

The significance of public and semi-public spaces in existing and planned housing developments in stimulating the process of integration among residents

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1 ABSTRACT

One of the most significant elements determining the standard of modern housing developments is the quality of open spaces, with diverse accessibility categories, contained within the contours of such housing developments. The three basic categories are described as: "public space", "semi-public space" and "private space".

One of the most fundamental issues, which has not found an adequate interpretation within the theory of urbanization so far, is an attempt to define the principles according to which the housing "development systems" should be designed, where the generated public and semi-public spaces (by definition, so to speak) would ensure the creation of true human communities directed at cooperation and full integration within the area of residence. This would result in the living standard as expected by the residents.

The above-mentioned in the context of new phenomenon of building "housing estate gettos" particularly in the towns of the post-communistic countries, becomes one of most important (if not the most important) problem, if it is to be still unnoticed, it will result in building disintegrating structures in the existing towns, "hotbeds" of socially alienated space: "town within the town". (Fig.1)



Fig. 1: Suburbs in Szczecin, Poland. Photo: Cezary Skórka

Key words: The public space in the place of living, local community, manner for organising social relationships, cultural infrastructure in housing estates.

2 DIVERSITY OF ACTIVITY DIRECTIONS AND DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN THE CONTEMPORARY HOUSING DEVELOPMENT SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

The housing estate in Hanover – Kronsberg (Germany) may be regarded as one of the examples of the model housing estate from the perspective of the public space importance which at the same time observes the sustainable development principles. Designing and building the housing estate as both human- and environment- friendly required *100 ha land which was the property of the local authorities in 60% and the remaining part was the property of four property developers.*

The public transport is based on fast tram going to the city centre, railway and underground; one third of parking spaces is built underground and the majority of traffic routes are at the pedestrians' disposal. The function and space concept is based on the division into certain quarters with peripheral development and courtyards serving mostly for greenery and playground purpose (Fig. 2,3,4).¹

Fig. 2: Kronsberg defines sustainable urban development. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

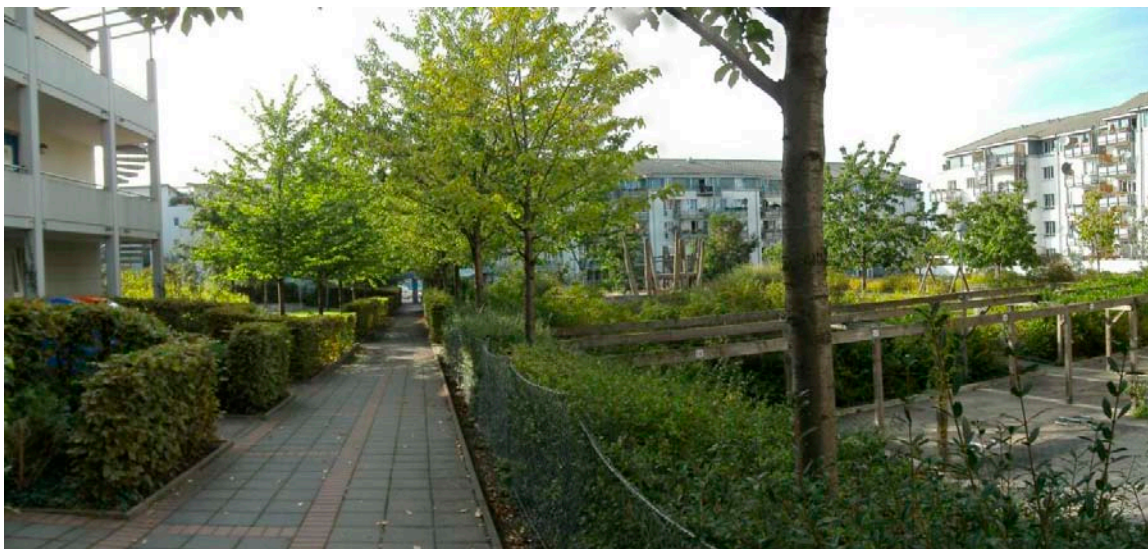


Fig. 3: Kronsberg in Hannover. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

¹ Prof. Alina Drapella Hermansdorfer. X Seminarium wyjazdowe z cyklu Krajobrazy XXI wieku, Niemcy – Holandia 2011 (10th Seminar in Landscape Shaping: Germany-Netherlands 2011 – organised by the University of Wrocław, Poland, Faculty of Architecture)



