

Aleksander Böhm

The Quality of Urban Living

Abstract

Objectives: This paper presets the different factors of living in an urban space, as well as their implications.

Research Design & Methods: The mosaic of the different ways of living in a modern city is currently influenced by a new phenomenon (till now only partially recognised), namely the advancement of information technology. The article assumes the form of the overview of the history of the development of modern city.

Findings: Comparing and estimating different results of urban innovations can serve as the best practice for urban planning.

Implications / Recommendations: Eliminating the disadvantages and retaining the main advantage of a “flat with own garden” – now called *smart sprawl* – seems to be a permanent and long-lasting tendency.

Contribution / Value Added: The paper is a contribution to the list of the contemporary problems such as urban sprawl, Transport-Oriented Development, telecommuting, and the role of the public space.

Keywords: evolution of urban housing, city planning, the quality of urban living

Article classification: conceptual article (overview)

JEL classification: R 21

Aleksander Böhm – The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Aleje Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: abohm@wp.pl; ORCID: 0000-0001-5442-748.

Introduction

The city has always held a privileged position in the history of settlement. It was – and generally still is – an area of the great accumulation of everything brought by the civilisation of a given epoch. This has its good and bad consequences for the inhabitants who have tended to settle in cities rather than leave them. And even if they left, it must have been due to the unusual circumstances of a plague, invasion, or natural disasters. Once the effects of these had ceased, they usually returned to their city as long as this was possible.

On a global scale, the sustainability and appeal of urban space are reflected in the forecasts that predict that by 2050, i.e. after nearly 10,000 years of urban history, around 75% of the world's population will live in urban areas. It is even claimed that we are becoming an 'urban species'. Yet, at the same time, we must not lose sight of abandoned cities, cities buried under sand, overgrown by jungle or, in more recent times, shrinking cities – with a concomitant tendency towards suburban sprawl. Thus, in addition to the overwhelming resultant centripetal force, there are also centrifugal vectors that are said to be capable of leading to the 'twilight of cities' – or the disappearance of cities as we know them.

The following text is written from the position of an urban planner, and it is therefore charged with the tendency to plan space – to look ahead and seek answers to the question: what next? Within the confines of a dozen or so pages, one might be tempted to recall the facts most relevant to the extrapolation intended here.

The crystallisation of the city

One should begin with the work that was pioneering in many respects, that is Hippodamus' project for the reconstruction of Miletus around 479 BC – and, more broadly, the Hippodamian plans, which were later used in many areas of Greek colonisation. They distinguished urban space as *asteios* ('brilliant') in contrast to rural space *agricos*

('vulgar'). The city had cobbled streets and an elegant agora, where trading in fish was forbidden. The city, and the state at the same time, enjoyed democracy. There was a theatre, a gymnasium, and, naturally, a temple. There were no public gardens, but there were plenty of open spaces just outside the walls of the then small towns.

The nobility of the spatial individuality of the city was also strongly emphasised by the Romans, who additionally ensured the standard of municipal facilities (i.e. healthy water, efficient sewage systems, segregated traffic, and a representative forum), but also entertainment in the established parks, as the crowd demanded *panem et circenses* ('bread and games'). Thus, efforts were made to achieve that which Vitruvius described as *venustas* ('beauty', 'charm'). This must have been a widespread need, since the first trade union of *topiārīi* (i.e. urban gardeners caring for greenery) was established in Rome (see Figure 1).

At the time, the imperial capital had over a million inhabitants, many of whom lived in *insulae*, i.e. multi-storey tenement houses.

Thus, the custom of having a suburban house (*villa sub urbana*), where the patricians liked to spend the time of the most unpleasant heat in the city, crystallised as early as in antiquity. Rome was an empire whose security was guarded by legions deployed on the frontiers, so the feeding zone surrounding the city could remain 'open'.



Figure 1. Model of a Roman insula

Source: Reproduction from the author's collection.

Although we tend to associate the Middle Ages with the austerity of life, as early as at the end of the 13th century there was an office in Siena called *Ufficiali dell'ornato* and dedicated to the beautification of the city and the décor of buildings. The frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1280–1348), which decorate the Palazzo Pubblico and showed – to people who could not read – an allegory of the effects of good and bad governance in the city, are very telling, which might mean that asceticism was not the only important thing in the worldly life of that time.

In turn, the out-of-town estates might have served the function of a manor or/and outdoor recreation. Situated far away from densely built-up towns, they were also a refuge from the frequent epidemics of the time. Such places would sometimes be used for frivolous pleasures – in defiance of the plague – as gracefully described by Boccaccio (between 1350 and 1353).

