The Human Factor in the Revitalization of the Housing Estates

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Abstract. The article presents the issues connected with revitalization of the housing estates built in the industrial technologies, regarding it as one of the key elements of the transformation process of the modern cities in Poland. The aim of this work is to draw the attention to a very important element of revitalisation - a ‘human factor’, which is the basis of any changes in the urban and architectural spaces of modern housing estates. The first aspect of transformations relates to searching for a suitable scale and the urban character of the building development, together with the available area and the functions of residents’ service. The second essential element is a social participation of the residents, their involvement in the decisions connected with the project, which range from the issues of spatial planning to the choice of specific solutions, furnishings and other details, but it also involves their participation in any works carried out for the housing estate. The residents’ participation increases their chances for happiness, a sense of identity, the bond with neighbourhood community and a better assessment of conducted architectural and urban transformations.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of a systematic decrease in the resources of urban building development areas forces us to think about the existing housing spaces and the invested land and the ways of how to use them more efficiently and how to improve the quality of housing environment and technical conditions of housing developments. The foundations for thinking about the revitalisation of the existing housing estates of the second half of the 20th century are found in changing social needs and housing standards, but also in the development of modern technologies. The economic growth of the level of social life and willingness to live in a functionally attractive and aesthetic housing environment have aroused bigger interest in the knowledge of inhabitants’ needs. The most essential issue of the revitalisation of housing
spaces is the creation of projects and modernisation addressed directly to the users of the space, as the key determinant of the transformations. A human, together with his social and living needs, functions in the residential environment and is affected by the surrounding. The surrounding forms his behaviour, individual reactions, moods, and the environmental features shape the level of the living comfort. When the residents’ needs are taken into account, the risk of failure of any undertakings connected with revitalisation of the housing tissue and its surrounding decreases. It also allows to adopt an unconventional attitude to solutions in particular areas, taking into consideration the special features of the housing environment.

2. The scale of the problem
The issue of the housing estates built in the industrial technologies is still very current. Numerous housing estates are permanently fixed in the landscapes of the cities, shaping their space and architectural expression. Residential estates still maintain good technical standards and fully use the owned amount of flats for the housing needs, which are usually in average and low conditions. Huge popularity of prefabricated building industry causes that any activities and endeavours involving changes in terms of improving the aesthetics and the space functionality are very important. According to the estimations done in Poland by Central Office of Statistics in 4 million flats located in the prefabricated blocks 12 million people currently live there, which stands for one third of the population of the country [1] and above half of the society live in the cities. Other statistics show that almost 50% of the whole number of flats are the places constructed in this technology. The buildings are at a good and “basic standard of usage” and there is no threat of withdrawing them from exploitation. The research concerning a technical tissue carried out by the Institute of Building Technology confirms the possibility of their further use. [2]

The interest in the issue of housing estates and the necessity of their modernisation is caused by a decreasing value of housing environments, despite maintaining the buildings in the conditions of exploitation. What is more, there is a strong aesthetic disproportion between the newly built housing complexes with their modern character and the varied flats on offer in comparison with the old residential estates. The flats in the blocks are still very popular, especially among young and elderly people. According to Central Office of Statistics, in the structure of sold flats in 2015 on Polish property market there was an overwhelming turnover of flats on the secondary market, almost 62% in comparison with the primary market. Poles were mostly interested in buying the flats between 40 and 60 square metres, which makes up over 45% of the overall amount of sold flats and these were 3-bedroom flats. The flats up to 40 square metres belonged to the second group of sold flats. [3]

The conducted analysis of the prices on the secondary market located in the housing estates built in the industrial technology shows that their price is lower from 7 to 10% in comparison with other flats on the local market. But some aspects, for example, connected with the desired localisation cause that there are not any differences in the prices between new and old estates. [4]

The interest in the flats in the prefabricated concrete slab buildings is caused not only by an attractive localisation or links with the city centre but also by good hygienic conditions of the estates such as suitable ventilation, insulation, and a big amount of green areas. The respectively lower prices in comparison with new buildings attract customers, who in spite of some objections to aesthetics or monotony of the estates and the standard of flats still show interest in buying a flat in the old residential estates. More and more often the surrounding of the buildings and its visual attractiveness undergo transformations and do not show so distinct and poor architecture in comparison with what is offered nowadays by real estate companies.