Fig. 4: Housing Estate in Hanover. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

The research on preferred features of housing estates related directly to the choice of place of living shows that single parents three times more often point out such a housing estate as a target place of living for them. It may mean that such a group of people cares mainly about the interactions with the others in similar family situation.² What is extremely important here is the structure and quality of the public space i.e. wide avenues, district parks joining the densely built-in residential area in the Kronsberg housing estate with adjacent fields of the Green Ring (proj. Kienast, Vogt & Partner).³

One of the first experiment housing estates to serve as a model for implementing new 1989 environmental policy in the Netherlands (NEPP) subsidised by NOVEM (The Netherlands Agency for Energy and the Environment) is “Ecolonia” built in 1991-1993 in so-called “Green Heart” of Randstadt conurbation as a part of new Kerk en Zanem district. The main design assumption was to consider social integrity equally important as technological aspects.

There is a small pond at the centre of “Ecolonia”, which along with its outlying area became the space for integrating residents, at the same time, it plays a significant role in the waste and water management. (Fig.5) What attracts attention here is the comprehensive design and implementation of landscape solutions starting with inner gardens and courtyards and finishing with ecological corridors leading to the nearest green areas.

According to the local design made by Lucien Kroll, 101 semi-detached and terrace houses create here few colonies clustered around inner public space. (Fig.6-11) *The designs were made by nine different Dutch*

² THORKILDÆRØ. Residential Choice from a Lifestyle Perspective. Danish Building Research Institute, Department of Housing and Urban Renewal, Horsholm, Denmark. Housing, Theory and Society, Vol 23, No. 2, 109-130, 2006

³ Construction: 1990-1994 plan; 1999; Architects: masterplanners: Studio d'Arnaboldi/ Cavadini, 1992; proj. Urban designers: Welp/Welp i Sawadda, 1993; landscape and ecology services: Kienast, Vogt & Partners, 1994. (Hannover Kronsberg Handbook. Planning and Realization).

companies cooperating with each other what shown the deliberate government policy aimed at motivating national architects and the building industry to take innovative action.

The experience gathered during building Ecolonia and conclusions drawn by its residents were used while formulating the policy on housing development in the Netherlands in the second half of the '90s (Beatley 2000).⁴



Fig. 5: Small pond at the centre of "Ecolonia". Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.



Fig. 6:

⁴ Prof. Alina Drapella Hermansdorfer.



Fig. 7:



Fig. 8:



Fig. 9. Figure: 6-9: Expected result: A road stops being meant only for vehicles anymore as a part disconnected with the development with regards to its composition. It has been shaped by the housing development. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.



Fig. 10: Expected result: By offering in a town the conditions similar to those of possessing “own house with a garden” we may restrict expansion of open development in the suburbs. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.



Fig. 11: The physical aspects of a road such as: green, soft edge, type of surface are the main factors determining the nature of road.
Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

The housing estates of Kattenbroek, Vathorst and Nieuwland ⁵, built in the outskirts of Amersfoort serve as another examples of urban assumptions that combine, what is still unique in East Europe, *social, ecological and landscape issues with clear symbolic message*.⁶ Being aware that people will find the value in the buildings used by them only when they offer them the opportunity to take action⁷, the decision was made on the cooperation with future residents already at the stage of design what resulted in the housing estate with true identity, *resident-friendly atmosphere, diverse landscape where the Dutch town evolves harmoniously into the country, and finally into the seaside*. The spatial structure of the housing estate of Kattenbroek designed by Ashok Bhalotra who used the components full of symbols such as: *Ring, a circle-shaped water channel with diameter of Amersfoort centre symbolises the home and community* (Fig.12); *Courts Ijzne – a wide strip of courtyards that joins the interiors of various functions symbolises the wander through existential needs satisfied by provided services and human relationships*; *Hidden Zone – a narrow “hidden” strip of walking avenues symbolises the wander through spiritual needs satisfied by the art*. *The development is low, densely built- in and diverse. The living standard here assumes combining council flats with the private ones*.⁸ The public space in the housing estate is by and large restricted to pedestrians and bicycles only. (Fig.13)

⁵ Such compact housing estate with 5 to 10 thousand of residents and average density of 30 people per ha complies with the proximity criterion (5-25 km) from the historical centres of development, huge trade centres, zones of the economic activity and they are well connected with them via means of public transport.

