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INNER-CITY TRANSFORMATIONS AFTER SOCIALISM. FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH NEW RESIDENTS OF PRE-WAR TENEMENT HOUSES IN GDAŃSK

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2478/v10089-011-0008-7>

ABSTRACT. Issues of intense suburbanization and urban sprawl have been the most discussed threads in the recent debate on urban development in Poland. Meanwhile, in numerous cities of Western Europe signs of inner-city revival have been observed and investigated. Led by demographic and lifestyle changes alike, such reurbanization trends are found to be closely related to household transformations. Results of undertaken studies indicate that residential preferences of non-traditional households, such as singles, cohabitations, childless couples or flatsharers, gravitate to inner-city living. The aim of this paper is to reveal similar tendencies in a postsocialist city, using the example of Gdańsk. Presented results of statistical and qualitative data analyses point towards confirmation of incipient reurbanization, although with several distinctions following from the postsocialist context.

KEY WORDS: Poland, Gdańsk, reurbanization, inner-city transformations, demographic change, residential preferences.

INTRODUCTION

Despite being frequently employed in human geography, the concept of inner city eludes simple definition. Usually understood as an indefinite area surrounding the historical city core or central business district, it is most often associated with material and social deprivation (Johnston et al., 2000: 396) and thus has a negative connotation. Yet, as any element of urban landscape, also the inner city is subject to changes. Recently signs of its incipient metamorphosis have been observed across Europe.

While the 20th century was marked by predominant processes of suburbanization, the focus of urban research at the turn of the century has been extended to include reurbanization tendencies (Szymańska, Biegańska, 2011). This final phase of the cyclical urbanization model, as theorized by L. van den Berg et al. (1982), consists in gradual retreat to the urban region's city core and slackening of depopulation trends in inner-city areas. In fact, while many Western European cities have been 'approaching reurbanization', it is acknowledged that 'these new trends are not simply a reversal of flows associated with the counter-urbanization of the 1970s, nor indeed are they limited only to gentrification, but may involve new population groups' (Ogden, Hall, 2000: 369). Several studies of these 'new population groups' reveal that they are likely to recruit from non-traditional living arrangements, alternative to the nuclear family model (Ogden, Hall, 2004; Haase et al., 2005; Bromley et al., 2007).

The abundance of non-traditional household types, such as singles, cohabiting couples, one-parent family households or unrelated flatsharers, is considered to be one of the outcomes of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT). Coined by R. Lesthaeghe and D. van de Kaa (van de Kaa, 1987, 1994; Lesthaeghe, 1995) the term designates contemporary changes in fertility and family-forming patterns, articulated in natural population decrease, postponement of childbearing and entering formal unions, or even a complete departure from either of these practices. The SDT effects, closely related to the wider plethora of contemporary lifestyle changes, are, quite understandably, most pronounced in large urban centres and have a considerable impact on housing.

Firstly, the increase in the number of households, derivative of the individualization and atomization of social life but also connected to multiplication of available living-arrangement options, feeds housing demand. For instance, Living Apart Together (LAT) couples form in fact two separate households in lieu of one. Hence, despite declining urban populations many cities across Europe have noted increases in the overall number of households (Ogden, Hall, 2000). Furthermore, not only the need for additional housing arises, but residential preferences become more diversified. Secondly, non-linearity of household transitions has a significant bearing on housing biographies. Instead of following the traditional path which starts from living with parents through renting as a single student or flatsharer towards starting a family and purchasing a flat or house of one's own, possibilities have become many and varied. Therefore, a sequential housing career ladder has become increasingly replaced by irregular schemes resembling a game of snakes and ladders (McCarthy, Simpson, 1991). Thirdly, as the individual lifestyles become more diversified and volatile, residential needs and preferences are more likely to alter as well. Flexible housing environment then becomes one of the most valued qualities. It allows, for example, transforming

the same dwelling to correspond to the changing household configurations. Otherwise, non-flexible housing structures may stimulate residential mobility, ‘forcing’ the residents whose requirements cannot be fulfilled to move to a better adjusted dwelling.