Nevertheless, safety within the city walls – in the event of war – was paramount and worth enduring the inconvenience of the cramped conditions and the stench of the gutters. However, there were exceptions, especially a little while later. Colas Breugnon, a connoisseur of the weal and woe of life in the 17th-century France, used to say: “My shell, my niche is outside the walls, and the result of that is that when from the top of St. Martin’s tower they spy an enemy in the plain the town shuts its gates, and the enemy comes to me... and then I have to rebuild... but what could I see there?” (Romain, 1947 [1919], pp. 12–13).

Apart from such exceptions, anything that could be too dangerous, burdensome, or inconvenient within the walls was placed outside the city – hospitals, slaughterhouses, tanneries, as well as brickyards and forges – for fear of catching fire. Outside the city there were also public meadows – *pratellum* – as a remnant of the Roman ‘Campus Martius’ tradition, still used for military training, but also as pastures or cattle markets. There were inns and workshops of the so-called ‘bunglers’, i.e. craftsmen who were not members of guilds. There must have been mills and harbours by

the water, hunting lodges in the surrounding forests, and some monasteries situated in secluded spots. All of this, scattered in the zone of food resources, created a kind of exurbanisation and sometimes a more compact suburban tissue, gradually incorporated into the city – which its inhabitants usually perceived as a promotion. In this way, they combined the benefits of belonging to the city with the pleasures of living closer to nature.

An example of the unprecedented career of a similar place was Versailles, once the royal hunting ground. It was there – about 30 kilometres from neglected and rebellious Paris – that Louis XIV moved his court (and along with it several metropolitan functions) in 1682. It was here that he received his envoys, where festivities and parties were held, and where the luminaries of the political and cultural life of the time met with the monarch. It is worth noting at this point that the gigantic costs of maintaining the majestic Versailles upset the state budget, which later contributed to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789. With a previous population of around half a million, Paris regained its metropolitan splendour only after the sanitary facilities had been put in order, representative buildings built, streets and squares modernised, and the Grands Boulevards established.

Life in cities was for a long time subordinated to the factor of defence – including the numerous projects of ‘ideal cities’ from the turn of the 16th century. Yet with the development of warfare techniques, the limits set by the old walls were gradually exceeded while at the same time remaining under the influence of new constraints, namely the range of artillery fire, which became increasingly extensive. Military constructions in a city always caused certain dysfunctions in its life¹. They were accepted by city dwellers

¹ For this reason, according to the Roman law, legions were to be stationed in camps outside the city, according to P. K. Dyczek, *Novae* (‘Legion camp and late antique city – information from unpublished research’).

in exchange for a sense of security. Municipal governments often erected walls on their own initiative to protect the inhabitants, sometimes taking in people from the surrounding zone of food resources for the duration of the war. In turn, when – following the increasing scale of warfare – the military infrastructure in the city served mainly the supra-local strategy of the state, the city became a ‘garrison city’, and the fortress-city relationship assumed an oppressive character. The quality of life of the inhabitants was ruthlessly subordinated to this objective, which meant, among other things, the obligation of the so-called demolition reverse², and in the case of an impending siege, it presaged forced evacuation and/or starvation.

Suburbia and beyond

With the replacement of bastion fortifications by a system of dispersed forts, and especially with the introduction of long-range artillery and later the advent of aviation, the corset of military architecture burst and the urbanisation of suburban areas began. A pioneering example in this area was the implementation of the ‘*Eixample*’ plan – the ‘expansion’ – of Barcelona in 1859, designed by Ildefonso Cerdá, who also coined the term ‘urbanisation’, i.e. the process of urban development (see Figure 2).

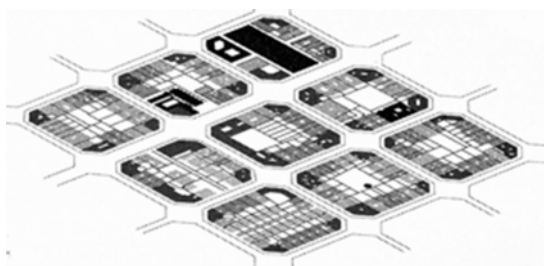


Figure 2. Layout of city blocks in Barcelona

Source: Cerdá and the Barcelona of the Future. Reality versus Plan. Barcelona 2009.

² A ‘demolition reverse’ was a commitment for the duration of the war to demolish at one’s own expense a structure built in the firing zone from the fortress.