⁶ Prof. Alina Drapella Hermansdorfer. X Seminarium wyjazdowe z cyklu Krajobrazy XXI wieku, Niemcy – Holandia 2011 (10th Seminar in Landscape Shaping: Germany-Netherlands 2011 organised by the University of Wrocław, Poland, Faculty of Architecture)

⁷ HENNY COOLEN. The Meaning of Dwellings: an Ecological Perspective. Housing, Theory and Society, Vol 23, No. 4, 185-201, 2006.

⁸ According to the assumptions of the VINEX programme, there is a mixed property structure in the district, i.e. 30% of council flats scattered all over the housing estate (PRP, URBED, Design for Homes 2008)



Fig. 12: Kattenbroek – one of the fragments of development at Ring. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.



Fig. 13: The traffic in the housing estate is based on pedestrians and bicycles. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

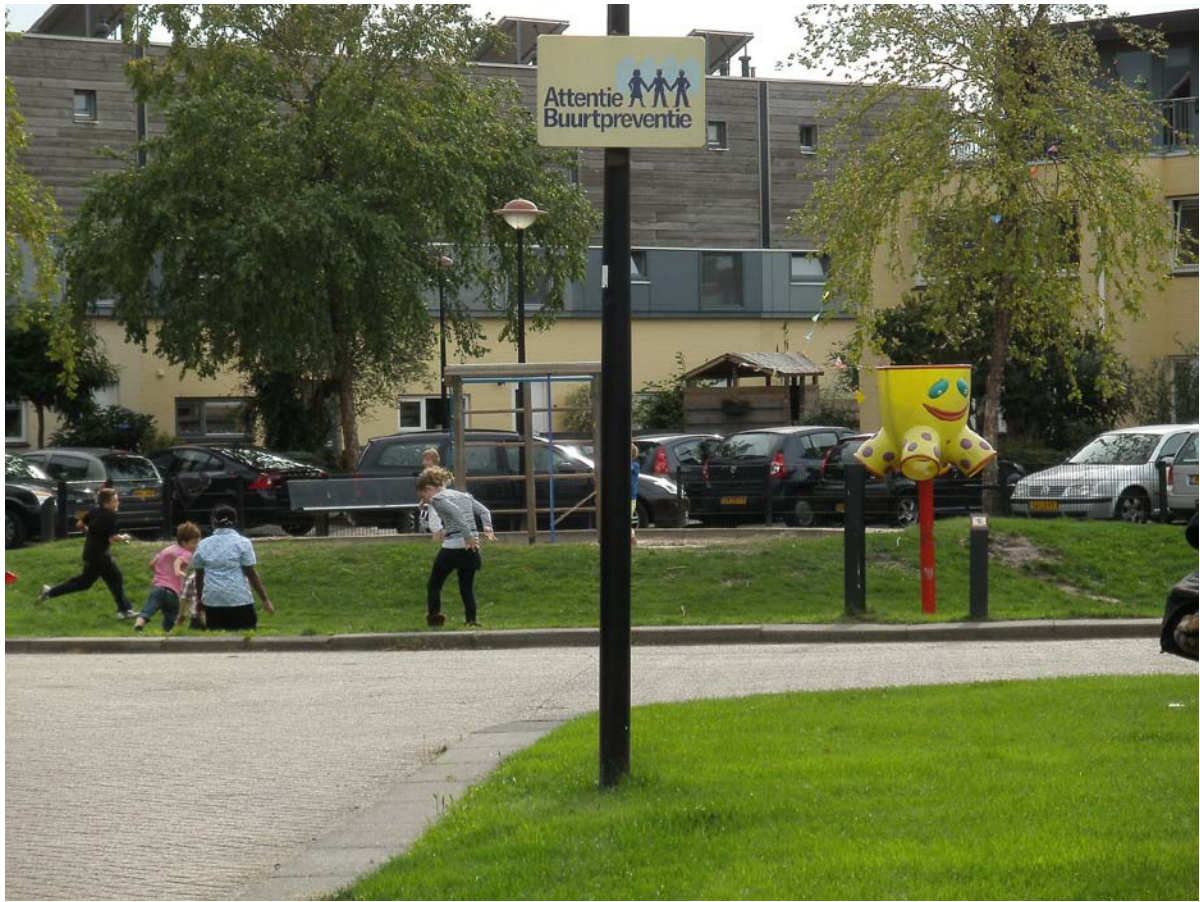


Fig. 14: Integration in public space. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