Given the three circumstances combined, it may be stated that specific needs and preferences of non-traditional households tend towards accessibility, universality, functionalism, and adaptability which are prerequisites of residential flexibility (Buzar, Grabkowska, 2006). Such high standards of choice of dwelling, allowing maximum leeway both in household arrangements and organization of daily life, in fact come down to two key conditions. On the one hand, the bigger the potential of housing structures for change, the better. On the other, central location of a dwelling and its proximity to public transportation systems, shopping and entertainment facilities is also of major importance. Both criteria, and especially the latter, are relatively easily met in Western European inner cities (Tallon, Bromley, 2004), which may offer an explanation for their growing residential attractiveness among non-traditional households. The aim of the following sections is to prove that this assumption remains valid in a postsocialist city, based on a case-study analysis of inner city in Gdańsk.

POSTSOCIALIST INNER-CITY TRANSFORMATIONS. CASE STUDY: GDAŃSK

The postsocialist city of Gdańsk seems to be an interesting case study for a number of reasons. For instance, it boasts a long and complicated history, marked by abrupt multidimensional changes translated into its landscape. Moreover, since it played a significant economic role during socialism, with the currently insolvent Gdańsk shipyard as the national flagship industry, postsocialist transformations are all the more distinct. In addition, it is a second-order Polish city, and as such is relatively under-researched.

Signs of the Second Demographic Transition in Gdańsk have become manifest since around the 1970s when the upsurge in household numbers began to outpace the stationary population development (Fig. 1).

Although between 1988 and 2002, i.e., the years of the last two national population censuses, the number of inhabitants in Gdańsk decreased only by 0.6% (from 464,308 to 461,334), the trend has gathered momentum and according to statistical projections it will result in the total population of circa 360,000 in 2030 (Urząd Statystyczny, 2006: 113) (1). Meanwhile, during the same intercensal period not only the number of households increased by 15.4% but their structure changed significantly as well, resulting in a decline of the mean household size from 2.82 to 2.45 persons per household (Fig. 2).

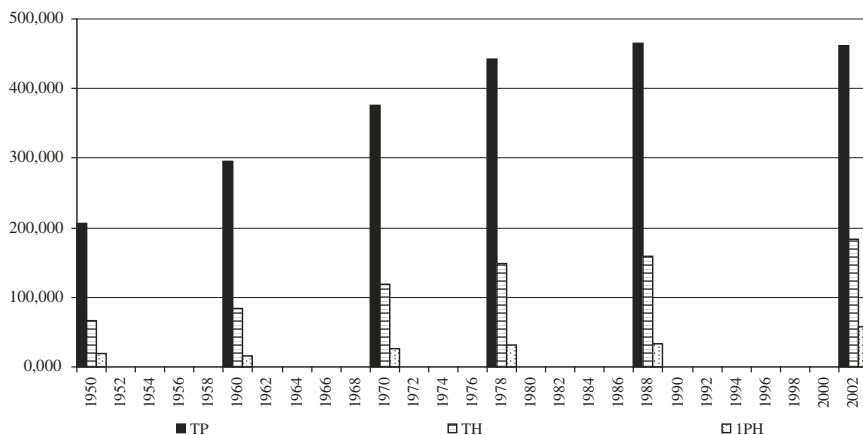


Fig. 1. Dynamics of population and household change in Gdańsk according to national census data, 1950–2002

Explanation: TP – total population; TH – total households; 1PH – 1-person households

Source: Author’s own calculations based on National Census Data 1950, 1960, 1970, 1978, 1988, and 2002 (Narodowe Spisy Powszechnie przeprowadzone w latach 1950, 1960, 1970, 1978, 1988 i 2002)

