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RETROACTIVE UTOPIA

Class and the urbanization of self-management in Poland

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Introduction

There is a widespread hostility towards middle-class contentious politics in urban studies literature. Many researchers hold a tacit assumption that residents' movements are conservative and guided by narrow, parochial interests. A classic example of this is provided by Mike Davis in his *City of Quartz*. Homeowners' associations in southern California were by his account busy establishing "bourgeois utopias". Those entailed the "creation of racially and economically homogeneous residential enclaves glorifying the single-family home ... and defense of this suburban dream against unwanted development (industry, apartments, offices) as well as unwanted persons" (Davis 1990: 170). Most literature on American cities perceives middle-class activism as a battle to defend white privilege and property values in an increasingly non-majority-white urban milieu. The assumption that all forms of property-anchored politics is reactionary is perhaps the reason why the very first Anglo-Saxon book on the right to the city (Mitchell 2003) deems the homeless as the true revolutionary subject of urban politics. For authors such as David Harvey (2012: 130) or Neil Smith (1996: 3–29) this is still largely the case.

The same applies to the US residents' movement manifesto – *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs. Although it is a radical text on many accounts (Berman 2010: 314–318; Taylor 2006), and while for many economists she became, as Paul Krugman (1995: 5) put it, "a patron saint of a new growth theory", very few urban scholars take Jacobs seriously. David Harvey (2011: 171) for example argued that after the glory days of sitcom suburbs were over,

traditionalists increasingly rallied around the urbanist Jane Jacobs, who had very distinctive ideas as to what constituted a more fulfilling form of everyday life in the city. They sought to counter sprawling suburbanization and the brutal modernism of [Robert] Moses' large-scale projects with a different kind of urban aesthetic that focused on local neighbourhood development, historical preservation and, ultimately, reclamation and gentrification of older areas.

A careful read leaves no doubt that Jacobs was actually an outspoken critic of the very first portents of gentrification. "Cities need not 'bring back' their middle-class and carefully protect it",

she argued, but instead, they should “grow” it (Jacobs 1961: 369). While Richard Florida and his acolytes managed to culturewash her work, Jacobs’ idea of urban diversity was indeed distinctive. It was not, however, about “superficial architectural variety” (132) but about “a diversity of incomes” (374). Her urban utopia was not aesthetic or sentimental but sought to facilitate upward social mobility.

All this fails to appreciate a point consistently made by Ira Katznelson (1976, 1981, 1992) – American patterning of class/race and space is by and large idiosyncratic. It was the American “ghost acres” that allowed Britain to escape in the nineteenth century the trap of proto-industrialization and jumpstart the Industrial Revolution (Pomeranz 2000). United States became “the first country in the world … to apply one simple ordering principle to the whole of its national territory” (Osterhammel 2014: 105), and the way its space was measured, sundered into pieces and then commodified, underpinned, as Andro Linklater (2002, 2014) brilliantly demonstrated, its capitalism (see also Smith 1991). This is why outside Anglo-Saxon countries the word property is *not* synonymous with real estate and the relationship between ownership, class and space follows a different logic. Yet, because most of the literature on urban activism in the Global South that emerged in the last decade follows in this wake, it focuses on denouncing for the many “bourgeois utopias” or middle-class “evil paradises” (e.g. Anjaria 2009; Baud and Nainan 2008; Bhan 2009; Ghertrner 2012; Taguchi 2013) and contributes to turning an American predicament into an universal law.

There are three notable exceptions to this: the work of James Holston (2008) on Brazil, Asef Bayat (1997, 2013) on Iran and of Eyal Weizman (2012) on Israel. What singles them out, and also brings closer to the heritage of Jacobs, is their immersion in urban materiality. The right to the city for them is not an abstract “cry and demand” (Harvey 2012) but instead lurks in quotidian, collective practices. They describe how change is brought by a political redefinition of the material fabric of the city. Holston showed how the very practical and mundane owning of the urban infrastructure, known in Brazil as *autoconstrução*, became a fulcrum for making broader political claims and a vehicle for a fundamental redefinition of citizenship. Property, he shows, does not have to be reactionary. Bayat describes how daily struggles, patterns of street and sidewalk use amalgamate into the “encroachment of the ordinary” that led to major political victories for the urban “non-movements”. Finally, Weizman showed how spatial tactics of Israeli activists engendered an “ordered chaos” and a six-dimensional space that makes the two-state solution practically impossible. My chapter follows this material tradition and describes different lineages and dynamics of the relationship between political contention, class and space, showing yet another case of the material and daily struggles for the right to the city.

