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The Urban Mentoring as A New Method of Participatory Urban Planning in Poland

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Abstract

Twenty-five years after the return of democracy and the beginning of basing the country's economy on neoliberal developmental paradigm, Poland adopted the regulations regarding management of urban policy, which had been wait for over a decade (accession to the EU). The National Urban Policy as well as the Act on revitalization have defined, in a modern manner, the field of cooperation between the local government, the administration and the residents; the transition to the second stage of a democratic society – the residents as the co-hosts of the urban space. Slow evolution of this relation, heavily laden by the legacy of the previous system, in recent years has gained significant dynamics – urban activism in a country with a relatively weak tradition of urban culture, among the new generation (the new Polish townspeople) has become not so much as a fad, but a cultural trend, a philosophy of life. It seems, that the difficult dialogue between a city of community worker-activists and a city of engineer-professionals is one of the major fields of research on the Cognitive City in Poland. After decades of domination of technocratic relations within city management, which used to leave the shaping of the vision for a city's development in the hands of an inner circle of administration, a period of radical and fundamental criticism of professional (technical) knowledge has followed, turning into a nearly complete deification of the social side's full competence. Public debate, as an ideological dispute about neoliberal city planning by nature, has been growing under the slogans „the right to the city”.

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Keywords: participatory planning; urban mentoring planning model; quality of urban public space.

The article describes experience acquired through realization of the project „Quo vadis Gdansk? The residents plan their city” involving participatory, strategic planning for improvement of the public space quality in the districts of Gdansk. An innovative work technique for cooperation of the planners and the local community was developed as an answer to the main current problems

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in Polish neoliberal urban planning reality – residual cooperation competence resultant from a low social capital; asymmetries in knowledge; lack of experience in genuine socialization of the planning process. A work technique realized through a method of the so-called Urban Mentoring, using a planning tool: the so-called microstrategy of improving the public space quality, will be described. The summary is a reflection on the possibilities of applying the planning results through the use of the above described technique for the study on the city: on learning the mechanisms which develop responsible involvement in shaping of common living environment; on effective methods of mutual exchange of knowledge between the residents, the local experts and professional experts in city management techniques.

1. Introduction

The difficult dialogue between the city of social-activists and the city of specialized urbanist-engineers in Poland seems to be the interest of one of the new, significant semi-studies on the Cognitive City. The study on the flow of the knowledge about the city, among the residents and the professionals, as well as creation of more effective methods of mutual communication, presently, under the new conditions in the country (when Poland has gained membership in the EU after 2004), constitute a merely developing branch of the scientific urbanistic reflection. Practice, in this context, is ahead of the theory. Experience in engaging the local community has been described, among others [1,2,3,4] as well as many others. On this basis, it can be noted that socialization of planning and management in Polish cities is in the experimental phase. Particularly important for transition to participatory management of the city is reinforcement of the learning and observation processes serving creation and modification of the knowledge on the place of residence and its potential for revitalization. Only nowadays, new models of the efforts to initiate and reinforce new social practices for perception and transformation of own residential environment have been shaping themselves. After decades of structural housing shortage, when just a mere fact of owning an independent housing was an important quality, the Poles begin to notice the meaning of the quality of their place of residence, both in its spatial-aesthetic dimension as well as in the social aspect.

The article is devoted to the issue of social participation in strategic planning of the cities. The first part of the text describes the main issues associated with development of the cities in Poland: the weakness of the social dialogue and of the activities for improving the quality of the urban public space in the cities inhabitants of which ‘wake up’ only after the second phase of the actual democracy of the social life – participation in planning and management of the city. The second part describes a socialized planning technique based on an innovative method, the so-called urban mentoring, using a new planning tool – a microstrategy for improvement of the public space’s quality – in the form of the work defined as social planning academy.

Summarization of the article is a reflection on the possibilities of applying the planning results, using the above described technique for conducting urban research on:

- learning the mechanisms which develop responsible engagement in creation of a common residential environment;
- effective methods of mutual exchange of knowledge between the local resident-experts and the professional experts in technical management of the city.

