



KATOWICE





THE SOCIAL MEANING OF PUBLIC SPACES

A city is, according to the Cambridge Online Dictionary, "a place where many people live, with many houses, stores, businesses, etc., and which is bigger than a town." Each city has its own specificity expressed in the history, architecture, and urban layout, while its inhabitants often prefer a distinct way of living. A city is expected to have aesthetically pleasing, attractive, and diverse spaces with interesting blue-green infrastructure. Although many cities meet these criteria, few people wonder how important they are in social terms.



Promenade at Paprocańskie Lake in Tychy, Poland / Photo: Krzysztof Bierwiaczonek



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Without a community, which makes it possible to be *among* and live *for*, a person falls into a state of alienation that leads to serious psychological consequences. A deficit of joy, an attitude of helplessness in stressful situations, submissiveness, a feeling of loneliness, and lack of self-fulfillment are just some of the symptoms that a person with low social engagement may experience. Cities are becoming increasingly attractive in order to provide ways to have a good time and offer opportunities for rest or entertainment.

The above-mentioned *attractiveness* often brings to mind modernity which, in turn, is strongly associated with glamor and consumerism. A key property of urban space is its utilitarian significance. As Danish architect Jan Gehl noted, residents use urban space to undertake or participate in activities that are necessary (e.g., going to work, doing basic shopping, walking a child to school) and those that are optional (e.g., visiting galleries and shopping malls).

Shopping centers, which appeared in Polish cities in the first decade of the 21st century, have changed their image and character. The paths inside a mall on which consumers moved were designed to resemble park alleys, the interior was rich in vegetation, and the heart of the building, serving as an urban marketplace, was supposed to bring people together.

“Until recently this was the case,” says Assoc. Prof. Krzysztof Bierwiaczonek, a sociologist and researcher of urban spaces at the Faculty of Social Scienc-



The Silesian Museum in Katowice built on the site of the former coal mine “Katowice” / Photo: Tomasz Kielkowski

es of the University of Silesia. “In 2010, together with Assoc. Prof. Tomasz Nawrocki, and Dr. Barbara Lewicka, we conducted research on the importance of public spaces for the residents of Katowice and found that, according to 30% of the respondents, the Silesia City Center shopping mall was the most attractive place in the city (a walk through its long paths was then considered one of the most pleasant ways to spend free time). Shopping centers have been more and more frequently equipped with entertainment facilities, such as cinemas, theaters, gyms, and bowling alleys. The food court has also become an indispensable part of a mall. Thanks to its presence, visitors can enjoy some refreshment, spend more time in the shopping center, and thus spend more money. As a result, malls have become an attractive meeting place for families and friends. Fortunately, people need a lot more to live than just buying new products. From today's perspective, i.e., more than 10 years after this shopping fascination, one can see that this kind of entertainment has become commonplace.”

The influx of funds into city budgets has made urban spaces better and nicer. Taking care of them is one of the main obligations of local authorities. Urban space has an axiological significance and is of value to its inhabitants. This means that it is important for them, they like to “be in it,” and it gives them a sense of comfort, an opportunity to rest and to stabilize.

“As early as the 1950s, Jane Jacobs emphasized the importance of both architectural and social diversity in creating an atmosphere of urbanity. The layout of the housing estates and the style of construction are also important. The city should encourage people to live and stay in it. Creating fenced off or even closed streets, districts, and settlements, whose inhabitants are separated from other areas of the city, or designing surfaces with excessive amounts of concrete, do not favor a positive reception,” argues the sociologist from the University of Silesia.



Multifunctional activity zone in Chorzów, Poland, on one of the University of Silesia campuses
/ Photo: Agnieszka Szymala

The latter phenomenon was brilliantly described in a book by Polish cultural animator, publicist, and urban activist Jan Mencwel, who criticized huge areas in cities that are largely devoid of greenery. There was a time when city authorities were fascinated with concrete cubes and used them in excess during the modernization works of city squares and markets. Fortunately, this trend is becoming increasingly rare. Correspondingly, information on the importance of green spaces for cities and their inhabitants is more widespread. Spaces in the XS (little parks or green squares) and XXL sizes (large parks) are important in this context. Appealing green areas attract residents and city visitors, thus effectively competing with shopping centers.

In addition to the utility values related to necessary and optional activities, the sense of security is important for city dwellers. However, this factor is not free from external influence. According to the specialist, the sense of security is also affected by media reports. Daily news of accidents, disasters, thefts, and murders reduce the

peace of mind of residents, and this makes people use various security systems: from simple barriers, through fencing and monitoring, to hiring private security agencies. In addition to caring for oneself and loved ones, there is also anxiety about personal possessions. The loss of what was once a major expense or the awareness of its possible destruction creates uncertainty that city dwellers try to alleviate as much as possible.

Regardless of the implemented security systems and their effectiveness, the best means of prevention is good relations with neighbors. Assoc. Prof. Krzysztof Bierwiazzonek reiterates that, despite being surrounded by so many amenities, one cannot forget about caring for other members of the neighborhood and local community.

“Mutual kindness and concern for others are the best guarantees of safety. We are all human and always will be. No one should forget about building and maintaining friendly ties. Modernity and technology are one thing, but there is never a substitute for contact with other people.”