Lineages of class politics

One appreciates the uniqueness of the American case immediately after looking at housing from a global perspective. Like in the United States, it is key for perpetuating inequality in Poland. While class disparities are usually calculated on the basis of incomes, if we factor in the property, then Poland’s Gini coefficient rises significantly from 38.4 per cent to 57.9 per cent (zero is a situation of perfect equality and 100 per cent is perfect inequality). Today 10 per cent of most affluent households hold 37 per cent of all property, while the 20 per cent of poorest households own only a margin (0.1 per cent) of Poland’s assets. Most of this is housing. While the average (median) Polish household owns assets worth 61,700 euro (which is half the EU average), only a fraction (2,014 euro) of this was constituted by financial assets (this is five times lower than the EU average). Not only are Polish households not plugged into the global financial system, but even the housing sector is only superficially financialized. Most households own their homes

(76.4 per cent as compared to the EU average of 60.1 per cent). But only 12.1 per cent of Polish households have a mortgage (Bańbuła and Żółkiewski 2015). This means that most of the property owned in Poland is old and was acquired during the country's largest building boom I called the "Long Sixties" (Pobłocki 2012a). It is clearly visible in Figure 31.1. Thus in order to understand Poland's property distribution and patterns of inequality today, we need to delve into the very moment Poland turned majority-urban.

While there is a direct relationship between income and education and one has to have a university degree to be considered 'middle class' (Domański 2012), if we look at the pattern of property ownership, a very different dynamic emerges. There has been a persistent housing shortage since the end of the Second World War, estimated at roughly 1.5 million units. Thus by EU standards nearly half (44.8 per cent) of Polish apartments are overcrowded. Yet, there are many households with a second home – which in most of the cases is rented out. And here lies the crucial statistic as far as class is concerned: 56.9 per cent of those who own a second house have a secondary (often vocational) education, 39.3 per cent have higher education and 3.8 per cent completed only a primary school. The curious fact that most of those who make money on property are not 'well' educated points to the critical peculiarity of the Polish 'middle' class. It is a vestige of the socialist class structure that defies categories coined on the basis of American or British experience. The propertied class in Poland is by and large the old socialist middle class. It was a broad category that encompassed skilled workers, office clerks and highly educated professionals – contrasted to people performing the most unskilled of tasks for which even secondary, vocational, education was not necessary. What is more, the mushrooming of urban activism all over Poland in the last decade can be seen as its late coming-of-age.

Another distinctive trait is that Poland never had its own 'bourgeois revolution' that forged the middle classes. The only equivalent of the French, American or the British 'Glorious Revolution' is represented by the Second World War. It was during the Nazi occupation that the ancient regime in Poland was wiped out. For centuries before that, cities in Poland were inhabited and shaped by Jews and Germans, while Poles dominated the countryside. The "revolutionary war" (Gross 1997) changed this. While looting of Jewish property was a Europe-wide phenomenon (Dean *et al.* 2007) in occupied Poland it gained a peculiar twist. The previously marginalized Polish lower-middle classes organized gruesome "golden harvests" (Gross and Grudzińska-Gross 2012) which became a way of claiming the so-called ex-Jewish property