2. The genesis of the problem

The work on the search for a new participatory planning technique was preceded by a reflection on both authors’ years-long experience in spatial planning in Poland. Analyses indicate that the four main reasons for undertaking this subject also describe the current state of numerous cities outside Poland, hence the results presented in this article may have universal application. The main problem areas being diagnosed, solutions for which can be sought through application of the UM model and a technique in the mode of a social planning academy, are:

- a perceptible lack of harmony and order in the residential districts – low quality of urban areas that are jointly used (public), as a result of the liberal city planning system;
- an increasing activity of the local communities for the benefit of the residential area, under the so-called urban movements, requiring support and coordination;
- lack of application of modern and effective methods supporting cooperation between: the residents-residents, the residents-professionals, the residents-professionals-city administration, in terms of planning and management of the urban space;
- lack of a spatial planning policy for the city, specified at a district level, based on a clear and understandable for

the resident's vision of development, which results in an informational chaos, in conflicting of the parties, or in passivity, but above all, in a permanent loss of the spatial developmental potentials [5].

2.1. 25 years on the way to social planning

Changing the petitioner, from an administrator and manager to a co-decision-maker or even a co-host of the urban space is a process of a slow evolution. It requires not only appropriate legal structures, but above all, development of the planning culture in those communities which have been re-formed under the rules of a neoliberal country and are heavily burdened with the legacy of the totalitarian system. The debate on participation in planning in Poland has gained significant dynamics over the past years. Urban activism, in a country of a relatively weak and disturbed by the cataclysm of the World War II urban tradition, has become not so much a fad, but a cultural trend, a philosophy of living that has been cultivated by the generation that grew up after 1989 and has formed into a new hybrid urban class, the so-called new Polish townspeople [6].

In 2015, 25 years (1989) passed since the systemic transformation in Poland which restored democracy and free market. This period ought to be viewed in two stages. The first phase is a state of necessity, marked by a legislative rush of the political elites to build the structures of a democratic country - the time of implementation of the commonly obvious great slogans of bloodless revolution and of the main transformation motto "take the country in your hands". At the same time, it was a period of a full rejection of the principles of a planned economy, one important element of which was authoritarian spatial planning. The initial, rather chaotic creation of an economic framework for the new reality as well as formation of new practices for functioning of the civil society that was oriented at ad hoc pragmatism, fostered questioning the professional knowledge and rejection of the authorities of the previous epoch. The status of systemic urban planning was lowered for decades, a burdening the economy with time-consuming theoretical solutions. In 1990's, during the period of the so-called "shock therapy" involving reduction and commercialization of various public social-cultural tasks, first steps were taken by non-government organizations (NGO), which among the new class of entrepreneurs were beginning to build the foundations for understanding the role of a private patronage and sponsoring of the social-cultural activities. The second phase of transformation (since 2004) was a period of a relative stability and good economic conditions allowing first conclusions and evaluations [7]. As evidenced by the example of Western European countries, European funds have enabled functioning of the developing sector of non-government organizations, being the main contractor of numerous soft projects aimed at development of the urban culture as well as development of the public debate and the civil attitudes. At the same time, numerous new investments have focused social attention on the local issues, viewed through the philosophy of "the right to the city" – a sort of a second urban edition of the Solidarity revolution, critical of the neoliberal economic paradigm, realized as the main political path of the country [8]. In this phase, especially after 2010, the subject of participation in urban planning has returned to the public discussion, with its essential role played in building a democratic city with a European genesis. In the spirit of the Leipzig Charter for sustainable development of European cities (2007), the complexity of the urban process in which the residents are willing to participate as partners has been noted. Understanding of the significance of contemporary knowledge on urban planning and management slowly has been expanding.

