

INTRODUCTION

The last quarter of the twentieth century was characterised by an extraordinary dynamism of urban population growth, especially in the countries of the Global South. The network of European cities consolidated, while South American, Asian, and African cities absorbed masses of immigrants from rural areas and grew at a pace that was difficult to control and hindered taking timely urban policies. Thus, spatial chaos, deficiencies in urban infrastructure, social divisions, behavioural disorders, and crime ensued. This process was not homogeneous. It was and is geographically diverse.

The last decade of the twentieth century was a seminal period for political change in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The transition from the system of centrally planned economy to the free market also implied changes in behaviour and processes in urban areas. From the end of World War II until 1989, cities were planned and built according to an ideology whose most important element was the provision of housing for working families. The state assumed the role of an investor in the construction sector. The nationalisation of urban land and means of production meant that the state was often the only investor in this sector of the economy, at least in major cities.

At the same time, the adopted model of the housing industry consisted in building large housing estates with apartment buildings. Land and building materials were divided among housing cooperatives established by the state. Housing estates for 10,000 or 20,000 people, sometimes even larger ones, were built on formerly agricultural land adjacent to old housing estates. Over the years, as the system of centrally planned economy began to erode, there was a lack of funds to equip these giant settlements with the appropriate infrastructure. There were not enough stores, schools, kindergartens, health centres, parks, playgrounds for children, or adequate transportation links.

Meanwhile, the extensive development of the centre also failed to provide a suitable environment for urban life.

Ineffective management of urban land was evident, among other things, in the fact that plots of land remained undeveloped for decades, old tenements from the pre-war period were not renovated, infrastructure was poor,

neighbourhoods were poorly connected, and the buildings were in a state of disrepair.

In the centres, old green areas were preserved. Some of them were further maintained and thus ensured the preservation of green infrastructure in the big cities, e.g. in Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Lublin; others became wastelands and for years formed a space for no one, remaining undeveloped (Czerny, 2006, 2013; Czerny, Czerny, 2016).

The change of the political system brought very profound transformations in the urban processes; a kind of “liberation” of the investments in housing, which consisted in the marketisation of land prices and the possibility of free trade with real property. The privatisation of the building materials industry, the unlimited import of construction and furnishing materials, and the explosion of demand for condominiums on the market made the construction industry the engine of economic development in the first decade of the political transition, i.e. the 1990s.

National and international developers appeared and started to carry out residential projects. Privatised building plots were immediately developed with new investments. The spatial arrangement of buildings was influenced mainly by two phenomena: the “filling up” of the areas of the old urban tissue in the centre and surrounding districts with residential, office, and commercial buildings, and the purchase of deagriculturalised land in the suburbs for large housing estates. The twenty-first century has also brought another previously unknown phenomenon: the demolition of old buildings to make place for new residential and office investments.

The urban development of the last 30 years has been characterised by high dynamism of new investments, chaotic distribution of housing estates in the urban space – especially in peripheral areas – and the lack of land use plans for many parts of the city, which means that the development is very dynamic, and the urban infrastructure cannot keep up with it. There are many examples of new housing developments whose layout shows the absence of any zoning plans and the settlement of new housing developments on narrow strips of former arable fields. Suburban areas, which until recently were a reservoir of green spaces, are being invasively developed without respecting the principles of harmonious spatial development or ensuring adequate road, sewage, and social infrastructure.

In Latin American cities, spatial development is also disharmonious. Although the spatial structure and processes of urban sprawl have been partially influenced by factors different from those in the cities of post-communist Europe, many unfavourable phenomena result from global development problems, such as ineffective urban planning (lack of local plans), speculation with vacant land for development, the dominant role of developers in urban development processes, etc.

These processes of dynamic development of cities have continued steadily since the beginning of the twentieth century, with many factors contributing

to this state of affairs in its last three decades, the most important being the accelerated industrialisation based on the import substitution strategy and the social reforms, including the agrarian reforms implemented in several Latin American countries.

