

Evolution of Spaces between Buildings in Polish Mass Housing Estates in the Eyes of the Inhabitants

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Abstract. The author investigates into the state of public and semi-public spaces in the Polish housing estates erected in the times of mass housing projects (1960 - 1980). The character of these estates is special. On the one hand, the buildings were accompanied by lavishly designed open spaces with elaborate material infrastructure: urban design followed the ideas that time – and strict regulations – that, in theory, prevented creation of substandard spaces. Provision of affordable housing was given a priority in the centrally controlled economy, so vast greenfield areas were devoted to housing. Moreover, the estates often stay under one management of housing cooperatives for years. The assets are relatively modern and usually conveniently located within the city/town infrastructure. This gives the areas advantage over contemporary housing schemes affected by constraints imposed by prior development and commercial approach to the provision of housing. On the other hand, technical wear and tear, functional obsolescence, years of underinvestment, natural demographic changes in local communities, changing ownership structure, and weakening social bonds make the large housing estates with their too lavishly designed public areas an ungrateful object of management.

Recent availability of the European Union funds for modernization of public spaces increases the numbers of municipal projects and individual initiatives to activate communities by improving public and semi-public spaces. A question arises whether the money and effort is spent reasonably. Do people actually use the new facilities? Are they encouraged to affect the form and function of their surrounding? Does the public space change according to some passing fancies, or according to the changing needs?

To juxtapose the development of technical condition of infrastructure and functions offered by the space between buildings with the expectations of users, the author repeatedly views the scene and conducts structured interviews with the inhabitants of the estates. The paper presents the results of two interdisciplinary surveys, held five years apart in the same estate, and based on the same questionnaire. Its results confirm that user expectations evolve. The interest in the development of green areas, and availability of recreational facilities in the proximity of home is growing as people observe that changes are possible. Some people declare some form of active participation in improvements. Preferences towards functions and accessibility of the areas reflect changes in the demographic structure. Surveys of this kind may be regularly used in defining guidelines for further improvement measures, and raising user awareness of the personal responsibility for the condition of the neighbourhood.



1. Introduction

Mass housing projects in Poland (1960 - 1980) produced a considerable share of housing assets. The dominating pattern of development were large estates of multifamily blocks, typically from 5 to 11 floors, build of precast concrete elements. Despite budgetary constraints and putting affordability first, these assets are still considered highly valuable: the estates were designed as a functional whole: housing blocks together with infrastructure of roads, green areas, and buildings to house local amenities. In the case of the latter, even if not erected at the same time with the dwellings, they were included in plans and enough space was reserved for them. Therefore, the buildings of that time are typically accompanied by lavishly designed open spaces [1,2].

Though the estates and buildings were designed in more or less the same manner regardless of their location, their maintenance levels were naturally not the same. However, it can be generally observed that money and effort were spent mostly on keeping the buildings in good condition, with minimum investment in improving spaces between buildings. The fact that the estates were created as affordable housing (low rent=low repair fund) adds to the problem. As the inhabitants grew older, as the trees in local greens grew bigger, as the scale of car ownership increased rapidly to the levels unexpected by the architects of the estates, the actual use of spaces changed – to the detriment of the existing facilities. The estates often stay under one management of housing cooperatives for many years [1], which is certainly advantageous in terms of conducting improvement projects. However, mixed ownership of flats (with prevailing individual ownership) and legal changes hinder investment decisions.

Obsolete infrastructure public and semi-public spaces in the estates call for rethinking their function before any technical measures are taken. As social bonds between the estate inhabitants tend to weaken and privacy becomes a key value [3,4,5], and restructuring the common use areas would be an opportunity to bring people together again – encourage them to decide what functions are needed, support improvements with their own work, or deciding to donate money. Some older inhabitants of the estates may remember their volunteer participation in landscaping works as the estates were built in 1960 - 1980, some – encouraged by the estate management – enjoy small-scale gardening in the fronts of their blocks. The younger generations busy with earning money might not be enthusiastic about such ideas, but the number of retired, lonely, or temporarily unemployed people is growing, and their potential can be utilized to serve common good. The author's recent observation provides a good illustration: an elderly lady living in a large housing estate in Lublin comes out well after dark to rake off leaves from public lawns – and she does it secretly, too shy to look for any “accomplices” to keep her company. The potential of participation is currently far from being explored by Polish towns and cities [6,7,8], though the number of initiatives is growing. There are numerous examples that shaping public spaces strongly affects people's lives, and there is a lot to be done in this respect [3,4,9-13].

