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WROCLAW: IMAGE OF THE CITY IN THE YEARS 1997–2007. PLACES LIKED AND DISLIKED

ABSTRACT. The image of a city can be a subject of various academic disciplines, such as urban sociology, psychology or marketing. This article presents preliminary findings of socio-spatial research conducted in Wrocław, Poland in the years 1997 and 2007. The study shows that the image of the city changes quite slowly compared to the rapid development of the landscape. The most liked and disliked places remained generally the same during the considered period, notwithstanding the improving quality of built-up areas. The main difference arises in the average number of answers given by each respondent, suggesting that the general attitude towards the city becomes more critical.

KEY WORDS: image, city, Wrocław, urban change, perception.

INTRODUCTION

Wrocław is a city of 640 thousand inhabitants in the south-western part of Poland. The recent decade (1997–2007) has seen a series of big events in the city's history. First, in 1997 Wrocław held the 46th World Eucharistic Congress and housed over 100 thousand catholic pilgrims from all over the world. Also in 1997 the city was struck by the 'Great Flood', which caused severe damage in many urban areas. Then, in 1999 due to a national administration reform Wrocław regained its rank as the capital of the large Lower Silesia region. And the year 2000 was the one thousand year anniversary of the foundation of the city linked with many cultural ceremonies. Next, in 2004 Poland joined the EU and new stimuli for urban revitalisation appeared. Finally, in 2007 Wrocław was selected as one of the cities hosting the European football cup in the year 2012 (Euro 2012). All of those events were – or will be – accompanied by major media campaigns, large public ceremonies and new large-scale investments.

Hence, we may expect that the general image of Wrocław has changed considerably during the last 10 years. But what exactly is the relationship between the recent changes in the landscape and the perception of the city? To answer this question I compared the results of the opinion survey carried out by E. Bagiński in 1996/1997 (Bagiński, 1998) with recent findings from an empirical study (2007). This article presents the preliminary findings of this research (1).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The image of a city has a wide range of meanings and can be a subject of social, psychological, geographical or market research. The approach taken in this article derives from urban sociology and defines the image of a city as a way of perceiving the cityscape by the residents (Lynch, 1960; Nasar, 1997; Madurowicz, 2008). In particular, the most liked and disliked places in a city are considered as an important element of the urban image.

The starting point for this study is a major research project run by E. Bagiński in 1996 and 1997 which aimed to measure the opinions about Wrocław among the inhabitants. During the survey 1481 people were interviewed in 20 representative urban areas.

The main focus of the project was the local living environment in selected parts of the city. However, some findings concerned Wrocław as a whole and may be useful for formulating general conclusions about the image of the city 10 years ago. The most relevant to this case are places approved and disapproved by the respondents.

In order to review and update the knowledge of the image of Wrocław, in 2007 I carried out an opinion study in the city. Two of the questions in the survey were: 'Which areas or parts of the city of Wrocław do you like the most?' 'Which areas or parts of the city of Wrocław do you like the least?'. In an internet opinion poll 2,927 residents answered these questions. Their responses may be compared to the results of the survey carried out by E. Bagiński in 1997, showing the changes in the perception of the city in the last decade.

RESULTS: PLACES LIKED

Fig. 1 shows the 5 places liked most in Wrocław in the years 1997 and 2007. It is quite evident that the first four areas remain the same during the research period. In this group Rynek and Ratusz (the Market Square and the City Hall) as well as Ostrów Tumski and Katedra (Ostrów Tumski island and the Cathedral)

are constantly the most liked places in Wrocław, whereas the next 2 areas Stare Miasto (the Old Town) and Park Szczytnicki (Szczytnicki Park), have swapped their positions in the last decade. The fifth position is occupied by two apparently different places: Krzyki (Krzyki housing estate) and Park Południowy (the Southern Park). As a matter of fact the last two areas constitute one coherent residential district and may be considered as a whole, which means that generally all the afore-mentioned places show similar levels of approval during the last decade.

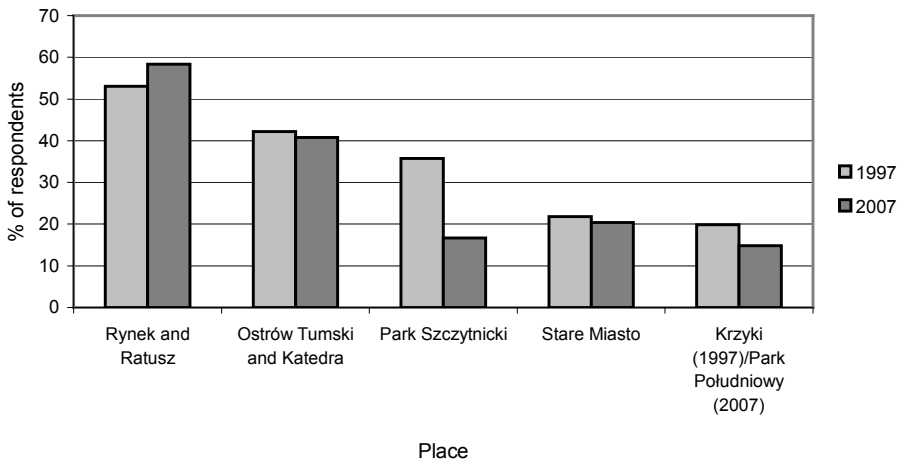


Fig. 1. Places liked most in Wrocław in the years 1997 and 2007 (the first 5 positions)

Source: of the 1997 data: Bagiński, 1998.

