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# Thoughts on the Use of Space in Polish Cities

## Abstract:

Space is one of the city's most valuable resources, and its development has a significant impact on the living conditions of residents and the possibilities for creating development processes. The article focuses on identifying trends in the development of space in Polish cities, which began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The factors and determinants of space development by various city users are discussed. The considerations presented in the article concern issues such as spatial chaos, urban sprawl, the dominance of developers in the housing market, the ghettoisation of urban space, the aesthetics of public places, and the lack of space for public service investments. The effects of the identified trends in the context of rational space management are also presented.

Funding information: D.S. – University of Lodz, Faculty of Management, Department of City and Regional Management, Łódź, Poland; P.M. – The City of Łódź Office, Department of Roads and Transport, Łódź, Poland

The percentage share of the Authors in the preparation of the work is: D.S. – 50,00%, P.M. – 50,00%.

Declaration regarding the use of GAI tools: Not used.

Conflicts of interests: None.

Ethical considerations: The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 2025-05-19. Revised: 2025-10-15. Accepted: 2025-11-26



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**Keywords:** urban space, urban sprawl, rationality in space management

**JEL:** R52, R53

## 1. Introduction

All human activity unfolds within specific spatial and temporal frameworks, regardless of its nature, organisation, or type. The concentration of diverse human undertakings is particularly evident in urban environments. Within cities, various users of urban space – communities, households, governmental authorities, economic actors, and both formal and informal social groups – seek to appropriate, utilise, and assert claims over space. Urban space, being one of the city's most valuable assets, becomes subject to competing interests and uses. In Polish cities, this often results in the monopolisation of common space by social, economic, and political elites (Domaradzka, 2021:53).

Space, as a common good, possesses the characteristics of a scarce resource: its supply is limited and not subject to reproduction through productive means. The only possibility lies in its more or less rational management. Crucially, this management must strive to preserve equilibrium among various spatial functions, such as commercial, industrial, residential, transport, financial, cultural, and administrative uses (Domański, 2002:90–91). Urban space is defined by its utilitarian properties, and in accordance with the principle of locational coherence, the optimal scenario arises when these properties align with the needs and expectations of users. This, however, prompts a fundamental question whether such alignment necessarily ensures the use of space in a manner consistent with the public interest and the long-term maintenance of spatial order. In the practical realm of urban space governance, achieving such compatibility proves exceptionally challenging, particularly given the diverse and often conflicting interests of numerous stakeholder groups. This complexity is further exacerbated during systemic transformations that redefine the regulatory frameworks governing spatial relationships – such as the shift from a centrally planned to market-based economy – where the rationality of spatial decision-making becomes inherently problematic. In recent years, the dynamics of spatial use and urban development in Polish cities have been increasingly shaped by a multitude of factors, with particular emphasis on the decisions of private developers. These influences were largely absent in the context of the centrally planned economic model, highlighting a significant departure from previous modes of urban space management. This gives rise to a series of fundamental questions: Do these ongoing urban processes in a given city lead to the emergence of development thresholds? Can urban space be understood as being shaped in a manner that promotes spatial order, thereby influencing the overall quality of urban life? To what extent is urban space being appropriated in the interest of private actors? And finally, what observable trends can already be identified, along with their potential long-term implications for the development and functioning of the city? These critical questions – and, more importantly, the answers to them – should attract the attention of both municipal authorities and urban communities. Urban space fulfils numerous essential functions, and the manner in which it is used

and structured directly impacts the city's investment attractiveness, which in turn influences residents' living conditions over the long term. In the broader temporal perspective, the shaping of urban space is determined by the interaction of four principal factors: the natural environment, the level of technological and technical development, the prevailing system of values and cultural norms, and the activity of social and economic actors (Gaczek, 2003:72). Periods of systemic transformation disturb the balance between these elements, often leading to the appropriation of urban space by economically dominant groups and a concurrent departure from the principle of serving the public interest.