*The integrating nature of roads, courtyards have been restored, the centre is emphasized. The distinguishing mark here is the human scale, well-thought-out programme and full of poetry relations between water, greenery and architecture. The opinion polls show that the local community found its “nest” here very quickly.*⁹ (Fig. 14)

3 PUBLIC SPACE AS AN INDICATOR FOR LIFE QUALITY

Contrary to the examples of the German and the Netherland described above, the spatial structure of housing estates designed in Poland is mainly subordinated to the economic factors. The main objective of their investor was to use the land for housing development as much as possible. Consequently, the space between the dwelling houses has been filled with the passage ways and the greenery has been restricted to minimum. The lack of the public space has become a distinctive feature here and surrounding individual properties with fence restricts the potential need to integrate socially almost to zero, what is particularly important to the psychological development of children and teenagers.¹⁰ (Fig. 15, 16)

⁹ Prof. Alina Drapella Hermansdorfer. X Seminarium wyjazdowe z cyklu Krajobrazy XXI wieku, Niemcy – Holandia 2011 (10th Seminar in Landscape Shaping: Germany-Netherlands 2011+ organised by the University of Wrocław, Poland, Faculty of Architecture)

¹⁰ Pieniążek M. 2010. Wartościowanie i kształtowanie przestrzeni miejskiej przez deweloperów (The town space is valued and shaped by property developers). Wyd. WGiSR UW i Urząd m.st. Warszawy, Warszawa 2010, s. 219

According to Zygmunt Bauman "(...) *the street is more like a jungle than a theatre. You walk down the street because you have to. After all, the street is the least expected place to seek pleasure. It is a place which abounds with danger*".¹¹(Fig. 17)

The lack of space in which the human relationships could have been fostered seems to be the most crucial disadvantage of such housing estates built in new economic situation, at the same time, they are also deprived of expected attractiveness of potential places for personal meetings and contacts with other residents outside clearly marked place of living. (Fig. 18)



Fig. 15: New housing investment in Szczecin. Photo: Cezary Skórka www.4Dfoto.pl.

As the Danish experience shows (Danish Building Research Institute, Department of Housing and Urban Renewal, Horsholm, Denmark), the importance of local space as well as local community regarded as a focal point for attracting the entire life of an individual is the key factor in the evaluation of the public space what is confirmed by the popular notion that the residents devote their spare time eagerly to acting for the “local community” when they are sure that it will serve all the residents.

Such an interpretation allows understanding again the reasons underlying both individual and collective models of settlement which lead to the social or cultural segregation; it may be useful to analyse such phenomena as working together on the image of the residential district or predominance of detached houses in the space of housing estates.

¹¹ Bauman Z. Przedstawienie na pustyni. W: „Drobne rysy w ciągłej katastrofie...” Obecność Waltera Benjamina w kulturze współczesnej, (Red. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Kultury 1993. s. 78



Fig. 16: The literature on sociology, psychology describes well the consequences brought by the civilisation development, the impact of the space structure in housing estates as well as natural environment on the human health. Photo: Cezary Skórka www.4Dfoto.pl.



Fig. 17: Szczecin suburbs– in the neighbourhood of dense forests. Photo: Cezary Skórka www.4Dfoto.pl.



Fig. 18: Lack of public space and area for relaxation near home. Photo: Cezary Skórka www.4Dfoto.pl.

New housing investments shape the function and space structure in the town of Szczecin. They are built outside the town centre, they increase the range of the built-up area and relation between the ecological lines and built-up space systems. (Fig. 19)

The pace of economic changes in Poland and, at the same time, low awareness of the importance of spatial planning is the reason for the spatial chaos and the lack of valid spatial development plans in the majority of towns, the result is that more and more uncontrolled investments are built which have negative impact on the environment.