3. Diagnosis
In Poland industrialised construction, the same as in other European countries, has become known as an architectural ‘phenomena’, and despite filling the gaps in huge housing needs of the second half of the 20th century, it has become a housing estate model full of shortages and irregularities. Citing The
Declination of the World Architects focused around the UIA Congress in Warsaw in the year 1981, Andrzej Basista in his book “The Heritage of Concrete” writes that the mass production of flats causes a creation of ‘housing monocultures’, functional and formal standardization and that “… the quality of such a new environment of the scale unsuitable for a man does not fulfil his social and cultural needs and aspirations…. A citizen is able to identify himself with neither his city nor the closest surrounding”.

At that time it was observed that the way of building housing development had nothing to do with the needs of a man, user and receiver. However, despite this fact, in Poland the implementations of such solutions were not discontinued, unlike in other European countries. In spite of the fact that the problem of the housing estates concerned communist countries and other Western European countries, the characteristic features of the construction industry are noticeable. The phenomena of ‘low-rise’ residential complexes have not reached such a scale in any other place and did not present such monotonous and homogeneous architecture. What is more, the standard of construction and precision of the assembly was much lower than in other regions of Europe. Also the residents could not choose any other place of residence, so one block of flats was inhabited by people with completely different social status.

The negative assessment of mass housing estates concerned some regions in the 90s, whose living standard was low and was caused by the imposed design limitations but also by considerable shortages in the field of services and planning green and recreational areas. Additionally, apart from the raised issues, the problem of technical exploitation of the building substance appeared. What is more, a lack of spatial legibility and monotony of architectural solutions were emphasised, but also “non-humanistic features of environment evoked by shaping the unbeneﬁcial social structures and spatial disintegration and pathogenic behaviours of the residents”. [6]

Currently, the situation of housing estates in Poland is much better than in previous years. Prefabricated housing estates partially change their appearance thanks to the internal investments. It concerns the areas connected with the localisation of the housing estates, where new commercial and service objects are introduced together with recreational areas. It does not apply solely to the housing developments. The only activity undertaken by housing corporations in terms of revitalisation and maintaining proper conditions is thermal modernisation. The government policy on thermal modernisation is not sufficient enough, it lacks both legal regulations and complete financial support from the government. The building supervisors conduct only thermal modernisation works because of limited financial resources.

When it comes to other areas of architectural and urban revitalisation, there are not any extensive activities carried out.

Meanwhile in Western European countries intensive processes of modernisation of housing estates have been continued since the 90s, with Germany taking the lead. These modernisations concern four categories of problems: technical, architectural, urban and social. The basis of these transformations are the strategic activities, involving various processes and models of transformations of big housing estates. Apart from sustainable methods leading to transformations of housing environments and technical conditions of the prefabricated housing developments, considerable transformations of the housing tissue take place, including demolitions of degraded and often abandoned building objects. In general, such activities are supposed to improve the living conditions of people and the state of living environment. Germany fulfils two primary conditions, which are not possible to be fulfilled in Poland; they have a big number of uninhabited buildings in prefabricated housing developments and huge financial sources coming from the government subsidies.

The idea of copying the Western standards of transformations in Poland is not possible on a bigger scale, however, some aspects of revitalisation and the problems connected with these changes may be put under public debate. There is still a current question whether the form and structure of originally shaped housing estates have a chance for a new presentation, taking into account the participation of inhabitants and their preferences, providing the return of build-up areas to their greatness, shaping friendly and attractive housing environment and creating the identity values of the place according to the expectations of a modern society and in harmony with its needs.
4. Human scale of housing development and the social need

Within a discussion, which has been continued for many years, about building human-friendly housing environments in multi-spatial housing estates, the attention is paid to the scale of the housing developments. The authors of the book “Modernization of the Residential Estates” refer to the report of the Research Committee on Violence, Crime and Offence formulated in France in 1977, where the connection between the intensification of negative social phenomenon and “.... types of urbanisation of particular areas” was emphasised. The assessment also concerned the height of the buildings and the length of the facade due to the fact that the accumulation of offensive behaviours in the objects higher than six floors was observed. That is why, it was recommended to “.... avoid any signs of agrandizement in the field of construction”. [6] Decreasing the scale of housing developments was supposed to increase the relations between the residents and build social bonds. A tendency within modernisation, whose aim was to give the residential estates a human face, so called ‘humanization’, seemed particularly important. Its aim, apart from improving the conditions of buildings and housing environment, was mainly to provide the conditions for human development and fulfilment of life necessities. [6]. These activities were connected with the necessity to possess the knowledge on the possibilities of development and psychophysical needs of humans and the implementation was based on introducing functional divisions of housing space for its better identification. What is more, humanization included breaking and changing the scale of housing developments in order to improve the local safety and strengthen the sense of identity with the place of living.