The processes of globalisation and the information revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have contributed to a profound civilisational transition – from agrarian or agrarian-industrial systems toward what is now commonly referred to as the knowledge-based civilisation. This transformation is observable in numerous urban centres around the world. At the global level, we are witnessing the emergence of a new civilisational paradigm, characterised by the central role of knowledge as a fundamental resource. Each civilisation is fundamentally defined by the nature of its productive forces, which in turn determine its defining characteristics. The identification and analysis of these characteristics are crucial for understanding the current stage of development and for assessing future developmental trajectories. In this context, civilisation may be conceptualised as 'a system that encompasses both material-institutional and spiritual relationships, structured around the primary resource that underpins its economic and productive system' (Kleer, 2016:135). In agrarian civilisation, this resource was land; in industrial civilisation, it was capital; and in the post-industrial (knowledge-based) civilisation, it is knowledge that assumes this foundational role. Cities functioning within successive civilisational paradigms exhibit varying relationships with space as a strategic resource. The expectations of urban communities regarding the quality and functionality of the spaces they inhabit have evolved significantly over time. In the era of knowledge-based civilisation, urban space acquires a meaning distinct from that attributed to it in previous epochs. The city – and its spatial structure – is increasingly conceptualised as being 'for the people,' (Lefebvre, 1991:34; Gehl, 2014) though this notion requires contextual interpretation and remains open to multiple readings. The advancement of knowledge enables the development of innovative, multidimensional approaches to spatial management that were unattainable in earlier historical periods. In practical terms, this translates into an expanded potential for the effective utilisation of space as a key determinant of urban development capacity.

On this basis, one may advance the thesis that the quality and structure of urban space exert a decisive influence on both the standard of living and the competitiveness of a city, thereby shaping its long-term development prospects. Moreover, the accumulation of knowledge and its translation into concrete spatial strategies enhances the capacity to reconcile, over the long term, the diverse expectations of urban stakeholders with the capabilities of contemporary space management and development frameworks – thus ensuring more effective stewardship of one of the city's most valuable resources.

The aim of this article is to examine the prevailing trends in the development of urban spaces in Polish cities, observable since the onset of systemic transformation. The discussion focuses on identifying factors that adversely affect urban space – those that undermine the establishment of spatial order, increase the long-term costs of urban functioning, and diminish the overall attractiveness of cities. It is widely acknowledged that the current standards and regulations governing urban space management in Poland are inadequate for enhancing either its functionality or aesthetic quality. These legal frameworks do not sufficiently support spatial governance in alignment with the principles of sustainable development or the imperatives of economic rationality. The consequences of irrational decisions in this domain will manifest with increasing severity in the coming years, imposing a lasting burden on future generations.

The starting point for this analysis is the conceptualisation of space in three dimensions and the identification of the key factors that have a negative impact on space, both from the functional and aesthetic angles. The undertaken reflections aim to reveal the principal constraints hindering the orderly development of urban areas and the implementation of rational spatial management. The era of the knowledge-based economy brings forth a variety of tools and solutions capable of improving urban resource governance, including the management of spatial assets. However, the implementation of such innovations is frequently limited by existing legal frameworks and financial constraints.

The methodological approach used in this article includes a review of literature, reports presenting the results of research on urban issues, legal acts, as well as descriptive statistics and observations of phenomena occurring in cities.

In the post-World War II period, Polish cities developed in a manner markedly different from those in developed countries due to well-known historical circumstances. The devastation of war, decades of infrastructural neglect, chronic housing shortages, underdevelopment of both technical and social infrastructure, a lack of maintenance and modernisation of the housing stock, and spatial decisions regarding the location of economic entities that failed to account for negative externalities (Marshall, 1925:258–275; Scitovsky, 1954; Markowski, 1999:148; Stiglitz, 2004:256) all contributed to shaping the reality of Polish urban spaces for decades.

One of the enduring legacies of the real socialist period in urban development is the absence – apart from the widespread availability of basic housing – of attractive public spaces designated for leisure and recreation. This deficiency is compounded by the visible deterioration of city centres: dilapidated residential buildings marked for demolition, neglected accompanying structures, abandoned post-industrial and post-military sites, deteriorating historic landmarks, and infrastructurally neglected peripheral areas. Nonetheless, one must acknowledge the notable achievement of this era: the construction of thousands of housing units within the framework of cooperative block housing. These developments were typically implemented on vacant plots and were accompanied by essential public amenities, including schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, cultural centres, shops, roads, various technical infrastructure components, as well as green and recreational spaces. Although the waiting period for housing could span 15 to 20 years, and housing demand remained unmet, the key advantage of those estates was the structured and planned approach to land use. Within such residential complexes, open spaces were purposefully incorporated to serve

environmental, social, ecological, structural, and symbolic functions. Those spaces played a significant role in fostering social interaction among residents, improving microclimates, reducing noise pollution, promoting active recreation, and cultivating a sense of community identity – allowing residents to perceive the estate as a distinct enclave within the broader urban fabric (Pawlik, 2015).