Among the objectives set for the designer at the time, there was primarily the improvement of housing conditions (which were deteriorating due to cramped spaces and clashes with industry) and the improvement of road links between the urban tissue and the surrounding area. This was achieved through a regular layout of extensive urban blocks – with enclaves of mid-block greenery inside – and a clear grid of wide streets intersected by diagonal arteries. As it turned out, the rigidity of the urban grid and permissible building height did not deter the Catalan architects, who had been filling out Cerdá’s canvas with highly original buildings for more than 150 years. Today, the most highly rated asset of Barcelona is the quality of life in the city. When asked about its level, almost all residents (99%) found it satisfactory, good, or very good³.

Less than half a century after the ‘*Eixample*’ plan, Ebenezer Howard (1898) announced his idea of the Garden City in England. Against the backdrop of the disastrously deteriorating quality of life in cities, which followed the rise of the industrial age, Howard’s proposal came as a ‘new opening’. It was inspired by a comparison of the good and bad sides of urban and rural life – reminiscent of later SWOT analyses. As a result, the Garden City offered living conditions combining the good sides of the city and the countryside while eliminating their negative sides. To implement such a garden city concept, Howard proposed setting up a company which, after taking out a loan, would buy land (cheaply because it would be outside the city, but within easy reach of the railway carrying residents to the city centre), draw up an urban plan, prepare the development site, and start building and selling flats. These flats were to be either in single-family semi-detached houses with small gardens, or in compact urban blocks with large inner squares.

³ The survey was conducted between 1st June and 31st December, 2015. 88% of the participants completed the survey online, while the remaining 12% completed the paper version (see: www.investbarcelona.pl, retrieved on 26.04.2021).

This scheme has evolved to take on different variants of development standards, not only in England but also in many countries, including Poland. Its universal value and the source of its popularity has been the affordable offer of buying a ‘house with a garden’, which, as it turns out, is the most popular form of housing in every latitude. It should be noted, however, that the Garden City concept referred mainly to housing development, treating other functions of the city – including workplaces – rather neglectfully. Hence, it usually resulted in housing estates which were not entirely autonomous, or which were merely ‘bedroom communities’.

The quality of life in a city functioning according to democratic principles results only to a limited extent from the ideas of town planners or architects. The key to their implementation is the ‘social contract’ in the form of a legal act adopted by the local self-government, which in Poland is called the local spatial development plan.

In relation to the principles of urban life, it perpetuates the priority of the common good over the benefits of individual property rights. This particular type of consensus gained the status of local law in Euclid, Ohio, in 1926, by a decision of the Supreme Court of the United States. Known as Euclidean zoning since then, this law has been widely used in America and was later adopted as a key element of zoning plans throughout the civilised world. Initially, the regulations specified building intensity and height ratios for particular zones: single-family, multi-family, commercial,

administrative, industrial, and recreational. The most convincing argument for adopting such municipal regulations – which, after all, limit the landowner’s freedom – was the desire to stabilise the quality of the space and, therefore, the price of property acquired in a particular zone. In other words, the plan became a form of guarantee that a neighbour would not be able to build whatever they liked, as this could lower the value of the property. With time, the provisions of the plan encroached more deeply and broadly, also encompassing utilitarian and aesthetic standards – if that was the will of the residents. An important development in this regard was another Supreme Court ruling, in 1954, stating that “local law has the power to ensure the beauty as well as health”⁴. As a result, it was possible to develop the original *zoning* to include the appearance of public spaces, and then to take the shape of *form-based zoning*, or zoning according to specific forms of development (see Figure 3).

Such developed municipal spatial planning became widespread only after Americans had experienced the ill effects of an earlier – very liberal – concept called *Broadacre City*. It was the project of an otherwise outstanding architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, which he worked on until the 1950s. The idea consisted in dividing the selected area into squares of one acre (approx. 0.5 ha). The construction of surrounding roads and technical infrastructure routes was to be the task of the municipality, while the purchasers or lessees of land within the designated investment



Figure 3. 1. building line; 2. maximum and minimum height; 3. minimum width of the elevation in relation to the width of the plot; 4. surface area of windows in relation to the surface of the elevation (on individual storeys); 5. other attributes, including greenery and street furniture

Source: <https://w.w.w. formbasedcodes.org/definition> (retrieved on: 20.12.2015).

⁴ Ruling in *Berman vs. Parker* of 22 November, 1954.

blocks could further develop them at their own discretion. The result was vast areas of ‘roadside sprawl’, punctuated from time to time by a strand of ‘the main street’ – where retail and services are concentrated – with skyscrapers looming on the horizon in the centre. Such ‘regulations’ leading to a “*modern space salad*” (Alexander & Chermayeff, 1964) – or ‘modern spatial salad’ – were criticised as stimulating ‘sprawl’ (a spontaneous ‘splash’ of development) which had little to do with the city (see Figure 4).