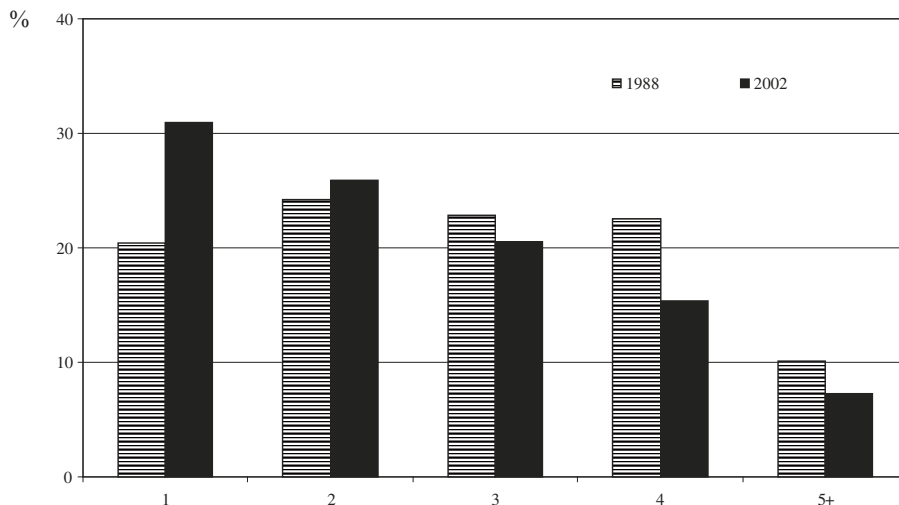


Fig. 2. Household structure by size in Gdańsk, 1988 and 2002

Explanation: 1 – 1-person households; 2 – 2-person households; 3 – 3-person households; 4 – 4-person households; 5+ – 5- and more-person households

Source: Author’s own calculations based on National Census Data 1988 and 2002 (Narodowe Spisy Powszechnie przeprowadzone w latach 1988 i 2002)

Despite the fact that the lack of comparable statistical data at the level of districts in 1988 hinders analysis of intercensal demographic change in inner-city Gdańsk, there are several hints available. For instance, the share of 1-person and non-family households in 2002 in Wrzeszcz Dolny, an old neighbourhood with domination of pre-war residential buildings, was relatively higher than the city average (Table 1) (2). Even though this anomaly could be partly explained by higher proportions of elderly women residing in the inner city, it seems that such interpretation is insufficient.

Table 1. Non-traditional and traditional household types in Gdańsk and Wrzeszcz Dolny in 2002

Households by types	Gdańsk	Wrzeszcz Dolny
	percentage of total number	
1-person households	30.9	32.9
Non-family households	33.3	36.2
Married couples	73.6	70.5
Cohabiting couples	2.8	2.8
Lone parent households	23.6	26.7

Source: Author's own calculations based on National Census Data 2002 (Narodowy Spis Powszechny 2002)

As for residential preferences, it needs to be noted that like in most other second-order cities in Poland also in Gdańsk the main reason for population decline is out-migration to the suburbs. Strong suburbanization trends have gathered momentum after the collapse of the socialist system, amplified by such factors as 'restitution' of free choice of housing based on individual needs and preferences, lack of coordinated spatial policy within urban regions, investors' pursuit of sites for greenfield housing development and intentional policy of local governments seeking to attract new residents (Lorens, 2005: 40–41).

A similar 'outward' direction has dominated intra-urban migration flows in Gdańsk. The migration balance between 1995 and 2004 was positive only in two peripheral boroughs, Zachód (West) and Południe (South), where the majority of new housing developments have been located after 1989 (Fig. 3) (3).

To date, there has not been much statistical evidence of the opposite, inner-city oriented migration trend in Gdańsk. However, several types of transformations ongoing in postsocialist inner city create possibilities for influx of new population groups. One of the most significant is related to privatization of municipal housing resources. In Gdańsk the share of this type of tenure has considerably decreased during the intercensal period 1988–2002 in favour of private ownership (Fig. 4). In 2007 alone, 1,894 municipal dwellings were sold to sitting tenants, while

