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Regeneration projects in Central and Eastern European post-communist cities: Current trends and community needs

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ABSTRACT

During the period of transition after the fall of communism in the late 1980s, cities in the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) encountered a range of processes that have reshaped their structure and functions. Regeneration effort was a major approach considered as a suitable tool to overcome burdens of the communist urbanistic model, which was typical of high population density, extent public spaces, and resulting in a weak interlink between urban design and the needs of local communities. In this paper, we use the best practice approach and analyse 56 urban regeneration projects carried our between 1989 and 2011 in 12 of the CEECs in order to identify the key issues addressed by regeneration effort and to evaluate the success with which the regeneration projects involved local communities. In addition, the case study based on a questionnaire survey (Neštěmice, Northern Czechia) is presented, illustrating the level of public participation within the regeneration project and perception of project results by the local community. Our results suggest that although there exist important territorial differences among the CEECs, the involvement of local communities in planning and designing the regeneration projects is still generally low. It is also shown that the regeneration projects in post-communist cities are not resolved comprehensively, i.e. that the structures, which are subject to regeneration, are addressed individually with weak relation to community needs and to the surrounding areas of a city.

1. Introduction

Current research of cities in the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) highlights development processes and qualitative urban and economic changes, which are characteristic for post-communist countries (Enyedi, 1998; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012; Weclawowicz, 2013; Couch, Karecha, Nuissl, & Rink, 2005). The economic and sociocultural implications of the political paradigm of communism have shaped a city that has specific physiognomic characteristics, such as compactness, large scale public projects, an oversupply of industrial uses with an undersupply of commercial uses (see Szelenyi, 1996), as well as weakened social ties and disrupted patterns of social behaviour (often referred to as a weakness of civil society; Howard, 2003).

During the period of transition after the fall of communism, cities in the CEECs encountered a range of processes and forces that have reshaped their structure and functions. According to Sýkora and Bouzarovski (2012), the urban transformation that has followed the institutional and social transformation has resulted in three main processes: city centre commercialization, inner city regeneration and outer city sub-urbanization. These processes have been primarily influenced by the political and economic democratization of the CEECs (Musil, 1993; Pichler-Milanovich, 2001) within the context of the effects of globalization (Hruška, 2013; Keivani, Parsa, & McGreal, 2001; Sýkora, 2002) and have resulted in reshaping the socio-economic structures of cities after the fall of communism (cf. Scott & Kühn, 2012; Stanilov, 2007; Leetmaa & Tammaru, 2007). Indeed, the re-establishing of local self-government and improving the social ties at a community level were considered the primary focus in post-communist countries (Elander & Gustafsson, 2006). On the other hand, the socioeconomic transition has resulted in the divergence processes that have gained increasing importance. These divergence processes resulted, e.g., in social degradation (Temelová, Novák, Ouředníček, & Puldová, 2011), demographic changes (Steinführer &, Haase, 2007), growth of social heterogeneity (Musil, 1993) including

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social segregation (Kovácz, 2014) and extensive sub-urbanization (Stanilov & Sýkora, 2004; Sýkora & Ouředníček, 2007), shrinkage of cities (Oswalt, 2004; Turok & Mykhnenko, 2007), and the construction of retail centres (Nagy, 2001).

The above listed processes have acquired specific forms in the realm of post-communist countries due to diverse paths of economic development at a country scale and local milieu at a city scale, thus producing different sub-types of post-communist cities (Hirt, 2013). Therefore, despite the common general processes of urban transition in the CEECs (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012) resulting in broader requirements for a change and development, the question is if and how was the diversity of post-communist cities reflected in divergent paths of urban regeneration within the CEECs. The major risk faced by regeneration projects seems to be related to a weak interlink between their design and the needs of local communities (Bouzarovski, Salukvadze, & Gentile, 2010; Temelová et al., 2011). Specific local needs result from increasing social divergencies across cities, and may be illustrated by current gentrification processes in city centres (e.g., Csanádi, Czismady, & Olt, 2010) in contrast to social degradation in prefab houses of neighbourhoods built in past decades. The difficulty of involvement of local communities due to the lack of initiative of local leaders and decision-makers in post-communist cities (Gustafsonn & Elander, 2015), may be partially compensated by community participation on various stages of regeneration (Choguill, 1996; Davidson, Johnson, Lizarralde, Dikmen, & Sliwinskia, 2007; Lawson, 2007).

