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City for Sale. Metropolisation in Peripheral Capitalism

Whose is the city? This question only superficially refers to the past when at least some cities were in fact law-making, autonomous communities of their citizens. Unlike in the past, the contemporary city is a random collection of individuals gathered in a space with no clear boundaries, who in their majority have a weak sense of identification with the place of their residence, whether longer or shorter. The residents of such a city are not citizens but merely users of space which has become a commodity. Taking Warsaw as an example, the paper shows the process of selling out the city space, which is driven by globalisation and metropolisation processes. The consequence of this is privatisation and fragmentation of space, leading to the evaporation of public space in the city.

Whose is the city? This question only superficially refers to the past, when at least some cities were law-making, autonomous communities of their citizens. Naturally, not all residents were citizens, but those who enjoyed such a status made up a political community. Conversely, the contemporary city is a random collection of individuals gathered in a space with no clear boundaries, who in their majority have a weak sense of identification with the place of their residence, whether longer or shorter. The residents of such a city are not citizens but merely users of various commercialised services provided at a better or worse standard.

'Is not therefore the loss of the City as a potential model for political community a fundamental drama resulting in the decline of the community as such?' asked Krzysztof Nawratek in his 2008 book[1]. The sequence of events was in fact reverse: the decline of the sense of community caused by the colonisation effected by external agents preceded the collapse of the city as a political entity. The newcomers were more and more numerous, which made their integration with the indigenous residents impossible. The municipal community transformed into a diverse populace guided by conflicting interests, for whom not the place of residence but such macro-structures as nation and/or social class would become the main points of reference and objects of identification.

Globalisation processes also seem to undermine some major institutions which, it seemed, were to last forever, such as the national state, and which are now more and more challenged by such rivalling structures as huge transnational

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[1] Nawratek K., 2008, *Miasto jako idea polityczna*, Kraków: Korporacja Halart, p. 27.

corporations, international organisations, social movements, and by citizens themselves who refuse to legitimise the state by not turning up at the polls. Increasingly, amorphous urbanised areas, or rather their centres, which are called cities out of sheer habit or simply for want of a better term, are becoming cells in a network outside anybody's control. There are many networked and local actors on the urban scene who pursue their complicated games, the rules of which are vague, unclear and in many cases not observed at all.

According to Nawratek, 'contemporary cities do not have any space left for their Citizens. Public areas no longer exist. The only areas that remain are those for either users or consumers. In countries where the society is basically pluralistic and tolerant, this change has occurred quite painlessly. At least until the moment when people who are nowadays called alterglobalists realised that cities are owned by corporations rather than by their own residents'.[2]

There is no space for Citizens because Citizens are long gone. However, there are users and they should be cared for. We lack appropriate language to call the entity formerly known as the city and therefore, seeking other adequate terms, we resort to technical notions such as agglomeration or conurbation. We talk about urbanised areas, being fully aware that the referent of this term is utterly undefined. On the other hand, we call some specific areas with clearly defined characteristics metropolises.

What is a metropolis? We should look for an answer to this question both in scientific literature and in the daily experiences of millions of users. A city is transformed into a metropolis when it 'assumes the form of a network created by close links between distant places. Void is constantly re-created in the "archipelago city" where the impact of lines and tunnels is fully visible. Such a city materialises through movement (Beaucire). The networked city replaces the territorialised city and the interactive city replaces the active city (Virilio). Nodes are as important as zones, connections are more important than boundaries and time – is at least as important as space. We can say therefore that these concepts apply to the transformations of the very nature of city relations: instead of the dominance of vertical relations between the centre and the periphery, non-hierarchical network relations tend to prevail'[3].

Michel Bassand once remarked that throughout their history municipal communities have organised themselves in three forms: cité (the city-state of the Greeks, the medieval city in Europe); cities of the industrialisation era, and currently the metropolis. In his opinion, the metropolis is uniquely characterised by its demographic potential, developed space, nodal location in a network of similar cities and a system of actors holding economic and political power who direct metropolitan development to ensure its integrity and identity.