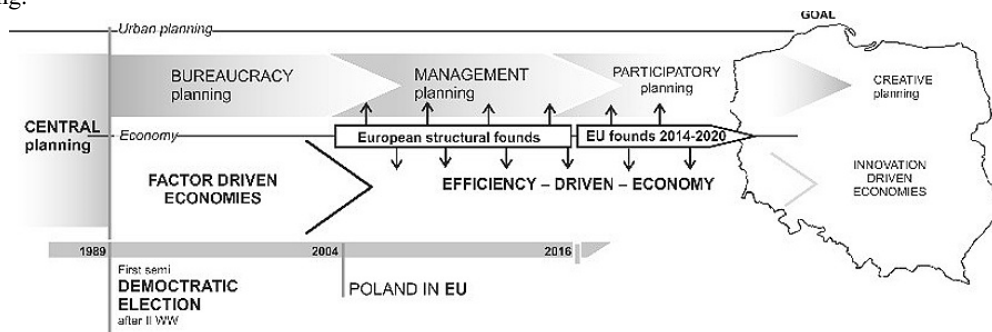


Fig. 1. Background of the changes and mutual relations between the transformations in urban planning and in economy in Poland during the years 1989-2016.

Such perception of the last quarter-century illustrates the particular dynamics of the residents-authority's relation and the professional planners' position in the social process of urban management in Poland. Nowadays, a sharp division is perceptible between the residents (the weak party) and the professionals representing the administrative-political authority along with the private sector connected with it (the strong party). The reason for such situation of a developmental-barrier nature should be sought in the mutual distrust that is based on the difficult historical experience, or in the general crisis of the public confidence in Poland, as evidenced by scientific diagnoses [9]. This mechanism, as a problematic situation, was officially noted and de-thematized. This stalemate situation of "acting in a conflict" can be excited by implementation of the solutions that are oriented at an increase of the social capital, a decrease of the asymmetry in knowledge, acquisition of experience in genuine socialization of the planning process as well as on adjustment of methodological shortcomings in the urban dialogue. Today, the problem of the still too little social involvement in formation of active local communities, which would responsibly work for their residential environment, has been becoming an issue. Decision about implementation of the "top down" or "bottom up" policy is significantly associated with the level of social trust and the actual understanding of the democratic principles as well as with content-based preparation of both parties, so the participatory planning dialogue does not turn into a decisional deadlock or a demagogic dictatorship of the public opinion over specialized knowledge.

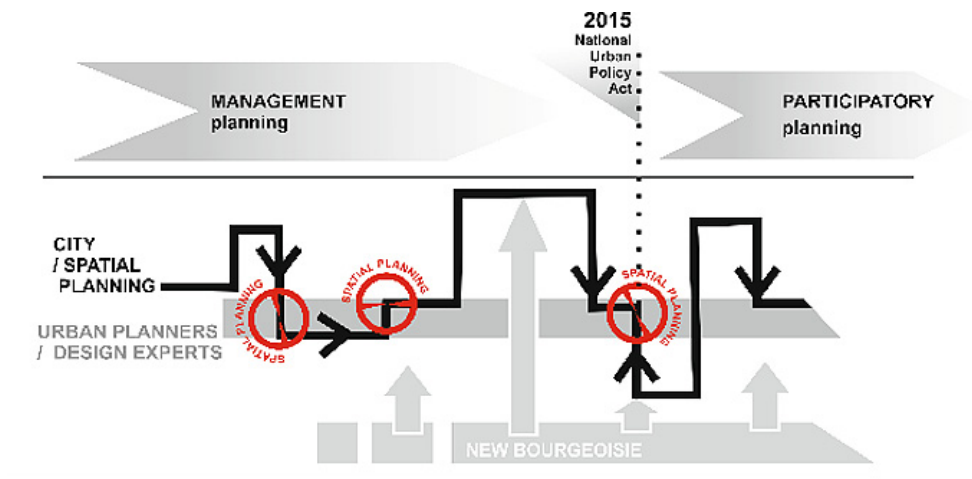


Fig. 2. Scheme of the city-expert-resident's relations against the development of the planning trends

Poor skills in developing a sustainable compromise and building a social contract, clearly reveal themselves in the dialogue about the urban issues. Also, urban planners' work within the scope of participatory planning often is related to this aspect. Two problems illustrating the weakest points of a young democracy, which is still commonly understood by the society as a principle of the majority rule without respecting the needs of the minority, are visible here. On one hand, it is the pursuit for seemingly effective authoritarian decisions of the government caring about the public interest (time-cost), constantly exposed to too close and unclear relations with the investment capital (the strong side of the process). On the other, an ill-equipped dialogue with the social partner, occasionally activating individual residents who rarely represent larger groups of interest or social organizations – which cannot be credible nor binding, since it allows all kinds of manipulations resultant from the lack of a systemic securements. The words written by Jane Jacobs in the 1960's "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody" today are the talk of the town for all urban activists.