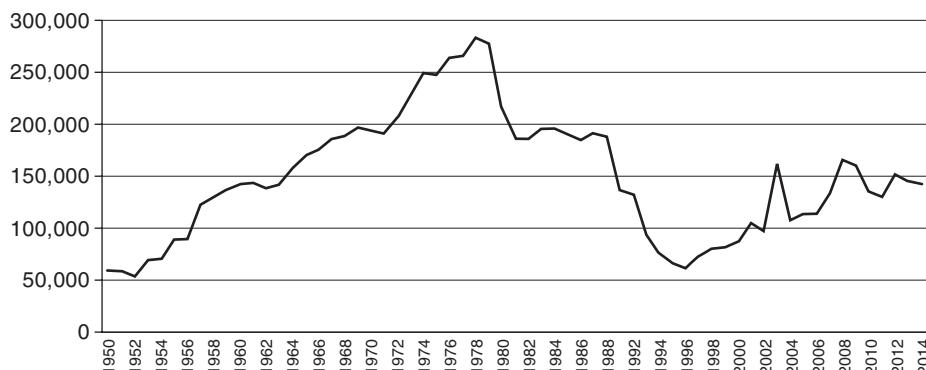


Figure 31.1 New construction in Poland, 1950–2014

(*mienie pożydowskie*). The antebellum nationalist right was well organized and led by local elites such as small shop owners, priests or school teachers. It was in the crucible of the Second World War that the Polish capitalist middle class emerged as a political subject.

As Leif Jerram (2013: 39–42) noted, while factories were in the first half of the twentieth century dominated by the left, European fascism was born from street fighting. In this sense, the fascists were the very first to claim the right to the city. This explains why killings did not stop with the war. As Jan Gross (2006) demonstrated, the Kielce Pogrom of 1946 was a struggle over both public and private property: law-abiding (lower) middle-class citizens in a provincial city went on a two-day-long killing spree in order to prevent Jews from returning to their homes as they now (or so they insisted) belonged to the Poles. Since Poland's borders were also significantly shifted to the West, the first post-war decade entailed a polonization not only of ex-Jewish but also ex-German (*poniemieckie*) property and cities. As it happened, this overlapped with 'building socialism'. It occurred not only in new, socialist towns (Kotkin 1995; Lebow 2013) but also in older cities and thus entailed an eradication of older, working-class urban cultures. This was documented brilliantly by Padraic Kenney (1997), who showed how communists established their grip over Łódź, a leading industrial hub and Poland's de facto capital between 1945 and 1950, by striking an alliance with peasant sons and daughters who just migrated to the city instead of the extant working classes.

The Łódź proletariat coalesced during the 1920s and 1930s from a unique hybrid of Polish, German and Jewish cultural material and was a child of a global upheaval. Between 1905 and 1911 peoples' revolutions broke out in countries (like Mexico, Iran, China, Russia or the Ottoman Empire) that together housed a quarter of the global population. Since they were the poor and 'backward' ones, this global moment (unlike the 1780s, 1840s or 1968 that revolutionized the West) did not stick in global memory. Yet, as Robert Blobaum (1995) showed, the 1905 revolution marked the birth of contentious politics in Poland. Only afterwards can we speak of mass party politics, urban protests or heated political contention between the right and the left. This urban/industrial environment, encompassing co-ops, self-organized cultural clubs and militant trade unions produced what Paul Mason described as "probably the most successful example of concentrated community organization in the history of the working class" (2010: 241). The very first wave of anti-communists strikes that shook Łódź between 1945 and 1947 was exactly this: an urban struggle over wages, production quotas and self-management at the workplace. This is why there were no pogroms in Łódź – politics at this moment confirmed to Jerram's dictum that the left fought for the workplace, while the right looted the streets. This was, however, soon to be over. And the socialist middle class that emerged later differed substantially from its capitalist counterpart.

The socialist middle class

While during the first post-war decade the power of the only discursively 'totalitarian' state was limited to the major industrial centres, after Poland turned majority-urban in 1965 building socialism gained a wholly new meaning. Major cities were officially closed for new migrants in 1956, and it was time to conquer the countryside and small towns. Thus while during the European 'urban miracle' that in Poland lasted, roughly, between the 1860s and 1960s, population growth occurred in the largest cities at the expense of the countryside and towns, after 1965 the focus was on second- and third-tier cities. As Stephen Collier (2011) demonstrated, this was a deliberate Soviet policy. Socialism was never municipal (as it was occasionally in the West) but universal. In 1931 one of the Bolshevik leaders "famously defined the socialist city as any settlement on the territory of the Soviet Union. The claim has often been taken to be a mindless

tautology” (Collier 2011: 75) – but it meant that abolishing all spatial divides, the one between the town and the country, or between large metropolitan centres and small towns, was the true objective. The idea was that it did not matter where a socialist citizen lived – he or she was to be liberated from the constraints of place (Collier 2011: 21, 34). It was effectively Lefebvre’s (2003) “urban revolution” realized.