To investigate into current needs towards shaping common access areas of large housing estates, and to check their actual condition, the author undertook a research project that involves recurrent surveys in the selected housing estates. As the survey was to be conducted in a number of estates, the results were intended to be compared with data from other locations. Its findings were used, among others, by the Lublin Municipal Office for preparation of the local development plan (2011 - 2012). The questionnaire, being one of the research tools, was used in practice by Lubartów Housing Cooperative to define scope for their improvement project [14]. Both cities are located in south-eastern Poland.

The paper presents the methodology and findings of the survey in one of housing estates in Lublin. Its aim was to learn about the users' opinions on infrastructural deficiencies in the neighbourhood related with both housing blocks and local amenities. The author wanted to discover the inhabitants' ideas how to cure them, as well as to make them aware of possibilities of improvements and to estimate their willingness to get involved in the improvement measures.

2. Recurrent interdisciplinary survey – the method

The method adopted in the Recurrent Interdisciplinary Survey (RIS) of housing estates includes a thorough analysis of records kept by the housing estate managers (original designs, building and infrastructure maintenance records, designs and feasibility studies of any improvement measures taken

so far), a direct observation combined with inspection by a structural engineer, a semi-structured interview with the housing estate managers, and a questionnaire-based user opinion survey to be filled in direct interview. The survey is intended to be repeated in about 5-year intervals.

The key research question – how the inhabitants would like to shape their neighbourhood – was to be answered in direct interviews based on a questionnaire. The interview with the inhabitants was agreed by the estate management and publicly announced. The interviewees, approached at their homes by trained interviewers, were made aware of the purpose of the survey. The assumption was that only one adult person per flat was asked to give answers. To avoid bias and to approach a representative sample of the inhabitants, the interviewers visited the estate several times during a week, at different times of the day.

The questionnaire contained 14 questions (8 close-ended and 6 open-ended [15]) regarding quality of the flats, the buildings, and the infrastructure outside the buildings. The questions on the quality of outdoor areas concerned:

- opinion on the problems observed in the estate and expectations towards improvements – multiple-choice questions,
- views on the social issues of life in the estate and willingness to participate in improvement actions (voluntary work, financial contribution on top of usual rent); the interviewees could select only one answer from the suggested options.

The age of interviewees was between 18 and 80. For the analysis, they were arbitrarily divided into age groups: 18 - 25, 25 - 50, 50 - 75 and over 75.

3. The case

The object of analysis was a housing estate (Osiedle Moniuszki) located in Lublin, a city of 350,000 inhabitants, capital of Lublin Voivodship, south-eastern Poland. The area of the estate is 14.94 ha, and the housing stock is 1622 flats of total usable floor area of 84,712 m², located in precast concrete or brick housing blocks 5 - 11 storey high; the size of flats ranged from 30 to 65 m². The population of the estate in 2004 was 6.5 thousand people, reduced to 4.2 thousand people in 2009 (figures based on declarations of flat users available to the estate management). The estate is managed by a housing cooperative (Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa Czechów) since its erection in 1974. Apart from block of flats, the cooperative manages 59 commercial units of 6,225 m² usable floor area and 840 m² of roofed parking space.

The estate was surveyed in 2004, in 2009, and is scheduled to be surveyed in 2017. The same questionnaire was used each time. In 2004, the response was obtained from 291 people (one person per flat), whereas in 2009 only 153 inhabitants agreed to answer. With the population of 1622 flats, the response rate was above 17%. Those who decided to open their door to the interviewers were generally willing to cooperate and expressed their interest in the problems of the neighbourhood.

4. Results and discussion

Figures 1 and 2 present the structure of the sample according to age and employment status. The largest group of respondents were 50 - 75 years of age; this group was also observed to be the most numerous in the estate's population. Aging of the inhabitants should be thus considered an issue in planning functional improvements of the infrastructure.