In this context, the year 2015 can be considered a date symbolizing the transition to the second phase of the democratic society's development, in which the state perceived a new role for the residents – when after over a decade since the date of accession to the European Union (2004), the first laws were adopted – the National Urban Policy as well as the Revitalization Act – in a modern manner describing cooperation between the local government with public

administration and the residents, realizing the urban policy postulated by the European Union directives.

2.2. *The crisis of the public space quality*

The democratic system of spatial planning described by the Acts of 1994 and 2003 determine, in a liberal manner, the rules of area development for the zones that are not conditioned by any restrictions, i.e. supervision of the conservation officer, environment protection. It is limited to minimum necessary regulations referring to the private areas. Local plans do not determine the time-frame nor the standards for realization of public investments, for which the reserved fields are assigned. In this way, planning is fully detached from the realization phase. It results in a lack of public investments for the public developmental areas and in spatial chaos resultant from the freedom of building development in private areas. It is particularly true for a city such as Gdansk, which has constantly been compared to the metropolises of the Baltic Sea Region, such as Hamburg, Copenhagen, Stockholm, or Helsinki.

The past decade can be described as the period of an intensive spatial development in Polish cities, which mainly resulted in a high standard of amorphous suburbanization, in an escalating growth of individual motorization. Poor quality of the public space, with the exception of the main historical-touristic zones, has resulted in development of gated communities [10]. They have become a dominant form offered on the primary market, accelerating the degradation of the public space's importance and hindering interference of the local communities at a district level. Such developmental tendency, in the context of uncontrolled suburbanization, is in a significant contrast with international political declarations which reinforce the role of architecture and of urban landscape, in particular, the quality of the public space as a factor important for improvement of the living conditions of the urban population. These include the unquestionable "soft localization factors", which play an important role in attracting knowledge-based enterprises, qualified and creative workforce, and tourism (the Leipzig Charter 2007). Lack of such quality of the common public residential environment that would be comparable with the cities of Northern Europe, nowadays has been viewed as a developmental barrier of the Polish cities that are on their way to full European integration. In the context of the present European cities that are competing for the quantity and the profile of the population, the Polish thought expressed by the words: "Who, during the centuries, planned only what is most necessary, has not even reached it. People need an emotional relation with the place of their residence, expect an increase in the aesthetic level, culture in shaping of the space which would add something more than just a glamor to their everyday life."† is still not appreciated enough.

The existing legal regulations in Poland require public consultations regarding the main documents on the city's spatial policy – the city development strategy, the study on the conditions and the directions of urban development as well as the local urban development plans. The most important methodological issue of this system is the lack of proper techniques to prepare the community for its role of a responsible partner in opinionating the city's strategic-planning documents. For an average resident, a debate on the future of the district, in a 20-year perspective, is an abstract task, hence the issues of an ad hoc repair of specific places prevail in every discussion about the urban space [11]. Analyses of the results of the project competitions that have been held since 2010 as part of urban district budgets, indicate the main systemic shortcoming – the residents are not familiar with the binding vision of the development of their district. For several years, the methods of public administrative cooperation with the local communities have been limited to consulting new forms reserved for individual problem places / investments. Non-government point repair interventions are based on socialized ad hoc actions, in the placemaking or design thinking convention. The increasing will of the residents to become engaged in the process of planning and co-decision-making about the future of the city, and even participation in physical or financial implementation of improvements, uncovers the need for development of new methods of cooperation with the local community, which would integrate and activate the district's community in a more effective manner, in order to realize common developmental goals [12].

† Wolfgang Braunfels, on the occasion of the 15-year anniversary of revitalization of the cities in Baden- Württemberg.



