



World Scientific News

WSN 89 (2017) 106-114

EISSN 2392-2192

Housing development. Council housing as an opportunity or threat for inhabitants

Hanna Borucińska-Bieńkowska

Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Engineering, University of Zielona Góra, 1 Szafrana Str., 65-516 Zielona Góra, Poland

E-mail address: hanna@bienkowscy.pl

ABSTRACT

The article discusses selected issues of homelessness of a chosen social group. Socio-existential differences of a given population are a common phenomenon and can be seen in cities, irrespective of their geographical location. However, they are particularly noticeable in the highly urbanized, anonymous environment of cities, in regions where economic and socio-demographic problems occur. In countries with a very low GDP, cities became destinations of migrating population from rural areas threatened with structural unemployment and famine. The article presents selected functional-spatial problems concerning issues of realization and functioning of contemporary council housing estates. It can be assumed that homelessness is typical of a particular group of dwellers of middle-sized and big cities. People who often move house or move into areas of rural communes adjacent to the central city are socially and economically active to a great extent. Paradoxically, depopulation of a big city gives rise to an increase in the number of the homeless per capita proportionally to the decreasing number of the inhabitants. However, the problem may also occur as a result of individual personality traits. Irrespective of attempts to eliminate homelessness, there will always be individuals who will choose life in opposition to social standards.

Keywords: depopulation of the city, a place to live, council housing estate

1. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness issues of a certain social group occur in every city, irrespective of the city's location or geographic position. The phenomenon is particularly prominent in heavily urbanized areas troubled by both economic and socio-demographic problems. In countries with very low GDP, many cities have become a destination of migrating population from rural areas threatened with high structural unemployment and famine.

Areas of social disaster are noticeable in big cities in Africa, Asia, Latin and South America. 'Six million is the estimated number of new dwellings needed to overcome the current housing deficit in Brazil.'

Still, there are poverty-stricken districts in North America and Europe as well, and they are all troubled by serious problems. The following article presents selected functional-spatial and socio-demographic issues concerning realization and operation of contemporary council housing estates in Poland, Central and Eastern Europe.

It should be highlighted that the issue of homelessness is evident in the anonymous environment of the city. In rural areas, whose inhabitants have known each other for generations, homelessness is not a burning issue. Single cases of families without adequate living conditions are solved by local communities or self-governmental authorities. Therefore, it can be assumed that the phenomenon of homelessness is primarily a concern of medium-sized and big cities.

People who often move house, e.g. into rural areas adjacent to the central city, are socially and economically active to a great extent. Paradoxically, depopulation of a big city gives rise to an increase in the number of the homeless per capita proportionally to the decreasing number of the inhabitants.

The following article discusses selected functional-spatial issues related to homelessness. Still, the problem may also occur as a result of individual personality traits. Irrespective of attempts to eliminate homelessness, there will always be individuals who will choose life in opposition to social standards.

Can council housing estates serve their purpose?

2. HOUSING NEEDS VS OPPORTUNITIES OF MEETING THE NEEDS

'Owning a place to live is a fundamental need of the human being. In Europe, a person without a home is sentenced to existence in the margins of a social system, thus becoming a potential threat to others, violating legal structures sanctioned by the state, and decreasing general productivity.' [J. M. Chmielewski, *Theory of urban planning in city design and city planning*, Publishing House of Warsaw University of Technology, Warsaw 2010.]

For many people, buying a flat or having a house built is the biggest life investment. For others with an average income, a flat or a house of their own is an unattainable financial goal. Thus, if housing deficits are going to be dealt with, it is vital to ensure mechanisms which will allow people to buy a place to live. One of the solutions that prove helpful in realization of single and multi-family housing is partial contribution of relevant institutions to financing construction or modernization of technical or transport infrastructure. Although the estimated deficit of housing units in Poland amounts to about 1.5 million it can be stated that housing conditions in the first half of the 21st century has improved, the main reason being an increase

in the supply of housing units in the primary and secondary market. Yet, prices for 1 m² of living space are still very high in many cities and are beyond financial capacity of many families. Another issue is standards of the new housing units and their size. As a result of increasing polarization of the society and decreasing wealth of the middle class, another phenomenon emerged: too large density of people in low standard housing units and an increase in the number of luxury apartments often inhabited by single residents.

Table 1. Housing resources in Poznań and 17 communes of the Poznań county in years 2010-2015

No.	Commune	Type of commune	2010	2015	Balance	%
1	Poznań	U	237 590	251 312	13 726	5,8
2	Poznań county	U, U-R, R	101 858	121 057	19 199	18,8
	Total		339 444	372 369	32 925	9,7

Urban communes (2) - **U**, urban-rural communes (8) - **U-R**, rural communes (7) - **R**
 Source: author's study. Data from publications: Statistical Office in Poznań, Poznań, 2011 and 2016.