This is why, with the exception of Moscow, there are no megacities in Eastern Europe. This is not a sign of putative “under-urbanization” (Szelényi 1996) but a consequence of socialist spatial justice. As Robert C. Allen calculated, if not for the Soviet demographic, educational and social policies, Russia’s population would have exceeded a billion by now. Between 1928 and 1989, the population of the USSR rose by 70 per cent, compared to the three- to five-fold increases realized by countries (such as India or Pakistan) at a similar level of development in the 1920s. Furthermore, although the Cold War was an unequal fight, by 1970 standards of living in both East and West were already converging (Allen 2003: 116–120, 136–137). Only a handful of countries (notably Argentina, Uruguay and Chile) that were rich at the beginning of the twentieth century have fallen into the camp of the poor countries, and only a few countries that were poor in 1800 have joined the prosperous. The latter includes Japan, Taiwan, South Korea as well as Eastern Europe (Allen 2003: 6). The ‘Soviet experiment’ was many things but not a failure. By the 1970s erosion of the rural-urban divide was already visible. The urban scholar Marcin Czerwiński (1974: 6) had no doubts that “the social meaning [and] physical form of contemporary urbanization is on many levels radically different from everything hitherto seen in history”. Urbanization, like socialism, was universal, and thus it did not matter that only 60 per cent of the Polish population lived in areas defined administratively as urban.

It was part and parcel of a larger effort. Also, income disparities were flattened. It ceased mattering if one worked as a university professor or a street sweeper – the salary was more or less the same. Because unemployment was eliminated, everybody had a basic income. Although housing was scarce, everybody had the right to an apartment. Regimes were largely popular and, as David Priestland put it, they “may not have created ‘new socialist people’, but they did create men and women with many socialist ideals”. An independent opinion poll from 1980 showed that equality was the second most important value for Poles (after family), and that although “democracy was seen as valuable … it was less important than equality” (Priestland 2009: 511). Sociability became more important than careers. Friendship in the Soviet Union

seems to have been taken much more seriously than in the West … 16 per cent of people met friends every day, 32 per cent once or several times a week, and 31 per cent several times a month. American single men, in contrast, met friends on average four times a month.

(Priestland 2009: 442)

Most people living under socialism “were neither dissidents nor true believers”, as Alexei Yurchak argued, and conducted a life “that was neither too activist or too oppositional, implying instead that this life was interesting, relatively free, full, creative” (2006: 118).

This does not mean that social frictions vanished, only that they moved to a different turf. Already the 1968 upheaval was no longer about self-management at the workplace but about distribution of the means for collective consumption (Poblocki 2012a, 2012b). The 1970s saw three powerful workers’ protests against a hike in … meat prices. These were both an expression of the urban ‘moral economy’ and part and parcel of global protests. The Global South, hard-pressed by the consequences of the oil-shocks, saw over 150 food riots only between 1976

and 1982 (Prashad 2012: 125). In Poland they gained a distinctive twist. In a society where everybody earned more or less the same, the stratifying factor was consumption and the family size. Since most men and women worked, households had similar incomes. Prices were centrally set and flat. Thus the amount of money per capita depended on how many children there were in a family. Working-class families that tended to have more children consumed more items such as cabbage, lard and dark bread, while families with two or one children had more butter, white bread and meat on the table. With over 70 per cent of incomes spent on food, no wonder this was a heated issue. The wiener schnitzel became the symbol of socialist and urban prosperity. Meat consumption in 1968 was already twice higher than before the war and stood at 68 kg (in the nineteenth century an average Pole ate 6 kg of meat annually). So having meat every day, not only on Sundays, became the way the working class translated all the lofty promises of socialism into their daily lives (Poblocki 2010: 230).