In these quasi-urban areas, the quality of life varied from luxury in the ‘good neighbourhoods’ through the monotonous ‘national average’ to the extremely poor one in the peripheral slums. It was therefore a clear step backwards compared to concepts – also a consequence of the progressive mobility of the inhabitants – which went in the opposite direction.

The first of them is a project from 1868 (!) of a villa estate Riverside near Chicago, connected to the city centre by a new type of road – a *parkway*. The author of the project, F. L. Olmsted, emphasised the landscape values of the whole establishment subordinated to the varied topography, with the convenience and attractiveness of the 15 km-long carriage ride (!) to work in the city, along a road with the character of a recreational avenue.

The aforementioned effects of the industrial revolution – first in England and later in many other



Figure 4. ‘Modern space salad’

Source: Alexander & Chermayeff, 1963.

European countries, and called ‘paleo-technical’ in the first phase – brought about the emergence of substandard housing spontaneously arising in the vicinity of mines, steelworks, and factories. They were built in areas that had not been prepared for the avalanche of people looking for work. Cramped spaces and poor sanitary conditions resulted in recurrent epidemics and the danger of workers’ rebellion, which forced the authorities to introduce the first urban planning regulations in England in 1844. They regulated the development conditions concerning access roads, water supply, sewage system, and minimum size of building plots, as well as – later – also workers’ gardens and a compulsory square.

Against the backdrop of these provisions – markedly improving the quality of life – subsequent changes were the consequence of advances in the technology of production and the popularisation of machines that required expert maintenance. Industrialists began to compete for qualified workers by offering them high standards of housing in factory-based company towns. Those were reminiscent of the ephemeral projects from the 18th-century ‘romanticism of industry’ and the concepts of the utopian socialists, but differed from them in their strong economic foundations. As of the second half of the 19th century, company towns became a permanent feature in the suburban landscape of industrial cities. This partly stemmed from the fact that one of their aims was the multi-generational stabilisation of the workforce, which was facilitated by company schools, nursing homes, day-care centres, canteens, and – not infrequently – parks, swimming pools, and theatre halls. Their standard was sometimes so high as to bewilder future workers and their families arriving from the countryside⁵. Hence, in 1905 in Giszowiec in Silesia, in order

⁵ “The miner prefers to walk a good half mile to work every day from Zabrze, where he has a tiny wooden hut with a grubby floor, with no daylight, where he lives with his family, a cow, with no fuel, and does not want to get a free flat in the Klein Zabrze settlement, where he will have free fuel. There he will not be allowed to keep potatoes and

to overcome this kind of resistance, the designers were instructed to conduct an inventory of country cottages to adapt the style of the new housing estate to them. Today, its part, saved from demolition, is an elite place of residence among block housing estates in Katowice (see Figure 5).

The dynamic development of motorisation in the United States in the 1920s led to a search for solutions to prioritise collision-free pedestrian traffic in residential areas. This resulted in the idea of a neighbourhood unit – designed by C. Stein between 1923 and 1929. In addition to the aspect of safety, its name emphasises the care for human relations, which was then considered an important factor in the design of housing developments. This was to be facilitated by the small scale of the housing estate, which did not exceed several thousand inhabitants. It was about people bound by neighbourly relations who walk their children to the same school, belong to the same parish, and do their shopping in the same shops.

Other problems – partially already outlined – existed in more densely populated Europe. Tony Garnier tried to solve the growing clashes between city and industry in a modern way in his project of an ‘industrial city’ in 1904, planned near Lyon.



Figure 5. The remains of Giszowiec against the background of the contemporary housing estate in Katowice

Source: Photo by the author.

cabbage. Nor a cow – in a word, this flat is too good for him.” (From the report of the German administration in Silesia.)

He proposed comfortable residential areas away from the industrial plants, keeping the historic districts intact and using open spaces for recreation.

Thus, he was thirty years ahead of the concepts drafted by Le Corbusier in the Athens Charter, surpassing them at the same time in the level of the proposed quality of life. The ‘industrial city’ did not come into being, but in the very same Lyon, Garnier – commissioned by the local government – built an urban block of affordable flats in the 1920s, inscribed on the UNESCO list in 1991⁶, where residents still enjoy the quality of life proposed a hundred years ago.

It should be stressed here, however, that the above-mentioned Athens Charter was created under the pressure of the dramatic housing shortage that emerged in Europe as a result of the disastrous effects of the First World War. This forced the international urban planning community to combine the avant-garde slogan of ‘Work – Housing – Leisure’, i.e. the segregation of the then conflicting functions, with the search for methods of fast and cheap construction, in line with the slogan: ‘Wohung für das Existenzminimum’ (‘minimum subsistence dwelling’).