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[2] *Ibidem*, p. 149.
[3] Cattan N., Berroir S., 2006, 'Les représentations de l'étalement urbain en Europe: essai d'interprétation', in: A. Berque et al., *La ville insoutenable*, Berlin, Paris, p. 93.

According to Bassand, the metropolis manages a number of spheres: the economy, which generates wealth and, in consequence, social inequality; the autonomous political sphere that promotes public policies; it also creates and animates culture and complex relationships; manages the natural environment and the central area; and – last but no least – it generates population movements. All these elements along with a great many others make up the social and spatial structure of the metropolis[4].

Unlike the industrial era cities, metropolises basically no longer manufacture products but only provide services and generate information. Metropolises are the seats of huge corporations and serve as places from which instructions to delocated production facilities are transmitted. Also, mass-media having both national and international impact are located in metropolises; they are places for luxury consumption on the part of residents, as well as tourists and business travellers arriving to the city.

'Metropolis is a gigantic structure of supply where particular and autonomous substructures develop (such as the notorious gated communities), in which every individual is free to choose where they want to belong, just as they are free to choose their own religion, place of residence or way of travelling.'[5]

These processes lead to a strong segmentation of the labour market and propel the division into highly qualified, top earning specialists and low quality employees who are threatened with unemployment and earn low wages, many of whom are part-time workers. At the other end of the scale, there are top specialists who make up a new social class, the so-called metropolitan class, whose members function on a national or supranational scale, in a network of intertwined metropolises.

The elements which give structure to the metropolis are no longer manu-facturing and trading centres but office buildings with the nodes of the global network, telecom connections and information highways; temples of culture – museums and exhibition halls, stadiums and meeting places; transportation hubs such as international airports and railway stations; historic areas, shopping malls and theme parks.[6]

Metropolises which operate in network systems are more strongly linked with one another than with their immediate hinterland. Their surroundings undergo fast peripherisation, while retaining only some role as a pool of qualified labour and some of their areas – as a place of residence and recreation for the wealthy residents. In consequence, we can observe a process of polarisation into the centre – the metropolis, and its surroundings – the direct and indirect periphery. In all European countries there is an observable tendency to widen the gap between the centre and the periphery. In some countries, these differences are particularly acute; as a result, we can speak of a growing exclusion of a sizeable

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[4] Bassand M., 2007: *Cité, Villas, métropoles. Les changement irreversible de la ville*, Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, Lausanne, p. 201.
[5] Bourdin A. 2005, *op.cit.*, p. 88.
[6] Cf. Bourdin A. 2005, *op. cit.*

share of the periphery's residents, a process which is as well as being economic is mainly social in nature.

Another type of polarisation takes place within the metropolis. There, the gap between wealth and poverty is particularly well visible. This is due not so much to absolute poverty, because the overall standard of living is higher, but to a unique degree of accumulation of wealth which is concentrated is such areas. Strong social (and also ethnic in many European metropolises) disparities constantly fuel conflicts and tensions.

Metropolises are formed as a result of the concentration of population, which is at the same time spreading onto wider and wider areas, leading to the fragmentation of individual components of space. There, a process is taking place, which is historically well known in cities, whereby the place of residence becomes separated from the place of work, and these two are mutually incompatible. Various spheres of urban activity are becoming separated from each other. Retail outlets, which have traditionally been located linearly along streets, have now moved to huge shopping centres and are being replaced by banks, restaurants and entertainment facilities. Residential areas, office space districts, industrial zones, technological parks, institutions of culture, huge stadiums, university campuses, hospitals, railway stations and airports are becoming scattered and interspersed in an increasingly growing space. Individual residential areas have their own specific specialisations and attract residents having different social status and frequently dissimilar ethnic backgrounds. Alongside immense depreciating residential complexes dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, luxury apartment blocks are built in the downtown areas and on the outskirts, where there are appearing single-family open and gated communities, interspersed with the remains of rural development, industrial zones, logistic parks and shopping malls.