Since the 1990s, urban governance and operational paradigms in Polish cities have undergone substantial transformation.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of local self-government – municipalities and cities with county rights – has empowered locally elected authorities (through democratic elections) with the legal competence to make decisions regarding the use and development of urban space. The primary responsibility of municipal authorities now involves responding to the diverse initiatives of private and institutional investors and implementing a range of development projects that directly influence the living conditions of urban populations. However, a critical limitation in this process is the framework of legal regulations imposed at the national level. Within the context of a market economy, urban space has been commodified, and more profitable functions increasingly displace those deemed less economically viable. This shift has imbued urban space with pronounced economic value, often in tension with public expectations regarding the preservation of the public interest in spatial planning. This paradox can be understood through the lens of spatial planning theory and the concept of market imperfections or ‘flawed markets’ (Markowski, 2010:12–31), which highlights the gap between theoretical efficiency and practical outcomes.

Broadly speaking, municipalities (cities with county rights) are responsible for the development of social and technical infrastructure, while private developers serve as the primary actors in residential construction. Commercial infrastructure, on the other hand, is predominantly financed by the private sector. All these investment activities inevitably require appropriate spatial allocations.

When we approach the concept of urban space from the point of view of ‘public interest,’ the idea of shaping spatial order, i.e., moving away from chaos in the development of urban spaces, becomes important.

In Poland, the 1990s saw the beginning of a process of urban sprawl. The protection of private property and freedom of development contributed to the spread of buildings into the outskirts of cities and the surrounding rural areas. The uncontrolled growth of urbanised space results in a chaotic process and irrational spatial arrangements, disparities between the development of buildings and technical infrastructure, underdevelopment of local services, and ugly buildings (Zuziak, 2005). This takes place at the expense of reducing undeveloped green areas. As indicated by the results of research presented in the Report on the State of Polish Cities (Rzeńca, Sobol, Ogórek, 2021:19–20), cities tend to underestimate the role of spatial planning in achieving a high-quality environment.

Between 2013 and 2020, over 647,000 dwellings in single-family buildings were completed in Poland, accounting for almost half of all new residential premises. In the suburban areas of the largest cities, the share of new dwellings was even higher, reaching as much as

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<sup>1</sup> Poland’s socio-economic system has changed since 1990. A centrally planned economy has been replaced by a market economy.

16% of the total housing stock. Such intensity of single-family housing construction testifies to its dominant role in shaping suburban spaces (*Suburbanizacja...*, 2025). Over the last decade, the number of agglomeration residents has increased, while the number of residents in agglomeration cores, i.e., what we consider to be central cities, has fallen dramatically. Among the largest Polish cities in 2003–2013, only the number of residents in the centres of the Warszawa, Białystok, Olsztyn, Zielona Góra, and Kraków agglomerations increased slightly, by 1–2% (Rzeszów ‘grew’ by 14%, mainly because it expanded its boundaries). The other cities are becoming less populated, with a dramatic situation in Łódź, which lost almost 10% of its population in a decade. During the period in question, almost 150,000 people settled in the Warsaw suburbs, 80,000 in the Poznań area, and almost 70,000 on the outskirts of Gdańsk. The numbers are smaller but still significant around other cities (Dybalski, 2014). Among Polish cities most affected by urban sprawl, Warsaw is most often mentioned, followed by Kraków, Trójmiasto, Poznań, and Wrocław. The main reasons for this process are settlement processes, a lack of spatial planning, and an oversupply of building land (*Společno-gospodarcze skutki chaosu przestrzennego*, 2021:12–19).