Table 2. Flats put into operation in Poznań and 17 communes of the Poznań county in years 2010-2015

No.	Commune	Type of commune	2010	2015	Balance	%
1	Poznań	U	3 180	3 629	449	14,1
2	Poznań county	U,U-R, R	3 803	3 817	14	0,4
	Total		6 983	7 446	463	6,6

Urban communes (2) - **U**, urban-rural communes (8) - **U-R**, rural communes (7) - **R**
 Source: author's study. Data from publications: Statistical Office in Poznań, Poznań, 2011 and 2016.

The period under investigation was characterized by an increase in new housing units put into operation (Table 2). The data show that the housing shortage is not expected to grow, and the prices of the units should not increase. However, the optimistic forecasts do not include potential tenants of council housing estates, who do not have either organizational skills or finances to rent or buy a flat or have a house built. The unemployed are particularly prone to lack a place of their own, but the underprivileged group also includes the underpaid, disabled or those at risk of poverty caused by various factors.

Table 3. The unemployed registered in Poznań and 17 communes of the Poznań county in years 2010-2015

No.	Commune	Type of commune	2010	2015	Balance	%
1	Poznań	U	11 200	7 964	-3 236	28,9
2	Poznań county	U, U-R, R	5 028	4 720	-303	6
	Total		16 228	12 684	-3 544	21,8

Urban communes (2) - **U**, urban-rural communes (8) - **U-R**, rural communes (7) - **R**

Source: author's study. Data from publications: Statistical Office in Poznań, Poznań, 2011 and 2016.

In years 2010-2015, the number of the unemployed decreased: both in the central city (by 28.9%) and in the communes within the impact zone of the city (by 6%), which is, among others, a sign of economic development of metropolitan areas and improvement of the quality of life. The data also show that social situation of residents of communes adjacent to the central city is stable. The number of people working in the city rose significantly, which promotes improvement of the quality of life and enables getting out of homelessness.

3. COUNCIL HOUSING ESTATES

The primary purpose of a place to live is a shelter from outside conditions. Habitat, compliant with the documents of the Habitat UN Conference (Vancouver, 1976) should, among others, ensure safety, seclusion and technical infrastructure to ensure access to clean water. Families who cannot ensure themselves proper living conditions are provided with housing units in council housing estates, mainly financed from self-governmental budgets. The whole process involves an array of social, cultural and economic actions (including taxation). Council housing estates for the poorest social class, who need financial and often psychological support, were also realized in the past. Currently, many Polish cities are realizing investments to improve lives of people in dire need; local authorities should work out solutions suitable for their specific needs.

Council housing estates for the poor, disabled or underprivileged but working or with independent sources of income are a necessary and well-grounded decision. Social outcasts shunning work and rejecting help to change their predicament may fail. A council housing estate in Nowa Sól, completed in 2005, was completely destroyed by its inhabitants within two years (Fig. 1 and 2). The flats had properly finished rooms, bathrooms with showers and fully equipped kitchens. The greenery outside, having a recreational and decorative function, practically disappeared. The playground was devastated too, and all saleable parts were removed from the flats.

A recurring question is, does poverty generate such behaviour? Is it possible to fight social, and moral degradation caused by various factors? The example of Nowa Sól proves that the primary action should be taken to heal pathology, solve social problems and provide families in need with full psychological support, and the social support should be

implemented strictly in compliance with clear guidelines. A conscious society should look after people susceptible to poverty, providing them with psychological and therapeutic support and ensuring proper living conditions.



Figure 1. Vandalized council housing estate in Nowa Sól, 2017.



Figure 2. Vandalized council housing estate in Nowa Sól, 2017.

It is doubtful whether gathering alcoholics, anti-social individuals or law-breakers in one place is a good idea. A major group with pathological and criminal inclinations may pose a threat to other inhabitants, supporting each other in actions against social standards and law. This, in turn, may give rise to creation of enclaves of aggression and high crime rate

There are different ways and methods of solving and preventing homelessness. The example of Great Britain shows that a certain percentage (up to 10%) of each housing investment is designated for social needs. That solution is one of the ways to introduce dysfunctional families into a different social environment, and might show them a way out of social exclusion. Children and adolescents attending local schools stand a chance of striking up correct social relationships with their peers. Additionally, access to public transport facilitates access to potential workplace or helps one to find a job sooner. Building council houses on the outskirts, far from potential workplace, makes it even more difficult to fight unemployment. Therefore, location of such houses in communes adjacent to the central city, with areas of business activation, could solve the issue. Depending on the needs and opportunities, combining the function of social housing with the chance to secure jobs for its residents would solve part of problems of the deprived social class, and would ensure workers for the developing economy. The above-mentioned solutions symbolically refer to so-called family houses (Polish familoki) in Silesia or housing estates for workers in Łódź on the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries. The biggest of them, called Księży Młyn, was built in compliance with European standards, fulfilling functional, architectural and urban planning objectives. It is only obvious that housing developments today must meet requirements of the 21st century.