Taking into account people’s needs, together with a human dimension in design, is the most essential element in shaping modern cities and residential estates. It is mentioned by Jan Gehl in his book “Cities for People”. A human scale is the pursuit to “...strengthen the role of pedestrians, as an element of an integrated policy of the city, to make the cities vibrant and safe, to make them develop in a sustainable way”. Excluding a human scale in the design would be a mistake and applying a human scale should be a requirement. The answers to the most difficult questions may be found in analysing a human body and checking his motor skills and the elements of the system of senses. Building a city from the level of the sight shows the quality of the space because a man experiences it closely, in his scale and spatial dimension. The quality of the place of living on the level of sight perception determines to a large extent the quality of everyday life of people and the comfort of use.

Another important and urgent solution is the issue of “...strengthening the social role of the urban space as the place for meetings, which contributes to building the social order”. [8] Applying a human dimension to designing and revitalising the cities is the field of knowledge and skills, which lead to improvement of the neglected areas without making the previous mistakes and is connected with the scale of the buildings and the size of the urbanistic assumptions. Current tendencies in design emphasise human needs in the aspect of a man’s physical scale and his psychic state. Creation of the places with human scale in urban space, closer to its users, often establish the relations, interactions, and social participation. Due to the spatial changes being made and satisfaction derived from transformations the mutual relations between residents and their bonds are strengthened.

5. Social participation

The residents’ participation in the process of revitalisation of housing spaces begins from the stage of participating in the project. It makes it impossible to introduce ‘bland’ features and allows to implement the real needs and desires of the clients into the projects. Participation teaches sensitivity to the needs of a given community and observers are allowed “to perceive the complexity and lack of clarity in many issues connected with the project”, especially in a situation when fast and economical decisions should be made. A successful participation assumes the residents’ involvement from the early stage of the design process so that their proposals might be considered and there would be a possibility of a discussion on many possible solutions. The most essential are the activities which bring quick reactions to solving problematic issues. The way of presenting should provide a simple visual or spatial graphic of design solutions made by a designer in order to reach possibly the highest assessment and make independent decisions. On the other hand, the residents without any experience in graphics should
present their ideas on models for legibility of their visions and upright information about “the relations between the desired scales”. [9]

Any changes made in the resident’s environment contribute to changes of their lifestyle, behaviours and affect their sense of happiness. The paradox of happiness means there is “a gap between what we choose and what is good for us”. It concerns the place of living, localisation, and the way of living. By choosing an escape from the city, where only seemingly we are far away from the urban threats, we are addicted to other “side effects”, such as disorder of the space or excessively developed communication. A dispersed and chaotically organized city is not a key to a happy or ideal city. [10] Mutual decisions, struggles with the city, reactivation of central and already invested areas, give a chance for striving for an ideal city.

Not looking at dispersed spaces and endlessly repeated forms, it is important to raise people’s awareness of their own housing environment and willingness to make creative decisions within their own backyard. The huge challenge is the city, housing estate and courtyard but the achievement is respecting a community and the prospects of creative cooperation of the community in terms of the improvements of the urban spaces.

The idea of social participation and local activities does not assume acting only on behalf of the residents but it means that people will be undertaking activities within their place of living. Jane Jacobs, a promoter of innovative attitude to the city planning and city’s mechanisms, claimed: “let the inhabitants decide about the appearance of their cities and run the transformation according to their own needs. If the new laws are necessary, they should demand them […] even if it means that the cities will be slightly inconsistent, common or weird, it is only a part of a challenge, not a problem. It is not difficult to design a city of happiness, but a lot of imagination is needed to transform the existing one.” [11]

6. The necessity for changes in the opinion of the residents. The example of Sadyba housing estate in Warsaw

Both, a factor of human dimension and social participation are the main explanations for the activities concerning revitalisation of the housing estates in Western Europe and should also be the main assumption of the activities in Poland. That is why, a survey was conducted within the seminar “Revitalisation of the Housing Development” by the students of Architecture at Warsaw University of Technology among the residents of Sadyba housing estate. The aim of the survey was to find out the users’ opinions on the key issues concerning the quality of their housing environment and current needs.