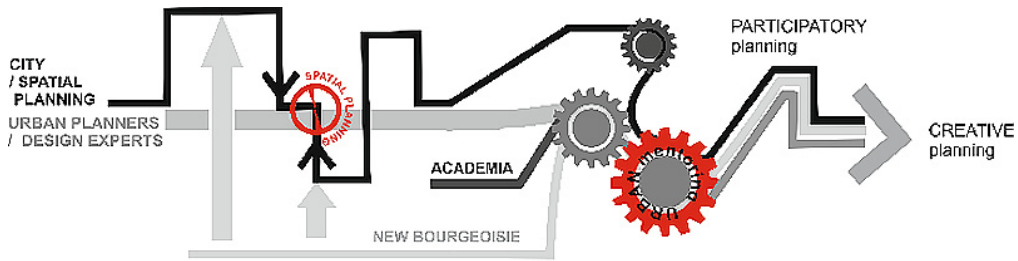


Fig. 3. The need for creation of an urban mentoring tool.

In this context, in 2014 a project was prepared, titled “Quo vadis Gdansk? The residents plan their city” (QV), on the participatory, strategic planning of the public space quality of the non-tourist districts of Gdansk. The intention aimed at cooperation of the community (the district council) with the professionals who professionally are not affiliated with the city administration was realized in 2014-15, as part of the “The citizens for Democracy” program, financed by the European Economic Area. Cooperation of the district councils of four districts of Gdansk with the consortium of the Gdansk Foundation of Social Innovation and the Faculties of the Gdansk University of Technology and the Sopot University of Applied Sciences, supported by professional local design bureaus BPBK SA, DOM, BUMC, enabled practical verification (implementation) of the theoretical working models.

3. Urban mentoring – an innovation in strategic participatory planning

The concept of a social planning academy, applied in the QV project as a new technique enabling a two-directional transfer of knowledge between the professionals who involved in local planning and the local communities of the urban districts was adapted for working in an urban mentoring model. The results of 6 workshops that were devoted to developing a vision for the district’s future and improvement of its public space were presented in the form of a microstrategy for development of the public space (a new participatory planning tool), which allowed abandonment of the ad hoc perspective of the “conflicted discussion” and a pursuit for creation of an effective system of socialized activity. Cooperation of the local district’s community with the academics, excluding active participation of the local public administration (lack of censorship), allowed creation of a closer relation between the residents and the young professionals (the students), which resulted in reduction of mistrust and in a broader sense of identification with the obtained results (co-authorship). The formula of a planning academy was implemented in an urban mentoring model, which allowed departure from the mode of the two conventions used previously: opinionating and informing, so far used in a top-down mode – from the professionals / administration to the residents – which significantly increased mutual misunderstanding and escalated the states of open conflicts.

Urban Mentoring (UM) is a type of counseling – a partnership relation between the professionals dealing with urban planning and the local communities willing to discover and develop the potential of the social aspect. UM assumes the social side to have expertise in the field of the knowledge on the local conditions and needs. Assistance of the professionals is required in order to broaden the aspect of understanding the mechanisms and the tools used for urban management, on the part of the community. It aids preparation of the social side for a dialogue with the professionals who are mainly represented by the city administration and the government representatives.

Cooperation within the UM has characteristics of a two-way exchange - a lateral input of knowledge and work, as well as characteristics of a permanent relationship with the program to be developed over a longer period of time, in which a certain group of regular participants is involved. In exceptional cases, the success of urban mentoring is defined by a change of the formula into a relation of a coaching nature – assistance in the process of reinforcing the effectiveness of the actions undertaken, support in independent defining the targets and the methods for acting, based on own discoveries, conclusions and resources.