The consequence of the above two phenomena was a growing rate of migration from the countryside to the cities (while at the beginning of the twentieth century it was mainly immigrants from Europe who settled in the cities, since the 1970s it has been mainly internal migrants) and the increase in the life aspirations of the rural population, whether in terms of health care, education, or culture.

Urban areas began to populate rapidly. There was a shortage of housing for the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who flocked to the region's largest cities each year. The demand for land and cheap houses triggered an intensified process of land speculation. On the outskirts of cities, haciendas were converted into building plots. The places which offered favourable natural conditions came to be occupied by rich city dwellers, while areas in more disadvantageous environments (deserts, vicinity of roads and railroads, garbage dumps, etc.) were occupied by poor people. The cities were surrounded by a ring of marginal districts marred by difficult living conditions due to the great distance from the city centre and workplaces and lack of basic infrastructure. In many of these neighbourhoods, there were no green areas at all.

The twenty-first century has brought some changes in the awareness of the inhabitants of marginal areas and in their attitude towards nature. The implementation of sustainable development strategies in some centres has increased residents' interest in the immediate environment. Through bottom-up initiatives, often supported by NGOs, sports fields, parks, squares, and nature trails have been created in marginal neighbourhoods. At the same time, the wealthy have increasingly retreated and segregated themselves from other city residents. Spatial segregation has deepened, and the number of gated communities increased and is still increasing. Latin American cities are thus a mosaic of dual spaces that are highly divided and disjointed and do not represent a continuity of socio-spatial relations. The city is a patchwork of adjacent neighbourhoods and housing developments that have little in common socially, economically, or culturally (Czerny, 2012).

Excessive pressure on the natural environment within the city limits increases the risk of suffering damage due to sudden phenomena (floods, landslides, heavy rains). The effects of the pandemic – increased isolation, compartmentalisation, fragmentation – overlay this picture. Cities face the challenge of not only ensuring adequate living environments for residents and health safety, but also arresting negative climatic, social, and spatial changes.

The modern city is affected by the climate crisis, the impact of pandemics, and the constant influx of migrants, while struggling to provide its residents with access to basic services. It is a socially, politically, and spatially complex space where most of the world's people live. Policymakers, social activists,

and scholars are trying to make accurate diagnoses and propose and evaluate solutions (e.g. Biczynska, 2019, 2020). Although local conditions are extremely important in the implementation of urban policies, observation and case studies of the problems of cities around the world represent an important contribution to the understanding of the modern city and an inspiration for innovation in urban space.

The authors of the individual chapters in this monograph invite such reflections. They focus their attention on the problems of cities and regions in the third decade of the twenty-first century. The chapters include analyses of crises and undesirable phenomena as well as discussions of solutions applied by cities and possible ways to improve the quality of life in urban centres.

Such measures are analysed in the first chapter of the monograph, “The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic and the city’s spatial policy directions” by Dudek-Mańkowska and Grochowski. They show that a city able to resist a crisis brought about by a pandemic is one that develops sustainably and solves the current problems, including the issue of social inequalities, a topic which reappears in this monograph.

Another look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the city is offered by Kowalski’s study, “The impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on the change of Warsaw information layout illustrated by the examples of the PGE Narodowy Stadium and the tenement house at 37 Tamka Street”, in which the author shares his observations on how the pandemic crisis was reflected on the visual and symbolic plane. This level – which often changes dynamically – is a perfect, albeit fleeting, reflection of what dominates the collective imagination at a given moment.

An extremely important element of crisis resistance of cities, also in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, is their natural system, which performs many functions, some known to us and some inconspicuous. Durydiwka, Krukowska, and Zajadacz, as part of their research in the chapter “Active recreation as leisure activity of inhabitants of large cities in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic. An attempt at a qualitative approach”, show that lack of access to active recreation leads to a significant deterioration of well-being. The urban nature system is a source of cultural ecosystem services but also a tool in the hands of local politicians which they exploit to build their public image, as Kulczyk, Kuzak, and Grzyb point out (“‘Welcome to the park!’ – Management and promotion of urban green spaces through the lens of local government social media”). The authors, analysing local government officials’ Facebook posts about urban greening, demonstrate the rather one-sided nature of this communication. Meanwhile, in the chapter “Building social capital through climate change mitigation based on the example of Warsaw, Poland”, Mbazuigwe points to the civic dimension of the natural system and its social functions in the context of building cohesion and social capital. These go far beyond health and recreation to include social networks, engagement, and identity.