Despite the urgent need, those proposals were mainly used in Soviet Russia, while they met with limited demand wherever a free market economy was in operation. Twenty years later – in the aftermath of another world war – the devastation again led to a ‘housing famine’. After the Second World War, a bloc of socialist countries with a centrally-planned economy emerged in Europe and the construction of low-cost housing was used there to promote the new system.

Initially, the housing estates built in Poland, and even the two new towns, Nowe Tychy and Nowa Huta, represented relatively high housing standards (see Figure 6).

⁶ Tony Garnier Urban Museum in Lyon in a city block redeveloped under the direction of Krzysztof Pawlowski in 1985, where, among other things, reproductions of Garnier’s design were placed on the gable walls of the renovated buildings, creating an open-air museum of his work.



Figure 6. Nowa Huta, A1 housing estate by S. Juchnowicz

Source: Salwiński & Sibila, 2008.

Following the principles of a command economy, compulsory design norms included not only urban planning ratios, but also an area of flats and even their equipment and furnishings.

However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the growing economic inefficiency of the socialist system became apparent, and the economy of shortages became synonymous with it. In this situation, the existing design norms – sometimes absurdly meticulous (see Figure 7) – were impossible to implement and were preserved only

in design documentation, while the quality of life decreased dramatically.

As a consequence, the residents – often coming from the surrounding villages – tried to compensate for the harshness of the surroundings of the prefabricated blocks of flats and ‘secured’ – legally or not – allotment gardens in the area for themselves.

At the same time, in Western European countries, the aforementioned segregation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic proved to be too costly and was replaced by the ‘taming’ of vehicles as part of the ‘Woonerf’ concept. Following the example of the Netherlands, the ‘traffic calming’ was based on transforming it – under certain conditions – into the pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Thus, as an added value, a new, attractive character of the urban interior was formed along with the ground floor storefronts. This has become popular especially in inner-city districts, contributing to their comprehensive activation without too much impairment to the quality of life of the inhabitants – something that is also attributed to the constructors of car engines, which are increasingly less harmful to the environment.

Some streets, hitherto overloaded with vehicle traffic, could regain their multi-use character – also as a culture-forming public space. Where this was

City population	Cycling tracks in sq.m	Dirt tracks in sq.m	Archery tracks in sq.m	Riding-schools in sq.m	Total sq.m	Area per person in sq.m
5,000	–	–	–	–	1,400	0.28
10,000	–	–	–	–	1,400	0.14
15,000	–	–	–	–	1,400	0.09
30,000	–	–	4,500	–	5,900	0.20
50,000	–	–	7,500	–	8,900	0.18
100,000	–	–	15,000	–	19,550	0.20
150,000	–	–	20,000	–	55,950	0.37
200,000	10,000	45,000	20,000	–	142,350	0.71
250,000	40,000	15,000	20,000	48,000	191,500	0.76

Figure 7. Normative programme of recreational facilities in housing estates

Source: Reproduction from the author’s collection.

not possible for various reasons, ‘20 km/h zones’ or ‘30 km/h zones’ were used for vehicular traffic on segregated carriageways. The inconvenience of car traffic near the flats is the ‘price’ for the possibility of commuting and parking not only near one’s dwelling place but also work, school, shopping, entertainment venues, etc. The limited capacity of streets and areas in their vicinity, however, made the habit of having a private car – parked nearby – so burdensome that it was gradually being supplemented or even replaced by efficient public transport, the developing system of ‘city cars’⁷ and bicycles. Despite fears, this also brings about a revival of revitalised historic districts inaccessible to private cars. New developments, in turn, aimed to concentrate housing, workplaces, and commercial activities close to public transport stops, which has become known as TOD, i.e. *Transport-Oriented Development*. Such transport, until now usually inter-district, is now taking the form of agglomeration transport, which makes life easier for suburban residents.

The progressive multithreaded changes in the quality of life in the city are also illustrated by the revitalisation programmes for neighbourhoods degraded for various reasons to the level of the so-called ‘urban wasteland’, and in extreme cases classified as an area of social pathology. After an initial period of activities limited to improving the technical standard of buildings and their appearance, contemporary initiatives are reaching back to the sources of urban degradation and reduced quality of life, i.e. to socio-cultural causes.

In this field, the revitalisation programme of the Brooklyn Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood in New York stands out as an example of bringing a degraded area back to life while giving it a new and higher quality⁸. At the time, the 13 km² of neighbourhood had a population of 500,000 and its 1920s heyday was well behind it. 90% of the population was African-American and

Puerto Rican, who – as immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s – gradually displaced the white-collar community⁹ (who chose houses with gardens in the suburbs), and then, street by street, led



Figure 8. a. A development of the 1920s; b. A street in the 1960s

Source: A Report from Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1969.