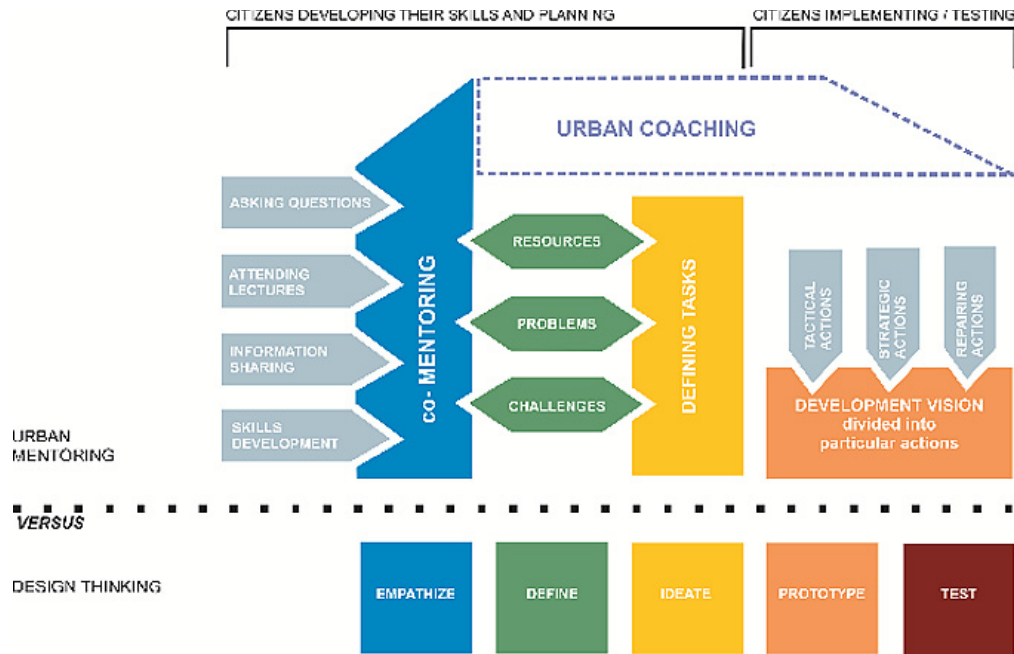


Fig. 4. Urban mentoring method.

Particularly important results are achieved by inclusion of the students of urban planning, management and construction in the UM process. It is a situation in which enthusiasm and idealism, which are especially valuable during the phase of constructing the vision and the concept, are often released. Exchange of knowledge and experience between the young adepts and the active “ordinary residents” results in deepening the understanding of the subservient role of the designer, revises the design concepts, develops design abilities through the skills of communication with the unprofessional – the participant of the planning process, a subsequent user. A young designer confronted with professional practice at an early stage of his/her studies develops skills in subjective perception of the resident’s role in the planning process as well as competence of the courage in professional confrontation of his/her own concepts in a debate with the local community.

The main forms of work as part of UM involve:

1. analytical workshops (focusing) allowing transition of the participants from the following positions:
 - from the subjective to the objective and from an individual to group perception, understanding and naming the urban space along with the changes occurring within it;
 - from perceiving only, the problems to seeing the potentials inherent in the places and in the needs;
2. analytical workshops on the current situation, which answer the questions: What is? Where is? What kind is it? How does it work? Who uses it?
3. individual homework model to be discussed with the immediate environment (neighbor-family consultations) and a report of the outcomes to the UM group – in order to create the so-called support group, enabling verification of own viewpoints and of the knowledge acquired as part of UM, in a trusted group of people, exercising identification of one’s own group and its viewpoints;
4. exchange of inspirations and opinions within the group through social media;
5. discussions / conclusions / thematic lectures e.g. communication, greenery, public space;
6. presentation and discussion of the examples of a good practice (realization) and the spatial concepts e.g. the students’ study projects – exercising a creative debate on the future – constructive criticism, searching for ideas, building conceptualizations;

7. overview of the city's spatial planning documents and investment plans (independent experts commenting on the issues);
8. design workshops on improvement in particular district areas;
9. discussion of the workshops' results, in terms of the implementation issues: Who maintains? Who uses? Who profits? What kind of partnerships? What ways to initiate changes?, etc.;
10. Discussions and workshops on the assumptions of the elaborations summarizing e.g. the microstrategies.