Fig. 19: Both choosing the place for living as well as the demand for houses depend on the economic capability. Photo: Cezary Skórka

In that context, the example of the Netherlands is again enlightening, as the governmental policy on environment (it was later so-called VINEX programme) restricted the possible spatial expansion within the country to selected urban complexes. When the City Council of Culemborg approved situating the model ecological village EVA Lanxmeer on the verge of the water-bearing area, it was quite a sensation in the Dutch urban planning. With the proportion of used land assumed beforehand (1998)¹², the development concept was planned in cooperation with the association of the future residents as well as the E.V.A. Foundation with the town authorities. The theoretical assumptions and high environmental standards, well developed greenery, include five zones: *private gardens, the greenery in home neighbourhood* (Fig. 21), *the common greenery, an agricultural farm with sectioned off recreation part* (Fig. 22) and *area of “wild” nature related to the water-bearing area, they were based on the inspiration of Marleen KapTen and the group of scientist related to the E.V.A. Foundation that promotes the widely understood permaculture principles (ecological gardening) and combines them with seeking new formula for habitat.*

EVA Lanxmeer is resided by the community representing the approach and outlook on life related to so-called deep ecology (ecosophy) which combines well the modern technological developments with suitable life model and acting for other communities through conducting research, providing education and promotion of the solutions implemented in the housing estate.¹³ (Fig. 23)



Fig. 20: Sustainable Housing Estate Eva-Lanxmeer. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

¹² Significant to the balance of artificial ecosystem: housing –6 ha, place of work –4,5 ha, mixed development (place of living along with the place of work) –1,5 ha, primary schools with swimming pools – 4 ha (Fig. 20), roads and common greenery –10,1 ha, EVA Centrum with the hotel facilities –0,7 ha, town ecological farm–4 ha.

¹³ Prof. Alina Drapella Hermansdorfer.

Fig. 21: EVA-Lanxmeer neighbourhood, Culemborg, the Netherlands. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

Fig. 22: With the favouring conditions, the road public space plays an informal role as the meeting place for adults and playground for children. The vehicle traffic doesn't have any negative impact on such an activity. Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.



Fig. 23: Community gardens provide sense of community and connection to the environment Photo: Sylwia Dębczak, 2011.

4 CONCLUSION

Many teams of researchers at the universities in various Polish towns conduct research on living conditions in Poland. The National Science Centre organises competitions for research grants, however, young researchers who work on the spatial planning issues and conduct research on housing are not financed by NSC. The landscape as a cultural value and specific indicator for the living standard is not important for NSC.

Unfortunately, the high standard green areas accessible to everyone are very rare in Poland and those already existing don't comply with any management standards and they are still shrinking when a housing estate is built. The new units of housing development built from 2000 to 2011 don't establish any social space and they are deprived of that particular microclimate favouring the physical health, good mood and mental feeling of belonging to society. As they are deprived of nature value, they aren't part of the ecological corridors and when they are built it means that all the land that could be possibly used is actually used without taking into account keeping the ecological balance and endurance of the basic processes in the nature.¹⁴

The town developing in such a direction becomes a cluster of another housing estates with various spatial structure and architecture conventions. The lack of urban regulations give the urban planners great freedom to shape usable programme of housing estates. The phase of urban planning of the entire districts in new areas of a town does not exist anymore. Investors are obligated to draw the urban concepts for their land only. Acting in the market economy forces them to streamlining their investments but from the economic perspective only: to minimize cost and maximize profits.¹⁵

¹⁴ Budzyński M. 2010. Utrzymanie życia jako podstawowa wartość przestrzeni miast (Keeping life as a main value in the town space). Wyd. WGiSR UW i Urząd m.st. Warszawy (Municipal Office, the Capital City of Warsaw), Warszawa 2010, s. 404-405

¹⁵ Grażyna M. Dąbrowska-Milewska. 2006. Wielorodzinna architektura mieszkaniowa Białegostoku 1990-2004(Multi-family housing architecture in Białystok). Wydawnictwo Politechniki Białostockiej Białystok

The issue of economic rationality perceived from the behavioural perspective has been already discussed in numerous academic publications. Guerin believes that the real problem is how the economy affects the manner of organising social relationships in which an individual actually exists (family, migration, way of thinking, approach to other people etc.) When we try to extend the behavioural analysis to the actual social reality determining the preferences of consumers, the experimental analysis may be only possible within a very restricted scope as the most important role here is played by existing economic situation and the economy context. Without being aware that except for the economy factor in the life of town, there are also spatial and aesthetic values, we cannot change the way of thinking on quality.

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