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Decline and revitalization in post-communist urban context: A case of the Polish city—Gdansk

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Abstract

This paper examines how different social, economic, historical and physical conditions coincide in the formation of space and processes of decline in the period of transformation in Poland. The focus lies on a specific residential area in the centre of the Polish city of Gdansk and the question why no improvements have been done in this particular area to stop its successive decline. It is among other things argued that clear urban policy together with improved urban planning and clear legislation on ownership are needed in order to improve conditions in this and other deprived areas of the city.

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Keywords: Post-communist cities; Decline; Revitalization; Urban planning; Urban policy; Civil society

Introduction

Many of the urban regions in Central and Eastern Europe have gone through considerable changes since the 1990s. The new economic order has opened up for private investments as well as for a concentration of capital in the cities of Central and East European countries. Post-communist cities have become mirrors of the changes going on or using Lefebvre's vocabulary spatial projections of societies

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(Lefebvre, 1968: 64). Although changes have taken place differently in different countries some visible marks such as the rise of new and modern buildings, the establishment of foreign companies on the market, privatized housing market and the creation of new residential areas, the improvement of infrastructure and the opening of cities' gates to streams of tourists coming from all over the world, can be observed in the post-communist cities. But the systemic change has not been entirely painless. The fall of communism has resulted in an amplified insecurity on the labour market, housing market and other spheres of the social and economic life of the cities. Great contrasts in prosperity concentrated in the space are observable to the visitor in post-communist cities (Szelenyi, 1996; Kovacs, 1998; Weclawowicz, 1998; Sykora, 1999). While parts of the city, most often the commercial parts, where the tourists and companies settled and shopping centres popped up, look as any city in Western Europe, there are parts of or even whole residential areas that are on the edge to decay (Dingsdale, 1999; Kok and Kovacs, 1999; Ladanyi, 1997).

The aim of this paper is to examine how different social, economic, historical and physical conditions coincide in the formation of spatial disparities and processes of decline in the period of transformation from state socialism to a market economy. The focus lies on a specific residential area in the centre of the Polish city of Gdansk and the main interest lies in answering the question why no improvements have been done in this particular area to stop its successive decline. Furthermore, questions of urban planning, ownership, organizational activity and confidence are brought up in the analysis of the lack of revitalization in the area.

This paper starts with a short review of literature concerning the topic of the study. Research questions and methodological standpoints are presented next. The case of the city of Gdansk is discussed as an interesting object of study. Paper continues with a description and an analysis of the case of Dolne Miasto, a deprived residential area in the heart of the city. The specific case of Dolne Miasto is used in this paper to draw upon different processes interplaying in the increase of spatial disparities and degradation in a post-communist context.

Literature review

Researchers studying social change in post-communist countries often refer to that change as either “transition” or “transformation”. The concept of “transition” presupposes that one condition is replaced by another and “that by imitating Western institutions the post-communist societies will quickly reshape themselves in the likeness of leading societies of the West (US, Western Europe, Japan and so forth)” (Sztompka, 2006: 456). The other alternative label, “transformation,” will be used in this paper, since it implies a more open-ended consideration of social change. The concept of transformation gives way to a more complex interpretation, with similarities and dissimilarities between post-communist societies and the West. Transition scholars are often guided by the idea of modernization marking out phases in history directed towards a specific goal and pointing out parallels between type of political

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