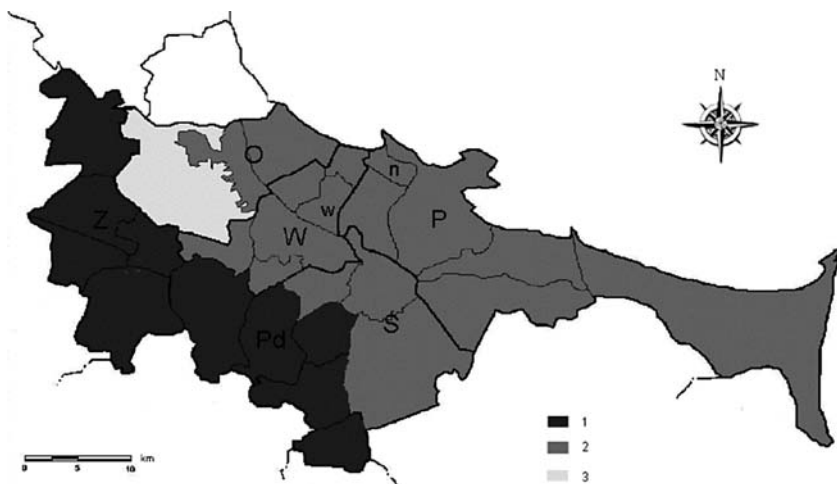


Fig. 3. Intra-urban migration balance in Gdańsk by boroughs, 1995–2004
 Explanation: O – Oliwa; Pd – Południe; P – Port; Ś – Śródmieście; W – Wrzeszcz;
 Z – Zachód; case-study urbanistic units: n – Nowy Port; w – Wrzeszcz Dolny;
 migration balance: 1 – inflow; 2 – outflow; 3 – uninhabited unit

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Zaborski, 2006

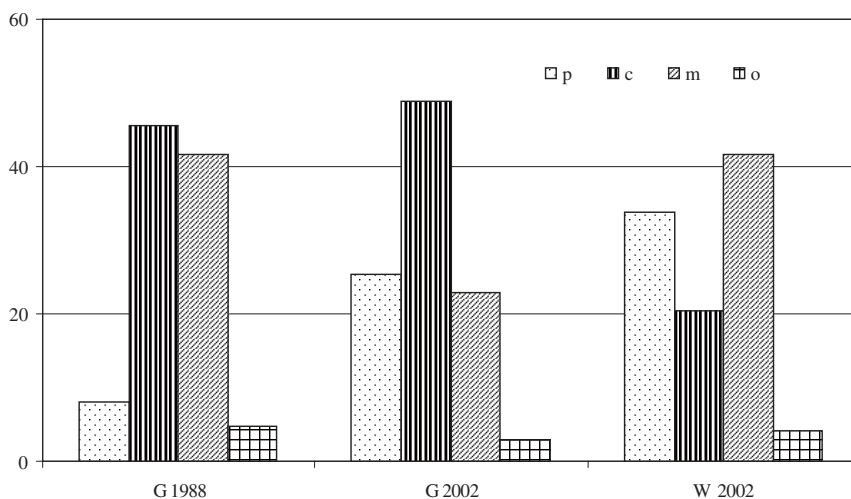


Fig. 4. Changes in the tenure structure of dwellings in Gdańsk (1988 and 2002) and Wrzeszcz Dolny (2002)
 Explanation: p – private ownership; c – cooperative ownership; m – municipal ownership; o – other

Source: Author's own calculations based on National Census Data 1988 and 2002 (Narodowe Spisy Powszechne przeprowadzone w latach 1988 i 2002)

in the two previous years the number of such transactions exceeded 2,000 (Urząd Miejski w Gdańsku, 2007: 138). Such high interest is mainly the result of the local authorities' policy encouraging municipal tenants to purchase the dwellings they rent. The incentives include 90% discount on the dwellings' market value, which has proven to be very effective considering the soaring prices in the estate market during the recent boom.

While it is not possible to compare the extent of tenure change in inner-city Gdańsk, due to missing data for the year 1988, it could be expected that the privatization impact has been even greater because of domination of municipal, typically pre-war, housing stock in these areas. In Wrzeszcz Dolny the proportion of municipal dwellings is however still quite high, which allows to assume that the buy-outs will continue.

Furthermore, the inner city of Gdańsk has begun to experience a massive generational replacement, with flats usually either being inherited by grandchildren of veteran residents or rented out, not always along legal lines, to avoid taxes. Although there are no reliable statistics to confirm the size of such processes, several local experts claim that both of them are common in inner-city Gdańsk (interviews conducted by the author, see next section).