The city centre holds a particularly significant role in the overall functioning of the urban organism. It is here that key facilities are concentrated, serving a broad spectrum of user needs: healthcare, insurance, legal services, cultural and exhibition venues, commercial establishments, recreational amenities, and educational institutions. In large urban centres, these also include metropolitan functions. In order to operate in accordance with contemporary standards, such functions require dedicated and suitably adapted infrastructure. However, identifying appropriate locations for such developments within the densely built-up core of the city often proves to be a formidable challenge. The underlying causes of this difficulty include the predominance of residential construction and the sluggish pace of revitalisation in areas that are in dire need of redevelopment. Furthermore, municipal authorities often lack the necessary leverage to encourage or compel business entities to relocate – despite the dilapidated state of their buildings, the physical limitations preventing spatial expansion, or the pressing need to repurpose land for projects aligned with the public interest.

Additional barriers arise from existing heritage protection legislation, which imposes strict obligations on the owners of historic buildings regarding their reconstruction, modernisation, or revitalisation. When financial resources – whether on the part of private owners, municipalities, or institutions – are insufficient to restore heritage properties in accordance with the guidelines of conservation authorities, such properties continue to deteriorate, disfigure the urban landscape, and effectively render the occupied area a constraint on urban development. The intensification of residential development in city centres is not matched by a corresponding expansion in social and technical infrastructure. This includes critical amenities such as schools, nurseries, kindergartens, cultural facilities, healthcare clinics, service points, and adequate parking. As a result, central urban areas are increasingly becoming inhospitable for everyday living. Similarly, peripheral districts – especially those hosting newly built residential developments – are often lacking in essential livability infrastructure. A further impediment to the rational use of urban space, particularly in central

zones, is the automobile. The car has become the dominant mode of transport within cities. Yet the rapid increase in vehicle numbers, combined with a road and parking infrastructure that has not kept pace, has led to significant congestion. The consequence is the widespread appropriation of any available open space for vehicle parking, resulting in the destruction of sidewalks, green lawns, and unmanaged greenery. The obstruction of access roads and the degradation of public space are increasingly common phenomena across urban areas.

**Table 1.** Inhabitants and passenger cars in selected cities

Cities	Population in 1,000		Passenger cars in 1,000		Population	Cars
	2013	2023	2013	2023	2023/2013 in %	2023/2013 in %
Warsaw	1724.4	1861.6	1031.2	1574.8	7.9	52.7
Kraków	759.0	806.2	395.6	582.8	6.2	47.3
Łódź	711.3	652.0	331.6	444.0	-8.3	34.0
Wrocław	632.0	673.7	352.8	522.4	6.6	48.1
Poznań	548.0	538.4	316.8	441.3	-1.7	39.3
Gdańsk	461.5	487.4	241.6	345.4	5.6	42.9

Source: own calculations based on BDL data.

A city should serve as a refuge from various forms of disaster, crisis, upheaval, and technical failure, providing a sense of safety in public spaces. This is only achievable when both existing and potential threats are thoroughly understood and when city authorities possess the capacity to respond appropriately. Consequently, urban space must accommodate new social and technical infrastructure dedicated to ensuring public safety. The realisation of such infrastructure, however, requires the allocation of suitable land – something that is increasingly difficult to secure in the densely built-up areas of city centres. These constraints affect not only facilities for emergency and rescue services but also the provision of parking, public transportation corridors and stops, pedestrian crossings, bicycle lanes, and similar public utilities. A comparable challenge arises with infrastructure considered undesirable or burdensome by local communities – such as gas stations, waste incineration plants, landfills, transformer stations, or socially necessary but locally contested institutions such as orphanages, rehabilitation centres for youth struggling with addiction, shelters for the homeless, or housing facilities for immigrants.