⁷ Cars used on the basis of a paid fee.

⁸ It is the work of a corporation founded in 1967 by Robert Kennedy and Jacob Javits.

⁹ ‘White collars’ is a popular term for clerical workers in the United States.

the neighbourhood to cultural and technical degradation (see Figure 8a and Figure 8b).

The neighbourhood revitalisation concept called ‘A College in the City – An Alternative’ (A Report From Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1969) was based on a programme designed to teach people how to live better, get a profession, and educate children who will want to live and work there. Vacant buildings and vacant lots left by burnt-out houses were gradually filled with social welfare facilities, counselling centres, vocational training centres, schools, libraries, community centres, gymnasiums, offices, and new flats. Simultaneously, public transport was modernised and bands of carefully designed public space were introduced. Yet, the focus of the programme was on raising the level of social capital.

In 2007, the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood’s prolonged (almost two-generation-long) rehabilitation process was given a noticeable boost by the removal of the nearby harbour docks at the mouth of the East River and by the creation of the Brooklyn Bridge Park leisure and commercial complex in their place – opposite Manhattan, easily accessible by ferry. In the second quarter of 2015, transactions in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood were the second most popular – after Manhattan – in the New York’s real estate market.

The revitalisation programme presented above was interventionist in character, with a large contribution of public funds, concentrated in one area. The previously outlined phenomenon of sprawl, on the other hand, has a global character. It is accompanied by widespread criticism from professional circles and perhaps even more widespread popularity among the clientele of ‘houses with gardens’. This paradox can be compared to the rift, noticed in the 1980s by Jean-François Lyotard (1984) – between the artist and society. He even called it *le différend* – ‘a dispute’. This problem, interesting in itself, has become the subject of a comprehensive report in the United States¹⁰,

¹⁰ TCRP Report 74 – Cost of Sprawl – 2000, Washington D.C. 2002.

and in terms of urban planning practice, it is being addressed in an accommodating manner. Rather than controvert the merits of a house with a garden, the planning and landscape effects of the prevalence of such a development on a large scale should be eliminated. Its main shortcomings include:

- an increasing distance of the flat from the workplace, school, commerce, and services;
- increasingly long commutes to the ‘city’, at the expense of recreation and social life;
- the increasing cost of building and maintaining roads and technical infrastructure;
- mono-functionality (‘bedroom communities’);
- the lack of public spaces and human interaction zones;
- anonymity, the lack of social ties and a sense of security;
- scenic monotony.

By eliminating the disadvantages and retaining the main advantage of a flat with a garden, solutions that are known as *smart sprawl* – the intelligent deconcentration of differentiated development – were sought. These were preceded by *walled (gated) communities*, surrounded by a fence with a guard booth, in which a sense of security was ‘revived’ – especially in the richer neighbourhoods of cities in developing countries. Such an enclave was also the result of a desire to live ‘among one’s own people’, i.e. people of a similar social status or a similar age group. The wall was also sometimes created as a sound barrier, out of a desire to make use of the land along an arduous road. Inside larger estates of this type, services started to appear as well as clubs, swimming pools, tennis courts, and other elements from the ‘middle-class dreams’ and ideas of prestige, and these also were expressed in pretentious names (see Figure 9).

Fulfilling the dream of living ‘on an island’ – especially in the literal sense – may have further increased the attractiveness and price of housing. However, in extreme cases of environmentally-unsustainable solutions, these were symptoms of gigantomania threatening the safety of the whole venture.

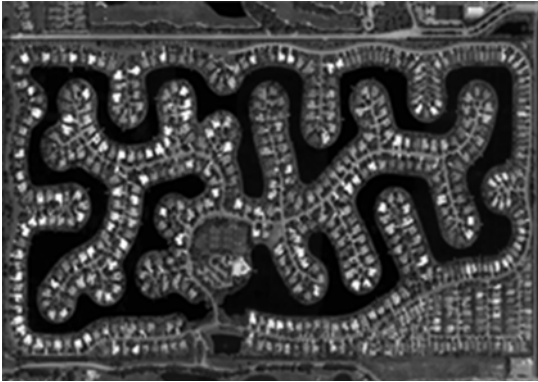


Figure 9. Projects and estate developments in Florida

Source: Reproduction from the author's collection.

From the point of view of the attractiveness of the urban community as such, the negative sides of a longer stay 'on an island' or 'behind a wall' have emerged over time in walled communities. They resulted from isolation and alienation, i.e. the reduction of public space to the level of a neighbourhood space at best. Life in isolated housing estates – especially with the overcrowded conditions inside – was becoming distressing for children and young people, and on top of this, police statistics were increasingly debunking the myth of safety 'behind the fence' (see Figure 10).