Another noteworthy inner-city change, related to property letting, follows from influx of students renting accommodation and the so-called process of 'studentification' (Smith, 2005; Smith, Holt, 2007). In Gdańsk the majority of higher education institutions are clustered within or in close vicinity to inner-city neighbourhoods. Since flats in pre-war tenement houses offer student flatsharers attractive location, adaptability, and relatively low price they have increasingly seized the functions of overcrowded halls of residence. Even though there are some dark sides to studentification, as for instance rough relations with immediate neighbours, students' presence animates inner-city space and contributes to the development of numerous services and facilities frequented by other urban dwellers as well. For example, it is not by chance that the biggest vegetarian restaurant in Tricity and two most popular milk bars, i.e., low-price and self-service restaurants, are located in Wrzeszcz.

Before turning to outcomes of empirical study on residential change undertaken in two inner-city neighbourhoods in Gdańsk, it might be useful to look into the specificity of the Second Demographic Transition in postsocialist context. Juxtaposition of consequences of socialist housing policy and the SDT effects reveals certain interdependencies (Table 2). For instance, severity of housing deficit is further increased by the upsurge in household numbers. Thus, despite typically declining population in a postsocialist city, the housing demand rises. In addition, the rigid and standardized features of socialist housing structures, such as prefabricated high-rise buildings, seem particularly unfit for users who

Table 2. Relations between housing conditions and demographic change in a postsocialist city

Postsocialist housing legacy	Second demographic transition effects
severe shortage of dwellings	increasing number of households
large prefabricated housing estates designed with regard to the needs of nuclear families	variation of living arrangements, rise of non-traditional households
mass-produced, standardized architecture	differentiation of lifestyles, individualization of preferences
residential immobility, rootedness	mobility, flexibility and change
socially and materially degraded inner city	reevaluation of inner city

Source: Author's own elaboration

value adaptability, mobility, flexibility, and urban lifestyle. On the contrary, these qualities may be easily provided in old, centrally located neighbourhoods, which not only is an attraction factor but also holds potential that the lost splendour of the postsocialist inner city, intentionally neglected by the former ideology, is restored.

As mentioned before, for the time being demography-led reurbanization tendencies are (yet) statistically insignificant, hence the choice of a purely qualitative method applied in the case study described in the next section.

OLD RESIDENTIAL AREAS OF GDAŃSK IN THE EYES OF NEW INHABITANTS

Wrzeszcz Dolny and Nowy Port, two inner-city neighbourhoods of Gdańsk, each with the share of pre-war residential buildings exceeding 75%, were chosen for a closer investigation. While Wrzeszcz Dolny is located more centrally than Nowy Port, accessibility of both districts is much higher in comparison with the new housing estates in Zachód and Południe boroughs (Fig. 3) (4). Both case study districts suffered much degradation in the second half of the 20th century and are still on their way to recovery from disinvestment and social ills. Despite the overly stereotyped view of the two neighbourhoods their perception has gradually started to change in postsocialism and they seem to become increasingly desirable addresses, which is especially evident in the case of Wrzeszcz Dolny.

The main research aims of the undertaken study thus included gaining information on socio-demographic characteristics of (relatively) new residents who moved into flats in pre-war tenement houses in either of the neighbourhoods

after 1989, as well as identification of predominant criteria of choice of inner-city dwelling. In addition, residential satisfaction in the context of households' needs and preferences was investigated, together with examination of consequences of new residents' inflow and presence in the old neighbourhoods.

Altogether fifteen semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted between July 2007 and May 2008, nine with households residing in Wrzeszcz Dolny and six in Nowy Port. The interviewees, representing non-traditional and traditional household types alike, were approached by means of a snowball sampling method and interviewed at their homes with the use of a digital recorder. The questions asked during the interviews concerned, *inter alia*, dynamics of household composition, housing biographies of individual members, motivations for moving, daily lifestyle patterns, quality of social relations, and technical condition of built environment, neighbourhood change (and potential for it), as well as own engagement in community actions. Information gathered from the residents was also supplemented by and confronted with opinions of local experts interviewed on issues related to signs of reurbanization and revitalization in inner-city Gdańsk (5).

General conclusions following from the analysis of the interview data confirm the assumed socio-demographic characteristics of the new residents. Their distinguishing features include relatively young age, overrepresentation of non-traditional household types, higher education (incomplete in the case of students) and professional occupation (often freelance and/or home-based), high residential mobility and 'urban' lifestyle patterns, such as eating-out on a regular basis or relying on public transport instead of owning a car.