The current expansion of residential development is primarily driven by private investors. Developers, upon acquiring plots of land suitable for housing, actively shape the spatial configuration of the city. New residential buildings are frequently ‘squeezed in’ wherever a parcel is available and construction permits can be secured. These developments often display architectural inconsistency with surrounding buildings, thereby violating the principle of spatial harmony, and undermining spatial order. Developers’ offerings vary widely – from small clusters of blocks of flats or row houses to individual detached homes. Such ‘mini-estates’ are typically fenced off from neighbouring plots, with only a single point of access to the main road, creating daily mobility challenges for residents. An unwritten rule of maximising building density

prevails. Additionally, many of these developments exhibit considerable architectural and chromatic divergence, with near-total utilisation of the plot's area for residential purposes – often neglecting the inclusion of spaces for recreation, green areas, or playgrounds for children and youth. In many cases, residential developments are established on previously undeveloped, environmentally valuable sites located far from city centres and urban employment hubs, and which lack the necessary technical and social infrastructure. For residents, this results in limited access to public services, while for municipal authorities, it imposes the financial burden of extending services such as public transport to these areas.

One of the most striking consequences of such spatial development practices is the emergence of urban ghettoisation (gated communities), manifesting in the proliferation of gated and guarded residential enclaves (Atkinson, Blandy, 2005:177–186). These enclaves often embody stark socio-economic divides, giving rise to spatial concentrations of affluence and poverty. Such fragmentation significantly undermines social cohesion and the collective building of social capital within cities.

Gated communities have become a new form of social order, called social governmentality. This involves the displacement of undesirable social groups or activities from the inhabited area, and the resulting order is maintained by creating zones in which specific social groups are protected from the behaviour of other groups (Low, 2006:45–46). As noted by M. Dymnicka (2007), the increasing tendency of residents to isolate themselves within gated communities has a profound impact on the structural fabric of the city.

From both spatial and aesthetic perspectives, these residential enclaves are frequently distinct from their surroundings and tend to exhibit significantly higher standards than neighbouring developments. However, the rise of such gated communities often brings with it the appropriation – or more accurately, the degradation – of adjacent public areas. This is most visibly caused by vehicles, for which insufficient parking is provided within the enclave. As a result, cars overflow into surrounding streets, sidewalks, green spaces, and pedestrian pathways, contributing to the progressive erosion of public urban space. In emergency situations, such as a fire, the access of fire engines to the site of the incident is highly problematic. City authorities issue permits for operators to construct facilities in line with their expectations, approving the designated locations. If these operators are investors who promise a significant number of future jobs, and the selected site lacks adequate technical infrastructure, the authorities offer public support in the form of financing and constructing that infrastructure, as well as providing public transport and other services. In practice, this results in the formation of mixed, chaotic developments within urban space, an increase in the operational costs of the city, the elimination of green areas, and a reduction in the space available for wildlife.

## 2. Aesthetics and Attractiveness of Urban Spaces

Publicly accessible urban spaces took on special importance for residents during the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in March 2020. During lockdown periods, those spaces became venues for meetings, walks, recreation, events, and cultural activities, turning into highly valued public assets. Streets, parks, squares, allotments, green areas, undeveloped plots, and even cemeteries assumed a different meaning for residents than they had before the pandemic. People became more aware of the aesthetics and functionality of those spaces, the limitations of access to them, and their irrational development (such as through privatisation or appropriation). They also began to notice that many plots were undergoing privatisation on a large scale, which simultaneously led to a reduction in the stock of publicly accessible areas. This prompted reflections on the attractiveness of living in a given location, the increase in city operating costs borne by the public budget, as well as the costs borne by households and businesses, which are often determined by location. Residents also began to observe the ugliness of certain urban spaces. Streets, squares, parks, and arcades are often cluttered with elements that do not harmonise with one another. A particular role in this context is played by advertisements in public space. Advertisements – billboards, signs, placards, neon lights, etc. – often of questionable aesthetic quality, are becoming larger, more garish, and detract from the visual appeal of streets. They become a public nuisance, obstruct traffic signs, and generate negative externalities.

For example, according to the results of research conducted in 2021 by the Polish Economic Institute, 60% of respondents considered large-format advertisements or banners to be very burdensome and cause chaos in the space (*Společno-gospodarcze skutki chaosu przestrzennego*, 2021:41–43).