The metropolitan community is also becoming structuralised in many interrelated networks which facilitate the mobility of individuals, goods and information. A new type of dense (though superficial and individualised) social relations is emerging. Socialisation is changing its nature and its privatisation, as Manuel Castells put it, is proceeding.

Metropolisation induces four fields of social generation of space.

The first field involves international corporations changing the multifunctional city centres into relatively homogenous office space districts with small services and retail 'annexes', designated mainly for their staff and clients, as well as the development of business districts located on the outskirts. In some cities, the corporations, concerned about their image among the general public, have allowed some of the space in their office complexes to be let for public use.

Another reason for the shrinking of public space in cities has been the organisation of trade which is concentrated in specially arranged facilities (malls), as a rule situated outside the metropolis' downtown areas.

As compared to traditional cities, metropolises are characterised by an increased sense of danger, particularly among the better-off social groups. Such

a perception of potential risk is caused not only by the presence of the so-called 'social dregs' in the metropolis, but also ethnic minorities and 'strangers' in general. This sense of jeopardy is one of the reasons underlying the emergence of gated communities.

Currently, the pace of everyday life punctuated by the sequence *tram-work-sleep* has substantially changed. Leisure time is not only limited to the after working hours; it is now much more varied. As a result, the demand for ludic space emerges.

For more than a dozen years, metropolisation process have been visible in Warsaw, with all the processes typical of European metropolises being observed: deindustrialisation, increased employment in the services sector, emergence of business districts, chaotic development in the periphery, depopulation of downtown areas and their gentrification, etc. These processes, which in other metropolises are restrained – more or less effectively – by spatial development policies, in Warsaw run rather spontaneously, beyond any control of the municipal authorities. In consequence, investors build what they want and where they want on the basis of uncoordinated decisions of the city officials. What is more, they are usually investors from abroad who are mainly interested in fastest possible return on their investment and maximised profit. These investment projects are not accompanied by adequate activities of the state and municipal authorities which would aim to limit spatial chaos, shape the public space and mass consumption facilities. Just as in many Third World countries, the metropolisation of Warsaw is compradorian in nature, the main borrowing from these countries being the gated communities, which are becoming the hallmark of Warsaw, at least on the European scale.

Above all, however, Warsaw is the developers' paradise, where they snatch whatever undeveloped space there is to build offices and residential blocks. Higher and higher buildings are erected on all available plots in downtown areas, which is leading to chaos on a scale unknown in other European metropolises. This is possible because Warsaw is a city of politicians and officials who, for their own convenience and maybe even seeking their own advantage, have given up spatial development (master) plans, thus leaving the city prone to an unrestrained interplay of market forces.

Offices are occupying larger and larger areas downtown and in the new business district, which means that 'widely shut space' (using Elżbieta Sekuła's words), the access to which is strictly rationed, is constantly growing[7]. High-rise buildings epitomise power and authority. Henry Lefebvre wrote many years ago that 'the vertical pride of houses-towers, public and especially government buildings adds phallic or rather phallocratic arrogance to the visual world; its

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[7] Allianz, an insurance company which provides services to the public at large, can serve as an example here. A client cannot simply enter the company's offices at ul. Rodziny Hiszpańskich 1 to pay the insurance premium. First a call must be made and the agent must come down to the reception in order to escort the particular client upstairs, and then to see him off. Can one imagine such nonsense?

is expressed and manifested so that every single onlooker can see the authority behind it. Verticality and height have since time immemorial spatially expressed the presence of authorities who are capable of using violence.'[8]

No matter whether we share this opinion or not, high and higher buildings will continue to be built, although their location and form can make a lot of difference. One can hardly accept the view expressed by the famous architect Zaha Hadid during her visit in Warsaw, that the context into which she designs her buildings is of no interest to her. Such an attitude might work well in the desert but is simply unacceptable in a city with a history of its own, such as Warsaw.