Finally, the urban greenery and urban agriculture that Gónna writes about (“Urban agriculture as an element of mitigation-adaptation strategy: a response to climate and food crises”) are indispensable for the security of urban residents, including their food security. Awareness of the importance of the natural system in cities and the actions that follow will continue to determine the comfort of living in cities, but they can also be of strategic importance to their resilience.

The greening of the city also contributes to the development of tourism, as pointed out by Mantey, among others, in her text “New Urbanism in assessing sustainability of Polish and American suburbs”, but processes related to tourism, including gentrification, do not always lead to an improvement in the quality of life in cities. This is illustrated by the examples given by Uribe and Kulczyk in the chapter “Understanding ‘outstanding’: An urban-rural cultural landscape facing tourism development. Case study of Salento, Colombia” and by Villar Calvo, Contreras Juárez, and Cruz García in the chapter “Habitability and gastronomic gentrification of public space in the times of COVID-19. The case of La Condesa neighbourhood in Mexico City”.

The first example of Salento shows how, over the subsequent years of the twenty-first century, a small city located in the coffee region of Colombia experienced changes in its economic and social structure as a result of the dynamic development of tourism. The case of the La Condesa housing estate in Mexico City is a telling example of a small-scale struggle for public space between its users and the owners of catering businesses, particularly common in this area of the Mexican capital, with the clash exacerbated by the circumstances of reopening restaurants after the COVID-19 lockdown. As the cases of Salento and La Condesa show, sudden and unexpected crises are not the only threat to cities and the quality of urban life.

Contemporary processes such as the commercialisation of public space, segregation and fragmentation, informal settlements, and inequality in access to housing often go unnoticed and have fatal consequences. Czerny addresses this in her text “Development of cities, the right to the city, and governance, as exemplified by Villavicencio, Colombia” and brings us closer to the conflict related to the creation and legalisation of illegal settlements in the Colombian city of Villavicencio. A.N.J. Carrillo Arteaga, B.E. Carrillo Arteaga, and Moreno Barajas also write about housing in the chapter “Fragmentation, segregation, and governance in rural urbanisation through housing developments in Calimaya, Mexico”, which focuses on the dynamic development of gated communities in the Mexican city of Calimaya. The lack of proper governance and planning favours gated condominiums and leads to the privatisation of public spaces and the fragmentation of the city. Méndez Ramírez and Becerril Sánchez, on the other hand, deal with the transformation of public spaces: these meeting places with important social functions are more and more often converted into commercial spaces, which goes hand in hand with the changes in the social structure of the inhabitants of Metepec

(“Social representations, public space, and consumption in the city of Metepec, State of Mexico, Mexico”).

Tourism is, of course, also an important factor in the development of cities, as mentioned earlier, but it is vulnerable to various crises, such as a pandemic, but also an armed conflict, as Gonzalez Cruz, García Waldman, and Castro Garzón discuss in the chapter “Impact of internal armed conflicts on tourism in urban centres, a context analysis”, devoted to the influence exerted on tourism by armed conflict in Colombia.

Crises as serious as pandemics, climate-related natural disasters, or armed conflicts require the intervention of the state, which uses its legislative capabilities, mobilises resources, and provides funding. This need is indicated by the analyses of Dudek-Mańkowska and Grochowski mentioned above and in the research on spatial and temporal differentiation of such diverse phenomena as mortality associated with COVID-19, human development, or informal labour. The impact of the pandemic on informal labour in the Peruvian capital of Lima is discussed by Olter-Castillo and Castillo Sanchez in the chapter “Workers’ adaptation strategies in a highly informal labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic. The case of Metropolitan Lima”. They point out that the economic collapse caused by the pandemic has a particularly strong impact on the most vulnerable sectors of society, especially informal workers. Their detailed analysis shows that the workers’ situation does not automatically improve when the economy reopens.