In order to keep up with the surging demand, the government imported substantial amounts of grain (used for animal fodder) and even meat itself. When it tried, increasingly squeezed by a global recession, to increase the price of meat, it was met by a fierce resistance. Thus, as Jacek Kurczewski (1993: 10) noted, the Solidarity movement of 1980, in which more than ten million people participated, was not “a rebellion of people in despair, but a revolution of those whose hopes remained unfulfilled”. This is why the strikes erupted in Gdańsk – a city with a highly skilled young labour force, that felt disenfranchised by the ruling elite and who thought, in the spirit of self-management, that they were competent enough to deliver the promise of socialism. “The cultural and advancement of millions of people”, argued Kurczewski,

led to the situation in which a new middle class was formed, blocked in its aspirations on the one hand by the close borders of the ruling class, and on the other by the mis-government of the country and its economy.

(1993: 188)

Solidarity was thus a ‘self-managing trade union’ that significantly broadened the idea of self-management also to the realm of consumption. Food rationing, introduced in 1980, was one of Solidarity’s demands, and so were free Saturdays or lowering of the retirement age. Although what followed was the very first bankruptcy of a socialist economy that contributed significantly to shifting the scales in the Cold War in favour of the United States (Priestland 2009: 522), the Solidarity movement can be seen as the very pinnacle of this socialist middle class – just as the 1946 pogrom was perhaps the final expression of the capitalist middle class in Poland.

The birth of urban movements

The “Polish crisis” (Simatupang 1994) was a protracted one, and (as Figure 31.1 shows) both the 1980s and the 1990s were lost decades. They culminated in the 1998–2003 crisis, that for Poland became “the first crisis of capitalism itself rather than of the transition to capitalism” (Ost 2005: 166, original emphasis). The project of de-industrialization, initiated already in 1980, came to its definitive phase. The Polish domestic economy moved from one constituted by large companies to one dominated by sweatshops – that in 2013 employed over 56 per cent of the workforce. Because unemployment surged to 20 per cent in 2003, many multinationals saw Poland as a reservoir of cheap labour. Thus in the wake of its EU accession in 2004, Poland quickly became the “Mexico of Europe” (Turner 2008: 63). With scanty competition from domestic companies, many sectors became monopolized by multinationals. In some cases they simply took over the existing infrastructure – like the American agribusiness that bought out

large parts of the former state-owned farms and turned them into profitable enterprises (Dunn 2003). In many others, new industries came in.

‘White goods’ manufacturing, that moved from North to South Europe in the 1960s, now shifted from Spain and Italy eastwards. Poland’s main cities like Wrocław or Łódź re-industrialized in the 2000s and became major producers of fridges, washing machines and the like. Others, like Kraków or Warsaw, became places where call-centres or accounting services were outsourced to. Germany eclipsed Russia as Poland’s main trading partner, and a (modest) building boom started in 2004. Roughly 90 per cent of money that went in the last decade into the building new office spaces, shopping malls and warehouses were provided by German pension funds, who thus recycled capital made from servicing the Chinese industrial revolution and producing luxury goods for the Chinese middle class. Residential construction was financed mainly by domestic money and the vast majority of it occurred in the ‘villages’ on the fringes of metropolitan areas. The already modest percentage of urban population fell below 60 per cent in the 2000s and thus Poland became further ‘under-urbanized’.

This substantially changed forms of contention. While 1992 saw a hike in labour protests, with over 700,000 people on strike against the ‘shock therapy’ of de-industrialization, by 2000 the number of striking workers fell nearly to nil. The opening of the British labour market that accompanied Poland’s EU accession, absorbed a further 1.1 million workers and potential labour discontents too. Trade union membership fell from 40 per cent to 14 per cent, and many of the new jobs were created on precarious terms, which today constitute over one-third of all job contracts. The so-called precariat organized itself only as late as 2014, so for the first decade of Poland’s EU membership most political contention was urban. Already between 2000 and 2004 the number of urban protests (demonstrations or blockades) increased threefold. It then withered away only to return with vengeance in 2010 (Urbański 2014: 188–191). This was exactly the moment when urban movements entered the stage – as a grassroots response to the policies of the mid-2000s, of course with a structurally unavoidable time lag.