As for the employment status, only 30% respondents declared being economically active; this again indicates potential problems in the estate: large number of elderly/retired, and large number of people with low income (unemployed, not yet in labour market, already not in labour market), potentially unable to bear increased housing expenditures in the case that improvement measures are undertaken. This conclusion may be unjustified, as those older and economically inactive are easier to be met at home and available for the interview; however, the schedule of the interview (conducted during a whole week, with several attempts at different times of the day) was to reduce this bias.

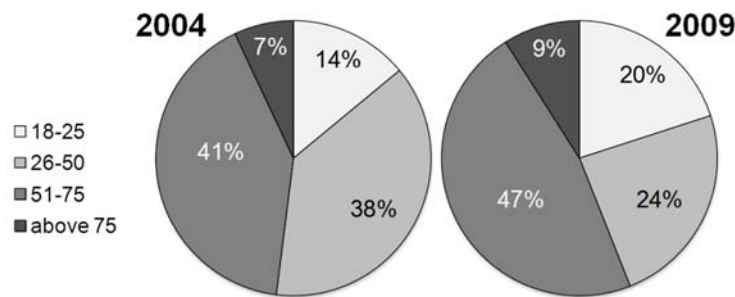


Figure 1. Age structure of the respondents

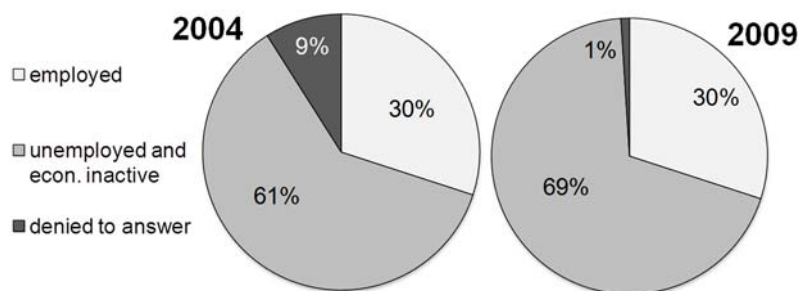


Figure 2. Employment status of the respondents

Figure 3 presents user opinions on most notable deficiencies according to age group, as in 2004 and 2009, and declarations to participate in improvement measures. The interviewees generally declared satisfaction with living environment. The most commonly reported problem was the quality of green areas – its importance grew by 40% between 2004 and 2009; indeed, during this time, as confirmed by the author's observation, trees and bushes grew uncontrollably, and lawns were kept with minimum treatment, thus the greens look untidy. The fact that people of all age groups pay more attention to the nature around them may be also the result of recent public campaigns and media coverage of environmental problems.

Small things matter. Another problem that significantly gained on importance was the number of trash cans – indeed, their number was reduced after 2004, possibly to save on maintenance cost. Parents and grandparents were also concerned about playgrounds for children – though these facilities were present, the appetites for more attractive equipment grew: the playground industry offers new products and people seem to realize what is possible to be done in this respect. Parking spaces were the second choice of the most acute deficiencies; despite the fact that some new parking spaces were provided between 2004 and 2009, the demand for them was not satisfied. The number of benches seemed to satisfy more people in 2009; however, new benches were provided between 2004 and 2009 and this fact seemed to be noticed by the users. The idea of installing acoustic barriers seemed to become less attractive: though nothing had actually been done to reduce traffic noise, the majority of the inhabitants generally declared that the noise did not reach unbearable levels and that barriers were not necessary. Resurfacing the sports field gained on importance, though not significantly.

Fluctuations in judgements on importance of infrastructural deficiencies are expected to be a combined effect of physical changes in the area (some problems observed in 2004 have been tackled by the estate managers before the survey in 2009, some problems have been ignored) and changes in user attitudes. However, people seem not to be very observant in changes in their environment: another part of the questionnaire concerned deficiencies in buildings, and the most popular demand was “paint walls in staircases” – even if they had been recently painted!