Comparing the opinions included in the survey helped to verify the knowledge about the real needs and how the problems of this housing estate are perceived by the residents and also to relate them to the European standards. The next stage was the creation of a design project and solving any problematic issues of the eastern part of Sadyba housing estate in Warsaw.

Sadyba housing estate was built at the end of 1960s, in the period when typical projects were designed. The compensation of using unified buildings was the creation of a proper quality of green areas, services and to provide the access to the disabled residents within the space of the housing estate and also in some residential buildings. Original assumptions of the design were not fully implemented and further architectural works and suppressing green areas showed the lack of spatial cohesion. Current disintegration among the owners and administrators and lack of unanimous opinions on some sensitive issues concerning this housing estate is unfavourable [12] for the future strategy and further development of this estate and the expected changes.

Although the conducted survey concerned only some parts of the housing development, its scope was very extended and included criteria connected with the housing development, range of services, communication facilities and the access to green and recreational areas. For the purpose of this article, some questions about the scale of the housing estate, the role of the urban streets, the aspect of the buildings’ individuality and the residents’ participation in potential functional and aesthetic transformations were included.

The results of the survey conducted in one of the Warsaw’s housing estates showed that in the opinion of the residents, the quality of the pedestrian streets in this estate is satisfactory. Out of 87 people, the
vast majority defined a lack of some elements in the amenities of this housing estate, such as benches (56.3%) and covered gathering places (27.6%) serving to maintain the contacts with neighbours. When the questions of improving the individual character of the buildings and their surrounding are concerned, the majority of the answers cannot be recognized as unambiguous. Out of 90 respondents, 33.3% said they did not have any opinion on this subject. When the questions about the aesthetic changes requiring improvements are taken into account, the residents (86 people) pointed that the changes in the colours of the buildings (51.2%) and also the completion of small architecture in the surrounding blocks of flats (33.7%) are essential. It means that the users are not particularly interested in individual aesthetic changes in their housing estate, varying entrances to staircases (only 14% respondents were in favour of this idea), adding balconies and loggias (5.8%) or the changes in the shape of the buildings (2.3%). When the questions about the neighbours’ relations are concerned 47.8% of the respondents said that there is a friendly atmosphere in the housing estate and 41.1% described it as neutral. Almost half of the respondents could not specify which aspects of the neighbours’ relations do not function, however, the others indicated overwhelmingly a lack of social initiatives (20%) and care of common spaces (18.8%). Almost 76% out of 90 respondents do not take part in any social initiatives such as cleaning the housing estate or other actions, while over 66% of the respondents expressed their willingness to do so.

The conducted survey confirmed the residents’ satisfaction with the existing conditions of the housing development, their unwillingness to any serious changes and it also revealed a lack of cooperation and involvement in terms of social participation.

Figure 1 and 2. The example of Sadyba housing estate. Author: Anita Orchowska

7. Conclusions
The man is the most important receiver of spatial transformations in modern housing estates and is also the creator of the changes in revitalisation. Searching for a suitable scale in architectural objects and urbanised areas involves some design activities connected with fragmentation of the forms, both in built-up spaces and in existing building structures, and formation of the urban attractions on the level of human sight. On the other hand, it is due to the urban scale of transformations that housing estates and courtyards create some social space for participatory activities increasing the sense of community. There are visible discrepancies between the theory, what the space in the housing estates should be like and what kind of changes are necessary, and practise, what is allowed by particular situational conditions in Poland. As a result, there are not any chances to follow the world widely accepted transformations of the built-up environment. The unambiguous identification of the residents with their place of living causes idealisation of this environment and the residential preferences result mainly from habits, lack of prospects to change location than not knowing the functioning patterns. Such a passive
adjustment does not encourage the residents to an active participation in the dialogue about the revitalization or participatory activities for a fear of future increase in rents or the property value and also of losing a peaceful place of living, unthreatened with any unexpected changes.

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