Although the interview results verified the supposition that the main pull factor to inner-city living consists in the relatively low price of flats and their attractive location in terms of accessibility and abundance of retail and service facilities, aesthetics and functionality of pre-war architecture appeared as an important additional advantage. Especially the interviewed singles, cohabiting couples and flatsharers gave consistent accounts explaining how their flexible lifestyle requirements and volatile household configurations find response in accessibility and adaptability of their dwellings. The flats' adaptability in particular was commonly praised by the interviewees and accentuated as a key quality of inner-city dwellings.

Apart from wide-ranging array of repair and construction works (e.g., layout rearrangement, erection of mezzanine floors, etc.), creative interior design and its frequent changes aimed at best fulfillment of households' needs, most of the interviewees displayed also high levels of commitment in the shared maintenance of the tenement houses they live in. In conjunction with the overall quite positive

perception of the neighbourhoods and shared opinion on their high potential for development, the new residents may appear as forerunners and proponents of positive change extending well beyond their homes. Through the actions of *wspólnota mieszkaniowa*, i.e., a collective of owners in multi-flat buildings who are in charge of their management, the newcomers appear to be capable of not only greatly contributing to improvement of the built structures' technical condition, but also encouraging local community bonds and fostering activity among veteran residents.

Even if the detailed picture may be not too rosy, since numerous obstacles to common actions were adduced, the interviewees' personal engagement in upgrading the quality of inner-city life deserves more investigation in future. As repeatedly articulated during interviews with the local experts, such strategy of bottom-up revitalization has already proven more efficient than any revitalization projects as yet set up by Gdańsk authorities.

CONCLUSIONS

As shown by examples from Western Europe, demography-led and lifestyle-induced inner-city transformations pave the way for reurbanization. Similar potential for a positive inner-city change may be observed in postsocialist cities, even if such tendencies have not yet reached beyond initial stage. Attractions of inner-city living however seem to be gradually rediscovered and adaptability of old-built housing structures increasingly appreciated east of the former Iron Curtain. Several conditions characteristic of postsocialism, such as privatization of municipal housing stock or overall deficit of dwellings, may facilitate the revival of the postsocialist inner city, together with more global processes, e.g., studentification.

A consistent thread running through the accounts of the interviewed residents of inner-city Gdańsk indicates that the inflow of new inhabitants may be seen as stimulating material and social revitalization. Regarding the relative newness of this process it will need to be monitored further. For instance, even if gentrification has been so far either non-existent or very limited in postsocialist inner city, it cannot be ruled out in future. Without doubt, a reintroduced social mix, unlike the top-down imposed social mix during socialism, could contribute to sustainable development of postsocialist (inner) city. It remains to be seen whether this potential is not wasted.

NOTES

- (1) Recalculated for the 1988–2007 period, the population decline in Gdańsk reaches 1.9%.
- (2) The category of non-family households includes 1-person households and all multiple-person households without direct family links between household members (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1990: IV).
- (3) The term ‘borough’ is used here as a synonym for ‘district’ which is applied by the local planning authorities in Gdańsk to denote 6 large urban units consisting of several smaller districts (‘urbanistic units’, *jednostki urbanistyczne*).
- (4) Spatial development of Gdańsk is strictly conditioned by the city’s physiography and in particular by the presence of two natural barriers, a seacoast along the northwest-southeast axis, and a parallel edge of the moraine plateau. From its earliest settlement Gdańsk expanded in the north–west direction, towards the present-day cities of Gdynia and Sopot, concentrating in the so-called Lower Terrace. The Upper Terrace, i.e., the boroughs of Zachód and Południe, became the site of urban development no sooner than in the second half of the 20th century, hence, its dynamic residential growth in recent decades.
- (5) Among the 10 interviewed experts there were 2 urban planners, 3 representatives of private housing administrations, 2 municipal housing officers, 1 real estate developer, 1 real estate agent, and 1 representative of a local non-governmental organization.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The empirical research described in this paper was part of the international research project *conDENSE: Socio-demographic change of European cities and its spatial consequences* funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

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