland, the strong structural deficit on the housing market (resulting from the dynamic urbanization), the progressing degradation of the pre-war housing resources, limitations put on private construction, as well as the low incomes (and relatively modest residential aspirations), created a reality in which the dwelling in a block of flats was a dream for the majority of the city inhabitants, regardless of their social status (cf. Lewicka, 2004). The relative attractiveness of this form of building, as well as the housing policy implemented by the socialist authorities, subordinated to the idea of egalitarianism,⁶ were the reasons why the inhabitants of the blocks of flats were (and still are, though at present to a smaller extent) a mixed community as regards their social status.

Nowadays the large housing estates in many West European countries (e.g. France, the Netherlands or Sweden) are generally badly reputed areas, inhabited by large groups of ethnic minorities, with high unemployment, deprived population and a high criminality rate. The estates in Central and Eastern Europe have a more diversified social structure and as a popular form of housing are not stigmatized, still enjoying a relatively good reputation (Musterd and van Kempen, 2005; Kovacs *et al.*, 2008; Borowik, 2003; Szafrńska, 2009).

Due to these differences, the possibility of using the same terms in order to describe large housing estates everywhere in Europe is limited, and looking for simple analogies within this type of housing in all European countries leads to overgeneralizations (e.g. referring to all large housing estates in Europe as slums). Detailed studies show that the estates differ not only between countries, but also between cities (cf. Kovacs *at al.*, 2008), and even within one city (Temelová *et al.*, 2010; Szafrńska, 2011).

3. LARGE HOUSING ESTATES IN POLAND – THE DIAGNOSIS OF SITUATION

In contemporary Poland, large housing estates are inhabited by over 8 million people (Węclawowicz, 2007). According to Rębowska (1999), they are inhabited by over 50% of the urban population and contain about 56% of households

⁶ In socialist countries, the policy of allocating flats was based on purposeful mixing of the inhabitants, so that they formed a socially varied group of people, which was supposed to guarantee solidarity of the new community (cf. Czepczyński, 1999).

(Rembarz, 2010). Similarly to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, after the fall of the communist system, the flats in large housing estates represented a significant percentage of the overall number of dwellings in Poland (35%); this figure for dwellings built between 1960 and 1990 was 61% (Knorr-Siedow, 1996). At present, the number of flats in large housing estates in Poland is estimated at about 3.5 million (Rębowska, 1999).

Despite the considerable percentage of large housing estates in the housing resources of Polish cities, they have not turned into problem areas. Contemporary studies show that twenty years after the transformation, the housing estates are frequently inhabited by people with higher level education, as well as people who are professionally and socially active (Szafrńska, 2008). The relatively high social status of the inhabitants is not decreasing, despite the outflow of the more well-off residents, who have higher aspirations as regards the housing conditions (Szafrńska, 2011). Living in large housing estates is quite common and is not seen as socially degrading (Borowik, 2003; Szafrńska, 2009). Similar conclusions can be drawn from the study of the preferred places of residence, which puts block estates quite high in the hierarchy of residential areas in the city (Groeger, 2004). They have not undergone the physical degradation anticipated at the initial stage of the socio-economic transformation (cf. Szeleny, 1996).

The majority of flats in the large housing estates in Poland have been bought from the housing cooperatives.⁷ The flats are owned by the inhabitants, for whom they are often the most valuable possession. A small part of these resources has not been sold out and is still the cooperatives' property. Such an ownership structure has its positive sides, because it prevents devastation and stops the outflow of residents. The flats are a real estate market commodity, and are subject to inheritance. In the early 21st century, this results in the exchange of the generations of inhabitants (the generation of the first owners is replaced by the generation of their grandchildren).

The study of the changes in the socio-demographic, spatial and functional structure of large housing estates in Łódź, the third largest city in Poland (750,000 inhabitants),⁸ showed the following phenomena:⁹

– the ageing of the population, the growing number of one-person households, the falling percentage of working people and the increasing level of education, which are all socio-demographic processes taking place in other large cities in Poland as well, the only difference being the time when a given estate was built, which affects the rate of changes;

⁷ These flats are a particular, imperfect type of ownership with a limited right on property. It is enacted on the grounds of an agreement between the cooperative in the building which is its property or joint property and the member of the cooperative. The actual owner of the building is still the cooperative, which has a right to the land on which the building stands, in the form of ownership or perpetual usufruct. This type of right on property is transferable, hereditary, liable to execution and may be mortgaged.