A positive example of a council housing estate functioning properly is a housing complex in Darzyborska St., Poznań. The estate, realized in 2007, has been fulfilling its function successfully. Alongside ensuring basic functions, i.e. a shelter and safety, it has given its residents a way to get out of a difficult social situation (Fig. 3 and 4).



Figure 3. Correctly functioning council housing estate in Poznań, Darzyborska St., 2017.



Figure 4. Correctly functioning council housing estate in Poznań, Darzyborska Str., 2017.



Figure 5. Design of a council housing estate in Poznań, 2017.
(Source: Hanna and Marek Bieńkowski Architectural Design Studio archives)

It is to be hoped that a future realization of this kind, built with understanding of domestic and social issues of its residents, will live up to the assumptions and expectations (Fig. 5). All the terraced bungalows (as studios, and two- and three-bedroom flats) are fully integrated with communal spaces of the estate. The entrances have carefully designed

greenery. In the centre of the estate, there are playgrounds for children and recreational grounds for adolescents. Special care should be taken to ensure that the new housing estate does not suffer the same fate as the estate in Nowa Sól.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analyzed chosen economic and socio-demographic issues of homelessness show that the problem of homelessness occurs, first and foremost, in big cities, unlike in the 17 communes of the Poznań county. Families threatened with homelessness due to unemployment or mental health issues are under care of the relevant authorities of local self-governments. In a smaller habitat, it is easier to diagnose and solve problems of homelessness.

Comparing housing resources and the number of housing units put into operation in years 2010-2015 in the central city, it can be concluded that the deficit has been decreasing. In contrast, in rural areas, in the communes adjacent to the central city in particular, the issue of housing shortage does not occur as it is solved on an ongoing basis as individual single-family housing. Another issue is the size and quality of housing units which often do not fulfil European standards. Still, the pace of the improvement of housing conditions is spectacular.

In conclusion, it can be stated that residents of council houses need both social and psychological support. Accumulation of a great number of families suffering economic, social (and often legal) problems may breed more pathology. The author of the article is of the opinion that an attempt at social integration and a council housing plan in conjunction with job prospects would be a good solution. Getting out of homelessness and social exclusion must also be a priority for the homeless and excluded themselves. The two examples presented here, one of Nowa Sól and one of Poznań, exemplify two entirely different outcomes of the same problem. In that matter, systemic solutions do not always yield expected results.

Reference

- [1] Brindle T., The social dimension of the urban village: A comparison of models for sustainable urban developmen. *Urban Design International*, Volume 8, Issue 1-2, 2003, 53-65
- [2] Giannetti B. F., Demetrio J. C. C., Agostinho F., Almeida C. M. V. B., Towards more sustainable housing projects: recognizing the importance of using local resources. *Bulding and Environment*, Volume 127, 2017, 187-203
- [3] Gibb K., Trends and Change in Social Housing Finance and Provision within the European Union. *Journal Housing Studies*, Volume 17, Issue 2, 2002, 325-336
- [4] Fischer K., Collins J. Homelessness, Health Care and Welfare Provision, Routledge, London and New York 1993.
- [5] Forest R., Murie A., Residualization and Council Housing: Aspects of the Changing Social Relations of Housing Tenure. *Journal of Social Policy* Volume 12, Issue 4, 1983, 453-468

- [6] Hirt S. Suburbanizing Sofia: Characteristics of Post-Socialist Peri-Urban Change. *Urban Geography*, Volume 28, Issue 8, 2007, 755-780
- [7] Kemeny J., *Housing and Social Theory*. Routledge, London 1992.
- [8] Kemeny J., *From Public Housing to the Social Market*, Routledge, London 1995.
- [9] Keenan P., Lowe S., Spencer S., Housing Abandonment in Inner Cities-The Politics of Low Demand for Housing. *Journal Housing Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 5, 1999, 703-716
- [10] Kok H., Migration from the city to the countryside in Hungary and Poland. *GeoJournal*, Volume 49, Issue 1, 1999, 7-16
- [11] Sailer-Fliege U., Characteristics of post-socialist urban transformation in East Central Europe. *GeoJournal*, Volume 49, Issue 1, 1999, 53-62
- [12] Priemus H., Dielema F., Social Housing Policy in the European Union: Past, Present and Perspectives. *Urban Studies*, Volume 39, Issue 2, 2002, 191-200
- [13] Steinführer A., Bierzyński A., Großmann K., Kabisch S., Klusáček P., Population Decline in Polish and Czech Cities during Post-socialism? Looking Behind the Official Statistics. *Urban Studies*, Volume 47, Issue 47, 2010, 2325-2346
- [14] Taylor M., Combating the Social Exclusion of Housing Estates. *Journal Housing Studies*, Volume 13, Issue 6, 2010, 819-832
- [15] Temelova J., Novak J., Ourednicek M., Puldova P., Housing Estates in Czech Republic after Socialism. Various Trajectories and Inner Differentiation. *Urban Studies*, Volume 48, Issue 9, 2011, 1811-1834