Many of the measures used in the UM model are present in other socialized formulas of cooperation in design and planning for improvement of the quality of the public space (citywide, representative, universal, common) and the semi-public space (neighborly, cameral, backyard), i.e. placemaking and design thinking[‡]. Each of these techniques can develop its targets and become a UM tool. Urban mentoring is a work model not oriented at solving a task – a specific problem, but on an increase of the level of knowledge and the abilities reinforcing the potential of the local community to effectively address the current problems.

4. Summary and conclusions

The experience gained during a year-long cooperation with the communities of four different districts of Gdansk as well as the numerous invitations to cooperate with other districts of the metropolis allow summarization of the results in the form of an answer to two basic questions – How UM can be used for urban research on:

1. learning the mechanisms developing responsible engagement in shaping the common residential environment,
2. the effective methods of mutual exchange of the knowledge between the local residents-experts and the professional experts specialized in urban management techniques.

In Poland, basic studies on the city, especially those in the field of urban planning, are still underfinanced. At the same time, an increasing demand for scientific studies that would be oriented at implementation of new, interdisciplinary models of organizational solutions is observed. There is a growing need for a return to the structural, close cooperation between the academics and the city administration, which has been far abandoned and neglected. The time for new challenges in development of the cities, i.e. an increase of energy efficiency, a change of the transport models, growing mobility of the society, or socialization of management, illustrates the need for a faster transfer of the theoretical knowledge into practice, also that opinionating the public authorities' activity. Therefore, activities involving selection and adaptation of the solutions existing in the world for the Polish conditions is the main innovation. Politicians expect this type of experience and knowledge from the scientists, as a sort of a magical medication.

Work with groups of the residents who declare the will for active and rather permanent co-activity for the benefit of their district, using the urban mentoring model, enables monitoring of the public opinion. It allows collection of the data necessary for conduction of systemic urbanistic studies as well as verification of the results directly in the local community, at a simultaneous realization of the educational mission – transfer of the knowledge onto the society and education of the young planners. Thus, it is a sort of optimization of the time and resources that are needed for implementation of the solutions solving individual problems. The tasks that superficially seem as local and unique, in the scientific sense enable transition onto the specificity of an individual problem, in order to develop a systemic solution in the initiative-model-program mode.

While in historic districts the subject of revitalization imposes a number of activities which fall within the scope of the urban mentoring concept, the subject of working with the local community that just has begun to shape itself, as part of new urbanization, has been completely neglected. This primarily is the question of the quality of the public space and building its significant role for the local identity. The policy of preventing and delaying the growing revitalization needs is important. Important issues refer to development of education in the field of the broadly understood urban culture, including improvement of the level of social activity [10], as well as the increase of the competency in public debate. The main potential here constitutes application of urban mentoring in order to change perception of the spatial issues from 'the problem' onto 'the potential', and the change of the public discussion style

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from complaining and a desire to settle the problems onto generation of ideas and creation of partnerships, not only to solve the problem, but to protect and use the developmental potential. A conscious community becomes a strong partner demanding and enabling application of higher standards.

Urban mentoring allowed consolidation of the local cooperatives, which under Polish conditions require development of institutions that would be independent from public (city) administration and devoted to working for the district community. In Gdansk, such model of a local social facilitator has been worked out by the Gdansk Foundation of Social Innovation, while working on the Orinua Neighborhood House “Hospitable Haven” which is run in a difficult neighborhood. The nature of this center’s work, which constitutes a meeting ground for many different classes, for other districts or even other cities has been an example of an ideal community center. In Poland, it is an alternative for Catholic parish activities which traditionally constitute a strong center of local community organizing itself around church initiatives – religious community. This is a non-government institution working in a difficult area in the degraded part of the city, which initiated the new model of socializing the discussion on the spatial planning in Gdansk. The local discussion on the future of this part of the city, carried out since 2010, has been supported by the Gdansk University of Technology, through dedicated design studies. The result of the students’ work reinforced the competencies of the councilors and the activists, also allowing development of grassroots activities for improvement of the dialogue with the city’s authorities. This experience, which has been a key aspect in formulation of the urban mentoring method, allows assignation to this model of a potential to strengthen the development of the local self-organization.

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