⁸ In Łódź as in other Polish cities more than half of the population (over 300,000 inhabitants) live in large housing estates.

⁹ Author's study (Szafrńska, 2011).

– intensification of housing development, which takes the form of individual multi-family buildings or their complexes, characterized by a higher standard and distinctive physiognomy (architectural details, street furniture, the colour and shape of the buildings). The process results in an inflow of new residents and the formation of enclaves of a higher socio-economic status within the estate space (sometimes in the form of gated communities);

– the growing percentage of areas with commercial functions (especially trade and services), sometimes at the expense of other, non-commercial functions (e.g. culture, education). In literature, the process is referred to as commercialization (Sykora, 2000), in examined estates triggered primarily by supplementing the old buildings with new ones, which perform the service and trading functions, as well as by changing the functions in the already built-up areas. As a result, the social sphere of the housing estates is changing, with new jobs, new places and new forms of spending leisure time appearing there. The daily routine of the inhabitants changes as well, because satisfying the majority of needs (not only the basic ones) may take place within the estate space and does not require travelling to the city centre;

– the appearance of new sacral buildings, the construction of which was restricted in the socialist period; in literature the process is referred to as space sacralization (Matlovic, 2000);

– improvement of the standard of the public and semi-public spaces among the blocks of flats as the unoccupied free spaces are turned into green areas, used for recreation and sport. There appear new parks, ball games pitches (mainly near schools), playgrounds and greens. The lighting of these areas improves, benches are installed, resting sites are organized, walking paths and pavements are repaired, and the buildings are marked to be easier to find;

– improvement in the physiognomy of the built-up areas, mainly due to some investments in thermo-modernization,¹⁰ which alters the appearance of the elevations of the buildings (introducing colour and architectural detail, departing from the grayness of a concrete desert). These changes, on the one hand, if planned and coordinated, improve the appearance of housing buildings and entire estates, but on the other hand, if chaotic and uncoordinated, not only do not help to beautify the space, but rather bring about architectural and spatial disorder.

The processes listed above occur in the majority of the large housing estates in Poland, but their rate and scale in individual cities differ.

On the basis of the study conducted in different Polish cities (cf. Borowik, 2003; Węclawowicz *et al.*, 2005; Kozłowski 2005; Gorczyca, 2009; Szafrńska, 2011), we can say that both, the changes so far and the future of the estates in Poland are determined by a number of mutually dependent factors, both endogenous,

¹⁰ The Thermo-modernization Act of 1998 allows subsidizing the refurbishment of buildings from the state budget, in order to reduce the use of heat energy.

depending on the particular character of individual estates and their communities (on the micro-scale), and exogenous, external to these estates (macro-scale factors).

The endogenous determinants include the following:

– urban planning factors, i.e. the location within the urban space and the accessibility by transport, the homogeneity and extensiveness of the estate, compared to the whole city, the state of repair (the size, height, concentration and quality of the buildings), the maintenance of the buildings, the standard and size of the flats (depends mainly on the construction period), the availability of the shopping, service and social infrastructure (corresponding to the socio-demographic structure), the size and condition of the green areas (sport and recreation), as well as the range of modernization for the purpose of the physical renewal of the estates;

– social factors, such as the inhabitants' socio-demographic structure, the reputation of the estate (compared to other housing areas in the city), the level of inhabitants' identification with the place of residence, which determines possible migration preferences and encourages the inhabitants to participate in the modernization and humanization of the estates.

The exogenous determinants include:

– socio-demographic factors, i.e. the changes in the number and demographic structure of the urban population, which are directly related to the deficit on the real estate market;

– socio-cultural factors, i.e. preferences regarding the system of values and patterns, as well as the lifestyle, aspirations as to the standard of living, the residential mobility, and the social perception of this particular form of housing development (its prestige or stigmatization);

– economic factors, considered from the demand perspective (the level of affluence, purchasing power and creditworthiness of households – the main actors on the urban housing market), as well as from the supply perspective (the offer on the real estate market and the availability of mortgage credits); the relation between the price and the quality of the flats in this residential environment;

– organizational and legal factors, such as obtaining funds for the modernization of the buildings, sorting out the ownership issues (currently still undergoing transformation), creating a realistic possibility for the inhabitants to participate in the processes of modernization and humanization.

The determinants listed above may both stimulate positive changes in the large housing estates and hamper them. Permanent monitoring of their influence on the changes in large housing estates is a serious research challenge, which should be conducted with the use of different methods and on different spatial scales (countries, cities, or even individual estates).

4. POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE LARGE HOUSING ESTATES IN POLAND

Despite the fact that over twenty years have passed since the fall of the socialist system, the large housing estates in Poland are not problem areas and are not treated as such by the inhabitants, the city authorities or the central authorities. Due to the good social structure of the inhabitants, the relatively high standard of the housing resources and the unchangingly good reputation of these estates (compared to other residential areas in cities), no potential threats are seen which these areas might generate in the future. The relatively small range of studies assessing the condition of the large housing estates in individual cities and monitoring the changes hinders the preparation of comprehensive repair programmes, which might prevent potential problems. Only in some cities the potential threats are taken into consideration and large estates are included in the local planning documents as areas which need repair (Gorczyca, 2009).

Ever since the political and economic transformation started, the changes in the large housing estates have been resulting from natural demographic processes (the ageing of the inhabitants) and migrations (the inflow of a younger population, better educated and more affluent, who buy flats on the primary and secondary real estate market), as well as market processes (commercialization of space and supplementing the existing development with new residential buildings) and political changes (space sacralization). The changes also result from purposeful, though still uncoordinated and fragmentary, actions taken by housing cooperatives and the city authorities in order to improve the standard of living in large housing estates (modernization of buildings and improving the quality of public spaces).

The factors which limit the possibility of planning and taking actions in the large housing estates in Polish cities is a disorder of ownership issues and lack of real host of these areas (the city, housing cooperatives, inhabitants). The flat owners are economically weak (sometimes they form homeowner associations, which comprise individual buildings or small groups of buildings) and the cooperatives administering the housing resources are often unprepared either to plan or to introduce necessary changes. The housing cooperatives often run a rather free spatial policy, restrained only by very general planning documents. Their actions, even if taken in good faith, are often merely temporary, incidental solutions (Rembarz, 1010). For example, selling plots of land to investors, who do not necessarily take into consideration the character of the surroundings and do not care much for the adequate aesthetic quality and architecture, often leads to spatial chaos and space fragmentation, and in consequence lowers the already poor aesthetic quality of these estates.

However, many actions taken in the estates by the cooperatives or the city authorities improve the standard of living there (e.g. creating new or improving

the existing public spaces, green areas, sport and recreation spaces, increasing the number of parking places, the availability of shops and services, etc.). If well-coordinated and not incidental, these processes lead to improvement of the quality of anonymous and monotonous concrete block estates. They are not sufficiently advanced yet, but as the studies show (e.g. Szafrńska, 2009), they are appreciated by the inhabitants, they strengthen their residents' identification and satisfaction with the estate, as well as increase the residential attractiveness of these areas.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The twenty years of the socio-economic transformation in Poland show that so far no comprehensive strategies of transforming large-scale housing estates have been devised yet, and solving this problem has been postponed until an indefinite future. The rich experience of the Western countries, e.g. France, Germany, the Netherlands or Sweden, cannot be used in Poland, because of the different political, social and economic conditions in which these estates were built and functioned. Despite similar political conditions, the solutions used in the post-socialist cities of the former German Democratic Republic cannot be applied in Poland because of the different path of the socio-economic transformation in East Germany and its rapid depopulation. The programme of demolition in large estates realized in Germany is unacceptable in Poland due to the permanent deficit of flats (currently due to economic reasons) and the existence of large built-up areas of much lower standard than the block estates. The experience of other post-socialist countries as regards the policy preventing the degradation of large estates in the future is too modest (or non-existent at all), which means that in Poland it should be gained locally. The need to work out such policy in this country arises from a number of factors. The first thing is the scale of the housing resources and the present situation on the real estate market, where the number of available flats is insufficient to satisfy the demand (about 1.5 million flats) (cf. Gorczyca, 2009). The second thing is the continuous decline of the quality of the old housing resources and the necessity to demolish about 0.8 million old flats (Węclawowicz, 2004). Finally, there is the economic aspect – the cost of modernizing the existing estates is estimated at 25–60% of the cost of erecting new houses (cf. Gorczyca, 2009).

The processes of renewal and modernization (humanization) of large housing estates require the involvement of many actors, of which central and local authorities should play a major role. The involvement of local communities (inhabitants) and NGOs is also of great importance. The correlated and integrated actions of these actors should take into consideration the needs of residents as well as social and economic conditions of the surrounding community.

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