The change in the ranking of Park Szczytnicki (one position down compared to 1997) and Stare Miasto (one position up) can be interpreted in two ways. The first explanation is changes in the landscape: Park Szczytnicki was substantially damaged by the Great Flood of 1997 and the perception of this area as a recreational area may have worsened. At the same time the appearance of Stare Miasto has been steadily improving. If you take a look at Fig. 2. you probably notice that the surface of Ulica Świdnicka (Świdnicka Street) – one of the main parts of Stare Miasto – has been replaced and new trees have been planted, giving a fresher look to the avenue. Traffic has been restricted and a pedestrian zone has been established in this area.

The second explanation is related to the actual extent of Park Szczytnicki. For some people Park Szczytnicki includes an area called Ogród Japoński (the Japanese Garden), whereas for others they are two separate localities. It seems

that in 1997 most people saw the two places as a whole and according to this general approach Ogród Japoński was not distinguished in the results of the survey. Conversely, in 2007 Ogród Japoński was perceived as a distinct entity and 10.19% of respondents indicated it as one of their favourite places. Moreover, if we total the scores of Ogród Japoński and Park Szczytnicki in 2007 (which gives 26.86%) we will discover that the ranking order of the first five most liked areas did not change in the last decade!



Fig. 2. Ulica Świdnicka (Świdnicka Street) in Wrocław in 1997 and 2007. A part of Stare Miasto (Old Town) that significantly improved its image during the last decade

Source: Bagiński, 1998: 156 and Ł. Damurski's private collection.

While understanding the complex perception of Park Szczytnicki we may easily interpret the change in the level of approval of Rynek and Ratusz. This area, like Ulica Świdnicka described above, has been completely renovated (Fig. 3). Not only has the surface been replaced but also old, historical buildings have been restored. This overall improvement of the landscape is probably the reason for the success of this area in the opinion polls in 2007.



Fig. 3. Rynek (Market Square) in Wrocław in 1997 and 2007. The most characteristic, high-quality public space in the city

Source: Klimek, 1997, photography 33 and Ł. Damurski's private collection.

At the end I would like to consider the change in the total percentage of people preferring Rynek, Ostrów Tumski, Stare Miasto and Park Szczytnicki (the top 4 of the most liked areas together) in the years 1997–2007. We can

see that it has decreased from 152.86% to 136.14% (the numbers exceed 100% because each respondent could give more than one answer). The main reason for this drop is that in 1997 respondents indicated more favourite places (3.00 answers per respondent on average) than in 2007 (2.76) (2). Thus, it seems that despite the evident improvement of the landscape and despite the rising quality of architecture in Wrocław residents are less enthusiastic about the city.

RESULTS: PLACES DISLIKED

The most disliked areas in Wrocław in the years 1997–2007 were Ulica Traugutta (Traugutta Street), high-rise residential areas (including Nowy Dwór housing estate) and run-down 19th century urban areas (Fig. 4). Two of those places have changed their place in the ranking: in 1997 the run-down 19th century urban areas were in the second position whereas in 2007 they were overtaken by high-rise residential areas (third position in 1997). Does this swap of positions reflect the factual development of the cityscape? The answer may be found in Fig. 5. and Fig. 6 where the most disliked places in Wrocław are pictured: Ulica Traugutta (characteristic run-down 19th century urban area) and Kozanów housing estate (a high-rise residential area).

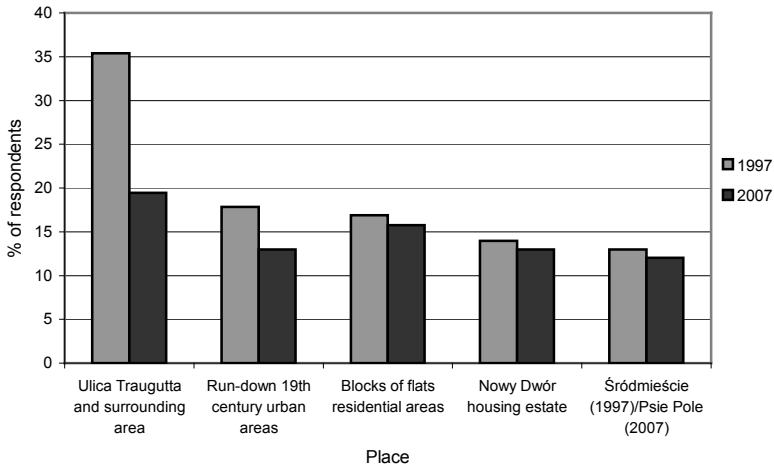


Fig. 4. The most disliked places in Wrocław in the years 1997 and 2007 (the first 5 positions)

Source: of the 1997 data: Bagiński, 1998.