The actors responsible for social policy should also be interested in the studies of Olín Fabela and Carreño Meléndez, who present an instrument to measure social vulnerability to floods in Mexico, in the analyses of Santana Castañeda, Serrano Barquín, Santana Juárez on the diversity of comorbidities with COVID-19, or in the studies of González Yñigo and Venancio Flores, who propose to consider human development in relation to territory. The first of the studies mentioned, titled “Mexico and social vulnerability to floods in 2020”, takes into account both socio-demographic and environmental factors to identify the regions most vulnerable to this phenomenon, which is important for the management and further spatial development of cities in Mexico. The second, “COVID-19 pandemic and geographic space in Mexico. A perspective of differences in comorbidities by sex”, discusses the spatially and demographically heterogeneous risk of death in the event of SARS-CoV-2 virus infection associated with comorbidities and points to the need for slightly different health promotion policies in each Mexican state. In turn, the chapter “Towards the construction of a territorial human development index. An approach from the metropolitan perspective” refers to development understood as the improvement of people’s quality of life and as a dynamic process that is also territorially differentiated.

Finally, crises in the city, whether caused by sudden shocks or long-term adverse processes, inspire the search for solutions and rules of conduct that, when implemented, make urban centres better places to live. Goliński and

Dziemianowicz discuss the concept of the compassionate city. Their chapter, “The concept of the compassionate city as a response to the demographic and social challenges of European cities. A comparative analysis of Berlin and Warsaw”, is an attempt to use this idea coined by Kellehear as a guide for the future development of cities. The authors’ study proposes and applies the ‘compassionate city’ indicator to examine the potential of Berlin and Warsaw.

Sitnik and Misztal focus on aspects of everyday use of urban space. The chapter “Physical barriers constraining walkability in cities. Case study of Warsaw, Poland” by Sitnik focuses on walkability and spatial barriers in different parts of Warsaw, referring to Carlos Moreno’s concept of the 15-minute city. Misztal’s analysis of functional mix in the city of Warsaw is based on the same concept of Moreno. In “Functional mix on a city scale. Case study of Warsaw, Poland”, the author presents an original methodology for an objective and quantitative data-based study of the potential of the 15-minute city based on the specified categories related to the daily functioning of its inhabitants.

Mantey, in the aforementioned text “New Urbanism in assessing sustainability of Polish and American suburbs”, refers to the well-known concept of New Urbanism and shows how it works in Poland and the United States of America. The author has created and presented a sustainable development assessment protocol and applies it to Siewierz Jeziorna in Poland and Serenbe in Atlanta, Georgia, pointing out the differences in the understanding of New Urbanism, its advantages, and possible pitfalls. In another chapter, Kałaska analyses the possibility of applying the architectural concept of Superblocks in Latin America. In the study “Possibility of implementing the Barcelona Superblocks model in the post-COVID-19 city. Reflections on Latin America”, the author demonstrates the validity and potential possibility of creating Superblocks, originally from Spain, in Latin American countries; his analysis reveals numerous obstacles to the application of such a solution.

The end of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century are rich with ideas on how to improve cities, make them more equitable, and adapt them to the needs of a growing and increasingly demanding population, as well as how to address the climate crisis. Each of these concepts is worthy of critical consideration. Dudzińska-Jarmolińska points to the risks associated with the application of ideal models in urban reality in the chapter “The city of La Plata – its development against the background of European ideas of ideal cities of the nineteenth century”. The Argentine city of La Plata was conceived to meet the ideal of equality and modernity, expressed through careful planning, education, and implementing European models. The problems that it is currently facing lead us to critically examine trends and concepts that come from individual ideological inspirations.

This and other chapters of the monograph may lead to the conclusion that the city is in a way a process which combines a plethora of power relations, different attitudes, needs, and visions. Sometimes it is shaken by crises, sometimes it develops rapidly, but it is never a “finished” work.

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Warsaw, August 2023

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