It has to be strongly emphasised, however, that the developers' world is not only the arrogance of skyscrapers but, firstly and foremostly, the generation of space at the lowest cost and with the maximum profit. Warsaw is being chaotically developed because residential buildings are built not where it is rational and sensible to build them but where plots can be bought cheaply and flats sold dearly. New buildings have many storeys and tiny space in between them, which means that no room remains for services or green areas. Nobody is interested in the fact that the dwellers of these tower block estates, which are frequently of low standard, cannot conveniently travel to work or to downtown areas. Flats are sold using the tricks of deceitful advertising. All this is reported by the press, but the city authorities choose not to react. They are servile towards foreign investors and populistic towards various local pressure groups. For instance, the city board cannot put an end to illegal trade in the city's main streets, while petty tradesmen selling trash in the most expensive of Warsaw's locations – the square in front of the Palace of Culture and Science (*Pałac Kultury*) – were able to force the authorities to let them use a new facility which is to be built there for a 30-year period, so that they can go on selling Chinese fakes.

'New residential buildings and housing estates are built higgledy-piggledy. Concrete is poured and walls are erected in fields and meadows or in open areas near old tower-block estates. There are no master plans, so the sky's the limit, or rather there are no limits, anything can be built. Like a high-rise building or a stocky tower block near a villa (…) Or development in the greenery wedge which provides fresh air to the city's downtown areas (…) (*vide* Marina Mokotów, Eko Park housing estates) or the areas on or directly below the Vistula escarpment. Or erecting buildings in gross contravention of the regulations in force (…) The higher the prices of land the more compact the development. Houses are built closer and closer to one another, and can reach more than ten storeys, as for example near the Kabacki Forest. One can see through the window what the neighbour has for breakfast (…).

The courtyard resembles that in a prison (…). No matter what price he pays, several thousand or more than ten thousand zlotys per one square metre of the flat, the buyer will almost always live in a house covered with a coating made of styrofoam and thin plaster. Stone is encountered very infrequently. In a few years' time, damp patches will appear on the facades. The balcony railings will start to rot. Poor workmanship will be exposed. When this happens, the fencing separating the new estates from old ones will be needed no

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[8] Lefebvre H. 2000:, 'La production de l'espace', *Anthropos*, Paris, p. 117.

longer.'[9] Developers have a different term for deception: they call it marketing and adver-
tising. They even advertise monster tower blocks located near expressways or railways as
'heavenly apartments'. In visualisations, the Wiślane Ogrody estate is literally enveloped
in greenery, although a heavy-traffic route is located directly nearby.[10]

And the residents? Their possibilities are limited; some of them remain in
depreciating buildings built of prefabricated concrete, while those who are better-
off move from old tower blocks from the socialist era to new capitalist housing
estates and isolate themselves from their old neighbours. In the morning, they
are stuck in long traffic jams while commuting from their gated and protected
estates to the 'widely shut space', and then, stuck in traffic jams, get back to their
homes and put their feet up, nestling their TV remote controls in their hands.
Sometimes they drive to camera- and security personnel-protected shopping
malls where they can devote themselves to the consumption of global goods.

'Getting to the city centre from Józefosław (located between Piaseczno and Warsaw) can
take as much as ninety minutes. In the Miasteczko Wilanów estate, advertised as a garden
city, there is only a tiny bit of greenery. There is no school, preschool or even an eatery.
If one feels like encountering high or popular culture, the choice is between a TV remote
control or driving downtown or to a shopping and entertainment centre. For this, a car is
needed because the roads are only provisional and too narrow for city buses.'[11]

Warsaw's city centre is being stripped of its traditional functions; retail and
services outlets are slowly disappearing, being relocated to shopping malls and
replaced mainly by bank outlets.