To overcome the above mentioned difficulties, the current research on regeneration projects should be completed with analyses of practical experiences of post-communist cities with regeneration projects (Csanádi et al. 2010; Nagy, 2001; Weclawowicz, 2013).

This paper presents the results of a survey performed by the authors within a broader framework of the European research project *"New post-socialist city: Competitive and Attractive"*. The aim of our survey was to analyse the regeneration projects in selected cities of the CEECs, the effects of these projects on various social and economic dimensions and the involvement of local communities in the regeneration processes. Herein, the regeneration projects represent a set of private and public investments for new development as well as reconstructions and revitalizations of buildings and public areas implemented in the cities of the CEECs during the period following the fall of communism. The primary aim of the analysis is to identify the key issues addressed by these regeneration projects and to find out, whether there exists a specific territorial pattern in the project-based regeneration of cities across the regions of the CEECs. While doing this, the paper also aims to shed some light on the success with which the regeneration projects involved local communities in the participatory planning and self-government to reinforce the social ties at a community level. In the following parts, we present the methodological design of the research, which was based on the best practice method. The results are presented in the form of (i) the analyses of regeneration projects across the CEEC with major attention paid to Central Europe and (ii) the in-depth case study of one of the analysed regeneration projects in the Czech Republic.

2. Methods and data

2.1. General methodological remarks

Currently, several methods exists that can be used for the evaluation of the territorial impacts of regeneration projects. These methods are most frequently based on aggregated sets of social, economic and environmental indicators, which were reviewed by Singh, Murty, Gupta, and Dikshit (2012), for instance. In some cases, the quantitative indicators are combined with qualitative survey among locals (Reed, Dougill, & Baker, 2008). Besides the assessment of territorial impacts of regeneration, attention has also been paid to the sustainability of the regeneration projects. According to Ness, Urbel-Piirsalu, Anderberg, and Olsson (2007) the sustainability assessment tools differ in their focus on (i) integration of nature-society systems, (ii) links between past and future development, or (iii) evaluation of partial issues within the sustainability.

Based on the benchmarking of completed projects the best practice method (e.g., Stockley, 2015; Punter, 2007) has a specific position among the evaluation approaches. It provides an added value to models based on theoretical concepts as well as those emerging from empirical studies of individual locations and aspects of regeneration (e.g., Heeley, 2011; Kolář, Krejčí, Krejčí, & Perečková, 2009; Popescu & Profiroiu, 2012). Furthermore, the best practice allows for comparative perspective using the clearly defined indicators of impacts of regeneration projects. The problem with applying the best practice approach is the potential rigidity of the decision-making processes; thus a non-critical transfer of the best practice examples from different conditions may prevent the innovations entering the decision-making processes in city development. The management (Steinführer & Haase, 2007), along with the issues of the development of the cities see a strong environmental variability, hence the factors that influence the implementation of individual projects must be considered. The configuration of criteria for selection of the best practice examples may also pose some problems, as city development is always a complex, even internally variable process, and we are often faced with the question of whether to include a measure of the best practice examples, which was rated as average in the majority of aspects, but higher than above-average (effective, inspiring) in some partial aspects.

The research consists of two approaches (Fig. 1). The first research step was based on the best practice method, starting with a review of the current regeneration projects in the CEECs, and selection of the top ranked project for further analysis. The review of regeneration projects across the CEECs has been performed in order to obtain the information on diversity of aims and benefits the regeneration projects on a cross-country scale. The projects were selected using the best practice concept and evaluated using a mixed-method approach. Second, the in-depth case study has been performed in order to illustrate the level and mode of public participation during the regeneration process. The case study was based on a questionnaire survey and process tracing approach.

2.2. Review of regeneration projects: a cross-country level

The review of current regeneration projects was based on a search of on-line sources and databases of governmental authorities and institutions (e.g., ministries, public research organizations) and of agencies funding regeneration projects in the CEECs. Furthermore, the bibliographic excerption has been performed in order to check for projects that were already presented in research papers. Since the complexity of information among authorities, funding agencies as well as published results varied, the specifics of individual regeneration projects were also checked in local media sources. Finally, the database of 56 regeneration projects was established based on the complexity of available information and ranking of these projects. These 56 projects aimed at the regeneration of buildings and public areas from the socialist era registered in 12 CEECs (Fig. 2). Each project record was characterized by location, title, year of realization (beginning), size, financial budget, funding authority/agency, type according to prevailing function, and territorial impact. The summary of this information together with their completeness is shown in Table 1. The list of locations of