Other users of urban space, once treated as shared space, began to protest against these 'ghettos for the rich', making their lives more difficult, which led to a ban on gating residential areas in many cities.

After initial attempts to formally 'diversify' *sprawl* – for example through the application of shopping centres – in the second phase there appeared projects in which the deconcentration of the homogenous substance of the development resulted from topographical barriers, now used as strands of fringe recreational areas. This was a more or less conscious reference to Eliel Saarinen's 1918 concept for Helsinki, which he called 'organic decentralisation'.

Following on from this, the most promising trend at the moment is the movement known as



Figure 10. The organisation of closed settlements in Poland

Source: Reproduction from the author's collection.

New Urbanism, promoted since the 1980s by the Luxembourg-based architect Leon Krier. In design projects and developments of the New Urbanism, the so-called green infrastructure – together with the spatial structure of the cultural heritage of a given area – form the canvass that 'keeps in check' urban expansion. It has nodal 'seeds' of public space from which cohesive networks of streets and city blocks diverge, accentuated by structures whose postmodern style refers to the proven canons of the urban landscape, following the aforementioned principles of *form-based zoning*.

A measure similar in effect was proposed in a slightly less popular English concept called 'the Urban Villages Group' (Urban Villages

Group, 1992). It has a well-established tradition of urbanising former rural areas while respecting their original layout, intimate scale, natural values, sometimes their specific *genius loci*, but under conditions of higher building density. Hence many districts of expanding London were composed around a square that became an enclave of greenery preserved from the former village square.

The analogies between the attempts to articulate *sprawl* and the ‘organic deconcentration’ of 1918, as well as the idea of ‘Design with Nature’ (McHarg, 1971) – including the relationship with the zone of food resources – can be traced back to the Hippodamian plan of 479 BC (mentioned at the beginning of this article). Their immanent feature is **composing and combining the man-made work with the work of Nature** around it. The composition provides the two ‘autonomous’ beings with a synergic effect, and not only a juxtaposition that augurs conflict.

In the examples of urban housing sketched so far, single-family housing predominates, supplemented by developing multi-family housing. It has its origins in the previously shown Roman insula as well as the tenement house, which has evolved over many centuries.

In the Middle Ages, it began to undergo a significant transformation due to the cramped spaces within the city walls, which forced the original full-sized plots to be divided into half-sized plots – about 4 acres in size – which lowered the living standards¹¹ (see Figure 11).

Later, especially in the urbanised suburbs, homestead plots originally associated with agriculture were gradually filled with more profitable craft workshops, manufactories, and, finally, factories, with the development of Łódź being a textbook example. In such cases, the living standard deteriorated drastically, which was not only due to the density of multi-storey multi-family buildings, but also as a result of the mixing

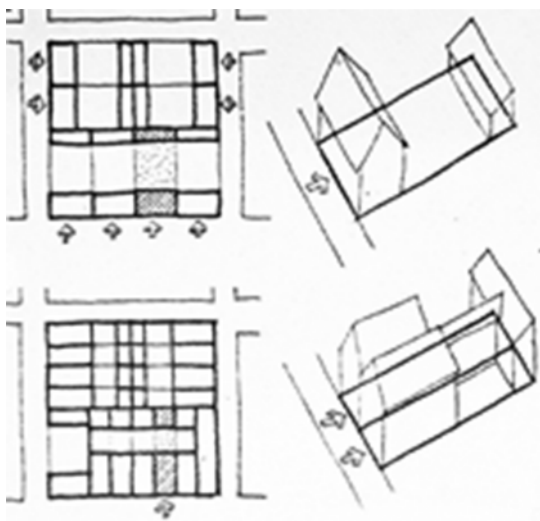


Figure 11. Division of full-sized plots in a medieval town

Source: Böhm, 1981.

of residential buildings with factory buildings within the same urban block (see Figure 12).

If industrial facilities were moved to other locations over time, it was due to the search for better conditions for production rather than for reasons of improving living conditions, which were sometimes extremely inconvenient.

At the turn of the 19th century, the typical structure of inner-city districts in most European cities was an urban block, and one of very different standards.

Against the background of the ‘well-courtyards’ stereotype, which unfortunately often depicted the existing state of affairs, it is important to note examples of better solutions, parallel to, but different from, the well-known postulates of the previously mentioned Athens Charter. Instead of the rapid ‘factory production’ of detached blocks of flats (advocated therein) facing the sun, these attempts aimed at improving the urban block, providing a higher comfort of living. This was achieved by limiting the density of development and by introducing a common green area into the interior of the block, while at the same time differentiating

¹¹ It is interesting to note that the four acres was the size of a plot of land in Miletus and now it is the smallest size permissible to build a single-family house.