As for the idea of personal participation in improvements, those who volunteered to contribute their work were in minority – and the willingness to physically “do something” for the neighbourhood dropped over time (especially the youngest generation does not see any sense in such activity). However,

the interviewees realized that these declarations are not binding. The potentially most involved inhabitants are those of 50 - 75 years of age (they were also the most numerous group of the interviewees) – as they grow older, and as they grow economically weaker, this potential could be lost. Therefore, if some activation projects were to be undertaken, they should be conducted soon.

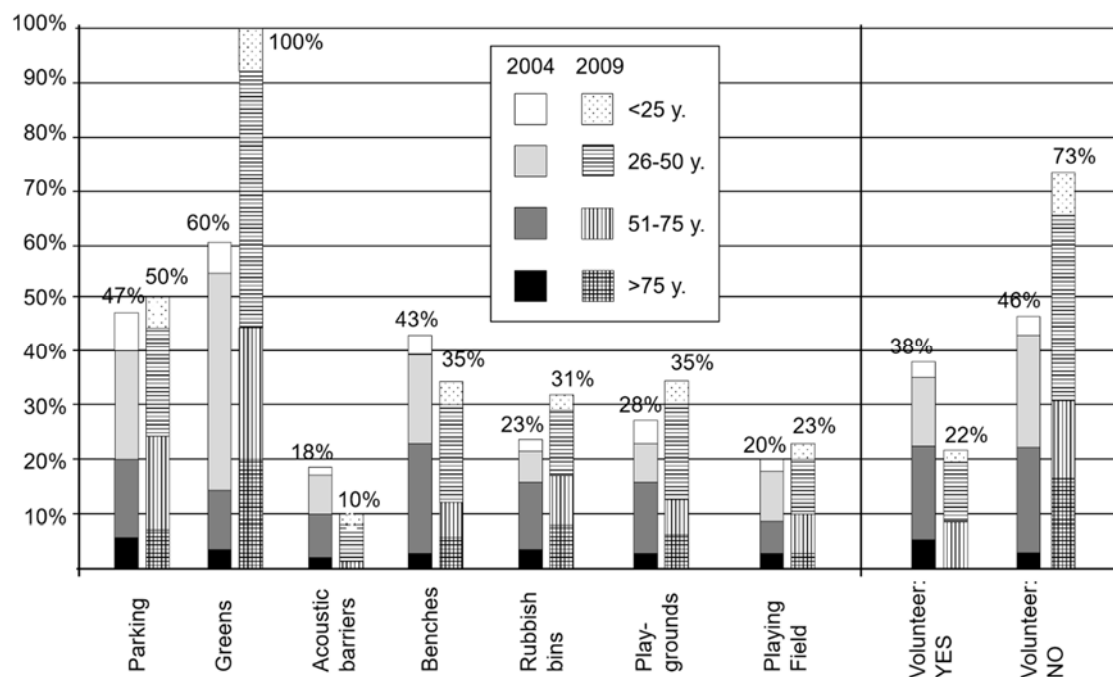


Figure 3. Missing or functionally insufficient elements of the estate's infrastructure and declared forms of involvement in improvements – results of the opinion survey

Interestingly, surveys conducted in other estates from the same era provided similar results regardless the location [14,16,17]: the structure of respondents according to age and employment status is similar, the set of “most important deficiencies” was the same (greens, parking, trash cans, playground equipment, benches), though their hierarchy fluctuated. An additional facility demanded in other location, but not found important here, was an outdoor gym for seniors. With consequence, a considerable share (20 - 40%) of the inhabitants declare to contribute their work to improvements – possibly due to the fact that all surveyed estates were originally housing cooperatives – in theory democratically managed organizations that encouraged personal involvement.

5. Conclusions

The results of the survey confirm that user expectations towards facilities in the living environment evolve over time. The interest in the development of green areas and availability of recreational facilities in the proximity of home is growing as people observe that changes are possible. Some people declare some form of active participation in improvements. Preferences towards functions and accessibility of the areas reflect changes in the demographic structure of the estates. Surveys of this kind may be regularly used in defining guidelines for improvement measures and raising user awareness of the personal responsibility for the condition of the neighbourhood: the interview with estate managers confirms that after a series of interview with the inhabitants, the number of enquiries grows, though temporarily.

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