Apparently those two localities did not change significantly during the last decade. However, a closer analysis indicates that both of them are steadily improving. The surface of Ulica Traugutta was renewed, some run-down buildings were replaced by new investments, offering a higher standard of living. It seems that this development is reflected by the opinion among the inhabitants: the percentage of people disliking this area has decreased from 35.40% in 1997 to 19.45% in 2007.



Fig. 5. Ulica Traugutta in 1997 and 2007. The opinion of this 19th century urban area is persistently negative, despite the visible improvement in the landscape

Source: Bagiński, 1998: 155 and Ł. Damurski's private collection.

In contrast to Ulica Traugutta, the perception of blocks of flats has not improved noticeably (16.88% and 15.75%). Moreover, the opinion about those

areas of the city has relatively worsened, pushing the blocks of flats up in the hierarchy of disliked places. This negative image does not reflect the factual changes in the landscape though: in Kozanów most of the blocks have been renovated or redecorated in the last decade and many new, well managed public green areas have been established.



Fig. 6. Kozanów housing estate in 1997 and 2007. The image of blocks of flats in Wrocław worsened during the last decade

Source: Dobesz, 1999, photography 168 and Ł. Damurski's private collection.

The overall image of Ulica Traugutta and of high-rise residential areas is still negative despite visible improvement of these places. The prevailing poor opinion

is probably connected with social problems occurring in these areas, such as poverty, high levels of unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse and violence.

To follow up the analysis presented above of the most liked places I measured the total percentage of people disliking the first four places in Wrocław (Ulica Traugutta, run-down 19th century urban areas and high-rise residential areas, including Nowy Dwór housing estate). The percentage of inhabitants disapproving of these areas has dropped from 84.09% in 1997 to 61.14% in 2007. Surprisingly, the average number of answers given by each respondent has increased from 1.61 to 1.79 (3). It means that presumably some new disliked areas have emerged in Wrocław, whereas the existing ones are improving their image.

CONCLUSIONS

The image of each city is influenced by various factors and changes in the course of time. In this paper I aimed to show the relationship between the changes in the image and the factual development of the cityscape, considering the example of Wrocław in Poland.

It seems that the image of a city, defined as a perception of the most liked and disliked places, alters quite slowly compared to changes in the landscape. In Wrocław the four most liked and disliked areas did not change in the years 1997—2007, despite extensive renovation of many public areas and new large-scale investments realised in the city. Some fluctuations in the percentage of respondents indicating particular areas are not wide enough to reshape the general image of Wrocław. It means that there are some persisting stereotypes about particular parts of the city, existing irrespective of their real condition.

The opinion about the city expressed by the inhabitants is ambivalent. The most liked areas in the last decade have lost some of their good reputation, notwithstanding the visible improvement in architecture and urban design. In contrast, the level of disapproval of the most disliked places is also decreasing, which seems to reflect in some way the positive changes in the landscape. Those contradictory findings prove that respondents in Wrocław have become less radical when assessing their physical environment: compared to the 1997 survey, the image in 2007 is less polarised.

If we consider the average number of answers given by each respondent, we may notice that people are more and more involved in pointing out the places they do not like whereas they are less concerned about the areas of the city they like the most. This may suggest that the residents' attitude towards Wrocław in 2007 is more critical than it was in 1997, which is an important piece of information for the local authorities.

To rightly interpret the 2007 findings we need to consider one more aspect: the research method employed in the study. It is widely known that using an internet survey strongly influences the results obtained. The distinctive character of online research makes most respondents give short, precise answers and encourages them to express more extreme opinions. In consequence, significant differences arise between the levels of answers in 1997 and 2007 and the interpretation of the results needs to be more complex.

Moreover, the results of an internet survey are not representative. According to the methodology of online research (Batorski, Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006) they should be verified and confronted with a traditional study of social opinion. Such a traditional control survey was carried out in selected areas of Wrocław in 2007, though its final results will be evaluated in the course of further studies and could not be included in this paper.

Finally, I should indicate that the landscape of Wrocław in the next few years will be changing even faster than up to now. Many new investments are under way: a skyscraper district, new roads, a new stadium. How will they influence the image of the city? This is a research question for the future.

NOTES

(1) Findings – including numbers – presented in this article may slightly change in the course of further studies.

(2) In 1997 1,453 respondents gave 4,360 answers and in 2007 2,927 respondents gave 8,086 answers to the question concerning the most liked places in Wrocław.

(3) In 1997 1,226 respondents gave 1,976 answers and in 2007 2,927 respondents gave 5,236 answers to the question concerning the most disliked places in Wrocław.

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