'There are as many as seven banks having their outlets in the main square of the Żoliborz
district, with two more opening soon. The residents complain that the district is now los-
ing its unique character (…). A similar process is taking place in Grójecka street, which
has always been the axis along which the life of the Ochota district revolved. Nowadays,
there are only banks on the ground floor of one building, with three bank outlets in the
neighbouring one. The number of bank outlets is also increasing in Puławska, the main
street of the Mokotów district; they are also changing the face of Marszałkowska, one of
the city's major streets (…). Today, between Aleje Jerozolimskie and Plac Konstytucji (less
than a kilometre) there are outlets of 14 banks and financial institutions (…). But why are
shops disappearing? Those owners who can afford it, move to shopping malls. Some of
them close their shops and open eateries instead.'[12]

Warsaw has become a city of transnational corporations which use space in
a way that allows them to maximise their profits. Billboards can serve as an
example of their appropriation of the public space: frequently placed illegally,
they litter the streets and spoil the look of the city. Corporations' activities shape

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[9] Bartoszewicz D., 'Nowa Warszawa, nowe blokowisko', *Gazeta Wyborcza* 2.03.2008.
[10] Bartoszewicz D., 'Apokalipsa Warszawy jeszcze w XXI wieku', *Gazeta Wyborcza*
17.03.2008.
[11] *Ibidem*.
[12] Zubik M. 'Warszawa w sieci banków', *Gazeta Wyborcza* 7.12.2007.

the face of the city and the lives of its dwellers by imposing onto them specific behaviours and lifestyles.

There is also another city – that of architects, urban planners, people of culture who, ineffectively in most cases, are trying to stand for values other than money, in the belief that not everything is for sale. And, last but not least, there is the city of politicians and their subordinates who pursue their own interests or the particular interests of their political party.

Whose is 'the right to the city', then? In 1972, Henri Lefebvre said at the Congress of the International Institute of Sociology at Caracas that 'The urbanisation of the society is accompanied by a general degradation of city life, the dismantling of city centres which are now devoid of social life, and selective dispersion of individuals in space. There exists a genuine contradiction, which I call the contradiction of space. On the one hand, the ruling class and the State work to strengthen the city as a centre of power and political decisions, but on the other hand the rule of this class and its State is destroying the city. This is what I meant when I spoke about the "right to the city", having in mind precisely the suburban residents, their segregation and isolation. Obviously, I do not mean here a right in the legal sense, but a foundation of contemporary democracy laid down in the famous Declaration of Human Rights. Although these rights have never been put into effect, we constantly refer to them in order to define the situation a society is in. The Declaration of Human Rights has later been supplemented by the specific rights of women, children, etc. I propose to add the "right to the city" to this list.'[13]

The answer to the question 'Who has the right to the city?' is simple: it is the city's residents. However, there is no good answer to the question on how this right could be guaranteed.

Note from the author: Henri Lefebvre in Poland

Henri Lefebvre is best known for his philosophical achievements. Several of his works were published in Polish: *Marks a idea wolności* – 1949 (*Marx et la liberté*, Ed. des Trois collines, Genève, 1949); *Kartezjusz* – 1950, (*Descartes*, Paris: Editions Hier et Aujourd'hui, 1950) and *Przyczynek do estetyki* – 1956 (*Contribution à l'esthétique*, éd. Sociales, *Pascal*, éd. 1954), as well as two short texts published in periodicals, which I did not find in the Author's bibliography in French.

Lefebvre's sociology of the city played a major role in shaping the attitudes to the city of some Polish researchers, including my own, as expressed in the publication *Społeczne wytwarzanie przestrzeni*. The Polish readers were also indirectly familiarised with such of Lefebvre's works as: *La révolution Urbaine* (1968), *Le droit á la ville, suivi de l'espace et politique* (1972) and *La production*

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[13] Lefebvre H., 1972, 'Le droit á la ville suivi Espaces et politique', *Anthropos*, Paris, pp. 258–259.

de l'espace (1974). Two excerpts from *La droit de la ville* were published in Polish: 'Burżuazja i przestrzeń' [Bourgeoisie and Space] and 'Klasa robotnicza i przestrzeń' [Working Class and Space] in a collection of papers entitled *Krytyka społeczeństwa kapitalistycznego w pracach socjologów zachodnich*, Uniwersytet Śląski, Katowice 1979.