There are many factors that explain its emergence into which I cannot delve. One of the them was a literal flood of second-hand cars after 2004. While in the 1990s an automobile was still largely a luxury item, and in 2003 only 35,000 used cars crossed the German-Polish border, already a year later this surged to 823,000 units annually and has remained at such astounding levels ever since. With infrastructure and regulations wedded to the erstwhile, moderate rates of traffic, this was bound to generate tensions. Most of the new suburbanites who live in the ‘rural’ counties retain very strong ties with the cities – they commute not only to work, but also drive their children to city schools or go there to movies (Kajdanek 2012: 86). New suburbanization and the flood of used cars that was embraced by city populations clogged inner cities; the traffic jams extended further and further out. The worst off were the older, socialist suburbs that quickly turned into transit zones. Little wonder, then, that residents of exactly those areas were the first to realize universal car ownership was a bad idea. While the poorer and older inner-city residents were more inclined to embrace automobiles and would be often in agreement with the new suburbanites that the most burning issue was a lack of parking spaces, groups like *My-Poznaniacy*, founded in 2007/2008, would quickly start challenging the rationality of the modernization programme engendered by the early few years of Poland’s EU membership.

My-Poznaniacy was an association of smaller residents’ movements from many corners of Poznań. It became the bellwether of Polish urban movements after it earned nearly 10 per cent of votes in the municipal elections of 2010. If one looks at spatial distribution of their support (see Figure 31.2), *My-Poznaniacy*’s candidate for mayor (who, although on a different ticket, won in 2014) registered most votes in areas between the inner city and the new suburbs (which are located outside the official city limits). These are exactly the suburbs built for, or rather by,



Figure 31.2 Spatial distribution of My-Poznaniacy support in 2010

the socialist middle class in the 1970s and 1980s. They were largely “unfinished utopias”, to borrow Katherine Lebow’s (2013) apt phase – but in a more quotidian sense. The socialist state was notorious for building new apartments without the amenities. While for the high-rise estates these ‘shortages’ were about schools or retail stores, for low-rise areas the problems were even more dramatic. Although many of those areas had comprehensive plans, like in Poznań’s Strzeszyn (see Figure 31.3), most of the amenities, including electricity, sewerage or telephone, had to be self-built by the residents themselves. Thus especially during the crisis-ridden 1980s, many grassroots committees were formed – exactly like in Brazilian cities described by James Holston (2008). Many of them were active during the political festival of 1988–1991, and during the 1990s were formally registered as community boards (*rady osiedla*).

At the same time, the idea of self-management (*samorządność*) – central for nearly a century of Polish politics, was urbanized. While during communism local administration either did not exist or, when it was established in the 1970s, was stymied by the state and party administrations, these institutions were allocated increasing power after 1989. Throughout most of the 1990s jobs at local governments, now called *samorząd*, were considered paltry and given to the least demanding echelons of party apparatuses. But once most state assets had been privatized and the post-2004 building boom took off, suddenly urban space became of substantial value. The new building boom was conspicuously chaotic. An entirely new legal structure ushered in in 2003 favoured scattered, fragmented and disjointed developments. Since developers cut corners, many preferred to construct new apartments in between those that already existed, so they could rely on the existing hook-ups. When residents of those socialist apartments and houses realized that the park in front of their windows was being built over, they started getting interested in how all this came about. It turned out the new legal framework meticulously excluded them from the decision-making process. But a local neighbourhood association precisely in one of