Figure 12. Stages of urban block development in Łódź between 1873 and 1931

Source: Tołwiński, 1948.

the individual segments of development that sometimes resembled rows of ‘urban villas’ (see Figure 13).

An interesting innovation in the interwar period was the reversal of the ‘front’ of the development from the street towards the green courtyard. This resulted in a new distribution of the functions of the living compartments, i.e. the living room was turned towards the garden interior of the urban block, while the kitchen and secondary rooms were turned towards the street, from which there was an entrance to the building and a staircase, with shops and services located on the ground floor.

This pattern of shaping new residential urban blocks in the development of the inner city appears to be most noticeable at present. Developers are looking for more favourable density ratios on



Figure 13. Innovative solutions in Poznań from 1902 – an urban block consisting of urban villas with a common garden designed by E. Asmus, M. Biele, and F. Weiss

Source: Jakimowicz, 2005.

the outskirts of the already packed inner cities. Thus, urban block complexes with a green courtyard inside, usually hiding an underground car park, are being constructed. Greater profits, increased by ground-floor storefronts and the possibility to reduce parking space, are offered not only by ‘urban infill’ in the city centre, but also by buildings located in the suburbs (as long as they are within reach of public transport), which was mentioned earlier in relation to TOD.

This offer is mainly aimed at a specific group of users of urban space – young couples, the so-called singles, students, or people who treat a flat in the city centre as a studio or a place to rent (see Figure 14).

They usually possess their ‘primary’ home outside the city centre or in another city. As a result, the priority here is good accessibility by public transport and a prestigious design, while the development density, the view from the window, and the greenery around the house are all becoming less important.

Yet another type of urban housing arises from the conversion of post-industrial or post-military buildings into flats (sometimes offices); in other words – lofts. Proposals of this kind appeared decades ago and initially shocked with their boldness in overcoming stereotypical associations,



Figure 14. A contemporary ‘urban infill’ (by S. Deńko) in Kraków

Source: Photo by the author.

but soon gained popularity owing to their originality. They found their way into a niche of customers so numerous that there was a lack of abandoned original spaces (the so-called ‘hard lofts’), and thus fakes (‘soft loft’ condominiums) appeared on the housing market. This phenomenon seems to be another testimony to the flexibility of the urban substance, whose most important magnet is diversity, freedom of choice, and a sense of community.

Conclusion

This mosaic – or rather palimpsest – of different ways of living in the modern city is currently influenced by a completely new phenomenon – the advancement of information technology. It is a factor whose effects humanity is only just recognising as people observe its symptoms ‘trickling down’ into the cities that have already been formed. The observation of the recent epidemic –

during which, out of necessity, many activities connected with work, education, trade, and services are performed remotely (i.e. at home) – helps forecast the consequences of this process. The streets became deserted, shopping malls and events fell silent, it became dull in public spaces and everyone began to miss the recent commotion, hustle and bustle, and even the crowd and noise. People put their laptops away and went out to wave to each other and sing chorally on balconies. Like the characters from the *Decameron*, they thus manifested their disagreement with fear as well as their desire to be together despite the unfavourable conditions. It turned out that the virtual ‘lightness of being’, even in these circumstances, cannot substitute real life – no matter how inconvenient it is – and people are not to become a group of frightened introverts. At the same time, it has also turned out that many of the necessities of everyday life can be handled without leaving home and, therefore, sometimes more conveniently. This convinces sceptics of the benefits of IT, but also dampens enthusiasm for the new possibilities, which prove insufficient for the full enjoyment of city life. It is also worth recalling here the erroneous predictions of the supposedly dangerous influence of the radio and television on reading, concerts, and sports events.

Alongside the spatial consequences, IT also affects people’s time management. The shorter time required to perform necessary tasks – owing to conveniences – means that groups and individuals have more time for other activities and occasionally also some ‘leisure time’. Thus, one can again hear the Roman exclamation: ‘bread and games’. And this is where the problem arises. One might venture to say that the progress of civilisation has been driven by innovation in meeting needs. In other words – though with a dose of simplification – the commercial offer was the result of market analysis. Today there is ample evidence that the opposite holds true, i.e. that the overproduction of ‘gadgets’ forces the promotion of non-existent – or simply irrelevant – needs. After all, business must be booming. What effect does this have on

the city – ‘an area of increased concentration of everything brought by the civilisation of a given era’? Among many hypothetical scenarios, there is also one in which the city, as the main producer of waste, disappears under its heaps and can be reborn in some unknown form.

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