The function of advertising remains the transmission of information; however, its effects can be categorised according to the time of day. In daylight, advertisements distract passers-by by disrupting the natural harmony of urban layouts and the architectural aesthetic (Czyński, Ostrowski, 2011:217). At night, advertisements – especially illuminated ones such as billboards – play an equally important role. Their intense brightness and dynamic displays are often associated with a reduction in public safety. This is mainly because they divert drivers' attention and contribute to the intensification of light pollution (Żagan, 2021:163–164). Advertising in urban spaces – especially illuminated types – constitutes an extremely important and impactful element of the cityscape. Sometimes, advertisements serve as a symbol of urbanity, and their striking, intense colours and graphic forms become integral components of the urban landscape. This is particularly true of neon signs, which represent a specific form of promoting products, locations, or particular businesses. Unfortunately, neon signage was largely removed from the streets many years ago, and its contemporary revival is mostly symbolic, with a significantly lower presence than in the past. Modern illuminated advertisements – such as boards, posters, and logos – are expressive and dynamic. They are marked by variation in components and intense brightness, which contributes to spatial disorder. Their form differs significantly from the classic aesthetics of neon signage.

The chaotic placement and organisation of today's illuminated promotional forms are, to some extent, regulated by the Spatial Planning and Development Act (UPZP, 2003), which outlines procedures for adopting landscape resolutions applicable to specific territorial units. In this way, it provides a framework for landscape protection in terms of the placement and form of advertisements and other disruptive elements. However, as mentioned earlier, based on current knowledge of lighting technologies, certain illuminated advertisements can contribute significantly to light pollution in urbanised areas. When it comes to the environmental impact of illuminated billboards, posters, or logos at night, current legislation lacks coherence. Formally, these matters fall under the Environmental Protection Act (POŚ, 2001), which addresses pollution – but only in very general terms regarding electric light sources. This legal ambiguity may amplify the negative effects of visual disorder. Despite the existence of valuable legal instruments, the proliferation of poor spatial practices continues unabated.

Apart from the previously discussed infrastructural elements, this also applies to various types of services that should be integrated into the urban space without contributing to spatial chaos. One particularly illustrative example is the growing presence of automated parcel lockers. These devices have become widespread as a response to evolving patterns of commerce and distribution. While they offer undeniable functional benefits, their impact on the visual perception of public spaces is substantial. The disadvantages include their considerable physical footprint and, above all, their bright, brand-specific colour schemes. In many locations, parcel lockers from different providers are placed side by side, resulting in a jarring, multi-coloured visual field. Regulations concerning the landscape impact of parcel lockers remain vague, allowing them to be installed without significant regard for their surroundings. Consequently, despite efforts to restore spatial cohesion and clarity, irregularities persist. Locating parcel lockers in areas with limited vehicle access often leads to the degradation of lawns, sidewalks, and other forms of common property. Polish law only regulates parcel lockers in a general sense, with no direct legal references to such installations. A similar spatial issue arises from the placement of the Polish Red Cross containers used for collecting second-hand clothing. Their aesthetic value is questionable, and they are often emptied too infrequently, leading to the accumulation of discarded garments around them (Kowanda, 2025:42–46).

When considering the aesthetic condition of contemporary urban spaces, one must also acknowledge the positive developments that help restore harmony. Among these, murals and graffiti deserve particular attention. Polish cities have featured these artistic forms for decades, although early murals primarily served advertising purposes. While this promotional function persists to some extent, other, more diverse messages have become widespread. Street art is now a common form of expression – communicating identity, embellishing the space, and often carrying symbolic or socio-political connotations (Krzywik, 2022:120). As such, urban street art represents an excellent alternative to commercial advertising (while still potentially serving as a creative variant thereof), contributing meaningfully to the creation and definition of urban space. This is an indisputably positive phenomenon among contemporary Polish cities, which sometimes becomes an element

of city branding and the development of a tourist base (Korpysz-Wiśniewska, Rogovoy, 2024:10–15). Murals, therefore, have a significant influence on the development of urbanised areas, and their increasing presence in cities serves as strong evidence of this trend. They are multidimensional in nature, often depicting prominent individuals, slogans, landscapes, elements of local history, and at times, abstract artistic expressions.