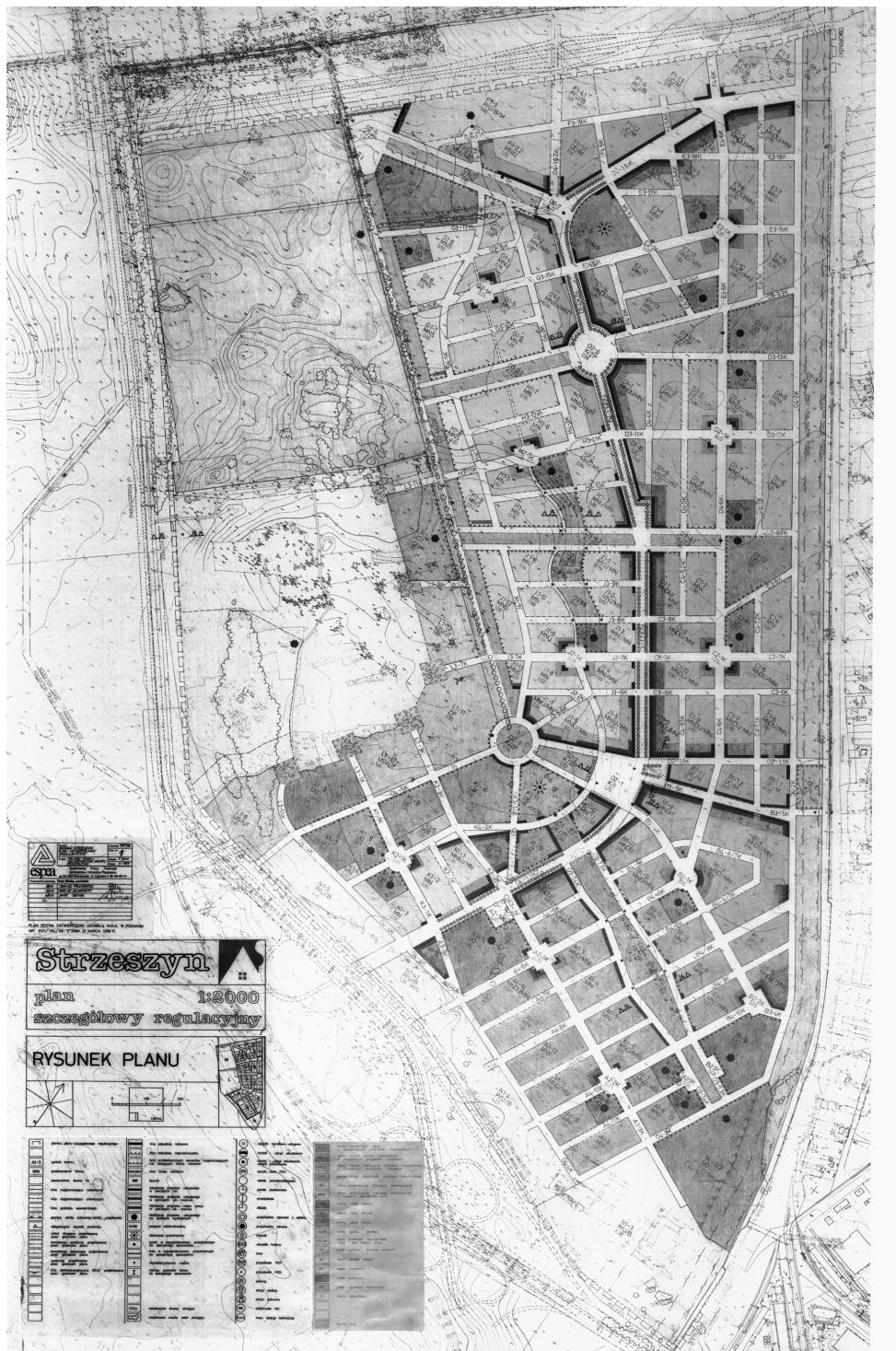


Figure 31.3 The layout for Strzeszyn

these areas found a loophole that allowed them to block the development (Mergler *et al.* 2013: 92). This discovery, made most probably for the very first time in 2007, gave residents substantial leverage and became the fulcrum of their political clout. This is also when the activists realized that community boards, dormant for nearly two decades, became a useful vehicle for voicing residents' demands.

In the process they discovered that although the country was a liberal democracy, the planning process was entirely undemocratic and intransparent. This autocratic practice stood in stark contrast to the democratic theory and rhetoric, and residents sought to act upon the idea of self-management in the place of residence. It is not surprising that Poznań – perhaps the only large city that was sidestepped in the re-industrialization of the 2000s – became the hotbed of this contention, as the city was mainly a recipient of the problems and not the benefits associated with new investments. The key concept that soon became the main idea pursued by all Polish urban activists, pundits and scholars alike, was that of *ład przestrzenny*. As the lawyer Hubert Izdebski argued,¹ it is broader than the Anglo-Saxon “spatial harmony” but narrower than “spatial governance” (and the German *Raumordnung*). It should be not translated as a “spatial order” – one of the utopias of Western middle classes that protect their little “evil paradises” against any sorts of contamination. The Polish word for order – *porządek* – which has been an integral part of the right-wing vocabulary, was never used by urban activists. *Ład przestrzenny* belonged to a different political lineage. As one journalist put it, it is “something everybody in Poland has heard about but nobody has seen for a very long while” (Springer 2013: 9). What everybody saw with their naked eye was its very opposite – spatial chaos, i.e. a practice of ad hoc, uncoordinated and opportunistic investments that destroyed the spatial harmony inherited from the socialist building boom and its modernist principles. The modernist plans, like the layout for Strzeszyn (see Figure 31.3), that had only been partially realized under socialism, were actually the material proof what *ład przestrzenny* once was, or what could have been.

Ład przestrzenny was what I call a “retroactive utopia”, because during state socialism no such principle was ever codified in law. Nor was it in any way used by the communist propaganda – unlike for example *czyn społeczny*, i.e. voluntary work done for the community, which, alongside the derogatory term *samowola budowlana*, would be the Polish equivalents of the Brazilian *autoconstrução*. Spatial reality during state socialism was in fact substantially “chaotic”, because it was also an outcome of overlapping and sometimes divergent policies (Jałowiecki 2010: 263). Now, because the principle of *ład przestrzenny* has been literally etched in space, even in its absence, it could be mobilized for generating a forward-looking, inclusive political agenda. To be sure, it was conservative – but it harked back to a very progressive political project. Without the knowledge of the spatial and social heritage it wanted to ‘bring back’, one could easily mistake it for a NIMBY-type of movement. But because it was socialist in a material and not discursive way, it could become politically potent without running into the danger of being accused of being ‘nostalgic’ for state socialism. While *czyn społeczny* was consistently mocked as an element of a failed political project, *ład przestrzenny* was free from such stigmas and thus could become a powerful political tool.

Although it came from the low-rise neighbourhoods that had the most extensive experience in self-management at the residential level, it was embraced by vast swathes of the (post)socialist middle class. Thus the most important campaign of 2010, one that landed one of *My-Poznaniacy*'s leaders the title of Poznań's Man of the Year a month before the elections, was a struggle to build a park – promised by socialist authorities already in the 1960s – in Rataje, one of the largest housing estates in Poland. This promise was not delivered upon by both communists and neoliberals, and residents thought it was in their capacity to compete the ‘unfinished utopia’ of socialist planning. While the communists established a pre-fab housing factory in lieu of the

park, arguing it was only a ‘temporary’ solution and once the estate was competed the space would revert to its ‘original’ function, in 1994 it was sold for a song as a brownfield. Three years later a powerful local developer acquired it but for the next ten years a legal deadlock prevented him from building new apartments in there. Only in 2006 when he finally managed to get a building permit, the residents – who followed the litigation but did not participate in it – entered the conflict, and once *My-Poznaniacy* was formed it became their legal vehicle.

The principle of *ład przestrzenny*, that applied to high-rise Rataje in the very same way as to Strzeszyn and other low-rise areas, was the engine of this supra-local alliance. As Lebow (2013) insisted, residents’ activism during the socialist era was inscribed in the planning philosophy, so this was actually not very surprising. But a movement that spanned both low-rise and high-rise areas with such ease would be unthinkable in the United States. For Harvey (2012: 138) the right to the city “has to be construed not as a right to that which already exists, but as a right to rebuild and re-create the city as a socialist body politic in a completely different image”. The Polish case, just as the Brazilian one, shows that it does not have to be an abstract ‘cry or demand’ but a material practice, and that the extant fabric of the city, and especially the housing, can become a powerful vehicle for progressive politics. Sometimes, a (modest) urban revolution can be achieved not by erecting progressive spaces on clean slates but by enacting on a political potential locked in tangible spatial relations even if it is – like in this case – dormant for decades.

Note

- 1 He made this point at a conference on spatial governance held at the Polish Presidents’ Office in the autumn of 2013.

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