According to the provisions of the current law (UUCP, 2019), city authorities hold a broad range of responsibilities concerning the maintenance of cleanliness and order within the city. This includes, among other things, the prevention of pollution in streets, squares, and open spaces – specifically through the removal and disposal of mud, snow, ice (when not assigned to the road manager by law), and other types of debris cleared from pedestrian routes by property owners, as well as the management of waste collected in containers placed on walkways. Furthermore, municipal authorities are tasked with maintaining cleanliness and order at public transport stops owned or managed by the municipality and located along public roads, regardless of the road category. For residents, cleanliness and order in public spaces carry great significance. Generally speaking, the central areas of cities are better maintained in this respect. In contrast, the peripheral zones are noticeably less orderly. Challenges in maintaining cleanliness are evident in and around markets, bazaars, underpasses, side streets, public squares, and in suburban areas. Illegal waste dumps still occur. In extreme circumstances, such as sudden and intense rainfall, debris from the streets flows into sewer inlets, clogging drainage systems. These overflows impede pedestrian movement and require immediate intervention from municipal technical services.

### 3. Conclusions

According to the Act of 8 March, 1990 on Municipal Self-Government (USG, 1990), municipal authorities are responsible for shaping spatial order and managing real estate. Compared to other public entities, they possess the greatest degree of decision-making power concerning the development of urban space, as granted by law. The implementation of this responsibility is governed by planning documents: the municipal spatial development study and the local zoning plan. In addition to this act, there are numerous other legal frameworks that municipal authorities must comply with. However, in practice, the existing legal provisions insufficiently protect urban space from appropriation and/or degradation by various social groups.

A distinct issue is the privatisation of public spaces. Municipalities often readily offer for sale public housing, land, vacant plots, abandoned tenement buildings, or former industrial sites (provided they hold ownership rights), due to the high costs of maintenance. Selling these elements of the municipal portfolio allows cities to relieve themselves of responsibility and the burden of maintaining what is typically a neglected asset.

Well-organised urban space plays an important economic and social role. The analysis of urban space management provides a basis for formulating several fundamental observations. Societies in modern Polish cities are undergoing profound structural transformations. Therefore,

the primary task of municipal authorities and decision-makers – both in the public and private sectors – is the management of urban space in such a way that the city becomes a place of shared residence, where local identities and strong social bonds can be developed. A central issue to resolve is how to foster a sense of community – both at the level of the city as a whole and within its smaller segments, such as neighbourhoods or districts. This challenge is particularly pressing in the face of widespread trends such as the enclosure of residential developments, restricted access to well-maintained public spaces, and the deepening socio-economic divide between the wealthy and the poor.

The challenges faced by cities are numerous and complex. However, municipal authorities should approach them from a systemic and holistic perspective. Urban space should be a matter of particular attention and care, as irrational management of this resource leads to diminished city competitiveness and declining living standards. Decisions concerning spatial development must be compliant with the applicable legal framework, but in all circumstances, the public interest should take precedence over private interests – whether those of individuals or commercial entities. Without the existence of a well-developed civil society, the principle of spatial coherence cannot be effectively implemented in practice.

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## Refleksje na temat zagospodarowywania przestrzeni w polskich miastach

### Streszczenie:

Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, iż obowiązujące w Polsce normy i przepisy związane z zarządzaniem miejską przestrzenią nie są wystarczające, aby poprawić jej funkcjonalność czy też estetykę. Ograniczenie chaosu i zarządzanie przestrzenią zgodnie z założeniami zrównoważonego rozwoju jest wymogiem ekonomicznej racjonalności odnośnie do wykorzystywania przestrzeni. Punktem wyjścia jest odniesienie się do przestrzeni w trzech wymiarach oraz zidentyfikowanie czynników, które mają na nią negatywny wpływ. Odwołanie się do aktów prawnych dotyczących zarządzania przestrzenią pozwoli na zidentyfikowanie głównych ograniczeń wpływających na porządkowanie miejskich przestrzeni w kierunku wprowadzania ładu przestrzennego i racjonalnego gospodarowania nią.

Analizowanym w artykule problemem są zatem zmiany obserwowane w sposobie i formach zagospodarowania przestrzeni w polskich miastach. W pracy wykorzystano metody analizy literatury przedmiotu, analizy aktów prawnych, analizy opisowej oraz prowadzonej przez autorów wieloletniej obserwacji przekształceń dotyczących zagospodarowywania przestrzeni miast.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przestrzeń miejska, inwestycje a przestrzeń, racjonalność w gospodarowaniu przestrzenią