

## **Urban Planning Education in Post-Socialist Countries In View of Global Challenges of Urban Development. Based on The Example of Poland.**

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### **Abstract**

*Challenges the modern world poses before urban planners are becoming more and more demanding. Global changes, including social, economic and environmental changes, require new approaches to planning and managing the functional and spatial urban tissue. The need for new competences to be acquired by urban planners in the course of their professional education is in particular visible in the countries which quickly transformed from the centrally planned economy and party controlled management to neo-liberal, free market economy. These countries failed to satisfactorily develop mechanisms controlling the spatial growth of the cities; what is more, we can observe in these countries a decline in public trust put in the urban planner, a professional taught to introduce the above mentioned controlling mechanisms. This article aims to define the most important competences an urban planner should have in view of the challenges posed by the modern world and to compare them with the teaching standards applicable at architecture and urban planning study program. The research was based on the guidelines published by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, developed in the light of the applicable UE requirements. In this article, the author attempts to answer the question whether the European teaching standards applicable to urban planning satisfactorily safeguard the right profile of education offered by universities within urban planning study programs in Poland.*

**Keywords:** interdisciplinary teaching, urban design, studying architecture, teaching standards

### **Introduction**

Global field specific literature on the concepts of urban planning and designing is extensive. The key aspects discussed therein include: planning the cities of the future, in this the assumption that urban planning is a coherent procedure aimed at attaining set goals through integrated decision management or through acquisition of relevant abilities by stakeholders in relation to particular places (understood as imagination creating activity for the participants to be able to image a place of the future), followed by developing programs and plans to implement the conception of the imagined city. Despite that, the literature on urban planning and designing to a large extent emphasises the 3D aspect of planning in view of managing the behaviour of the space users. Analysing the range of spatial planning activities, some researchers have come to the conclusion that they are a bridge connecting urban planning and architecture and that the basic task of an urban planner is to translate the tasks of planning spaces, settlement layouts and distribution of resources into factual strategies to be used as guidelines by the architects and developers. [1]

Constantly changing living environment of man elevates the urban tissue to a higher and higher rank. Cities become not only the centres of political, business and cultural life but, in the age of total urbanisation, basic habitat of man. Strong pressure of urban growth brings respective consequences visible in a number of spheres of life, thus urban planners are faced with newer and newer challenges on continuous basis. Global financial institutions have also made their footprint in the local real estate markets contributing to the phenomenon called the 'speculative bubble'. In view of such strong market pressure, countries with weak tools regulating their spatial policy bear the consequences thereof in the form of adverse social and economic phenomena, demonstrated via spatial chaos.

Scale and speed of the changes that spatial, social and economic systems undergo globally are so big that our approach to urban planning needs to be redefined anew. What this new approach is supposed to be like is defined in the document entitled *Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities*, which specifies the planning tools to be coordinated at a local level to engage the inhabitants and other stakeholders, who, this way, can largely contribute to the future shape of a given area and its quality speaking in terms of economic, social, cultural and ecological development<sup>1</sup>. From this point of view, we can understand the integrated planning as a system of mutual, interconnected activities intended to continuously improve the economic, natural, social and environmental conditions for the sustainable growth. [2]. According to Andreas Billert, the integrated planning:

*allows for the selection of investment potentials and their guided management compliant with the purposes of the local development policy. High quality investors deem social acceptance of their activities, high degree of their planning integration and smooth management thereof to be a guarantee for long life of their investments. Chaos, lack of efficient management and social participation attracts questionable, quick yield-oriented investments characterised with low labour costs. As a result, it decreases the quality of space and pushes out social groups of high professional qualifications.*[3]

### ***Urban Planning In Post-Socialist Poland***

In view of the growth and reconstruction of the urban tissue, Poland, as one of the Central European countries, which after 1989 had to undergo a transformation of the political system from the centrally planned economy to the free market economy, was in a position where specific conditions prevailed. Urban planners had particularly difficult problems to solve. Because the socialist regimes collapsed, their planning tools regulating the compliance of the investments with the harmonious urban growth principles founded on the legal regulations and technical requirements applicable during the regime times were significantly undermined. And so was the planning of the cities of the future based on experts' analyses concerning the present and future needs of the society. The profession of an urban planner was in a deep crisis. Any attempt to exert institutional control over a private initiative was vehemently rejected on the grounds that it was an attempt to reconstitute the old regime practices. [4]

National legal acts on the political system in Poland specified the value of public assets, however, their practical implementation and executive provisions mainly pertained to the urban planning system and space management that remained within the powers of the local government. Unfortunately, local governments have poorly exercised their rights and unsatisfactorily managed the enforcement of the said provisions, not only due to excessive pressure from private investors but also due to unsatisfactory abilities in finding consensus between private interests and public welfare. [5] Accounting for the words of Andreas Billert, we may conclude that urban planning in Poland is to adhere to legal regulations and technical requirements and is mainly intended to satisfy the interests following from the development of newer and newer spaces. Combined with the reduction of the planning process, such an approach only adds up to the bureaucratic and procedural aspect of planning and exclusion of local communities there from [6].

Unfortunately, modern urban planning techniques, which activate the creative potential of local communities are met with scepticism because they are based on public trust to a large extent, whereas Poland is characterised with a low level of public trust, which poses one of the most serious barriers for the sustainable development.

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<sup>1</sup> Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities - document agreed in Leipzig on May 24-25, 2007, on the occasion of the informal meeting of ministers from European Union countries on the development of cities and their territorial cohesion. [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/archive/themes/urban/leipzig\\_charter.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/themes/urban/leipzig_charter.pdf)

Moreover, the urban planning crisis in Poland stems from weak, indifferent and largely ignorant civic society. The average John does not seem to know that his taxes are used to cover the losses sustained due to chaotic and defective spatial planning. Szomburg quite rightly diagnosed one of the major growth barriers in Poland - absolute lack of cultural and mental infrastructure composed of civilisational and soft competences such as the social dialogue, cooperation, loyalty, trust, understanding the core of public welfare, feeling of empathy, ability to make concessions and resolve disputes [7].

The aforementioned *Leipzig Charter* postulates the development of integrated planning based on the participatory town management model. However, factual implementation of the so-called Urban Growth Management Strategy into the daily practice requires major changes in the Polish planning culture, shaped today mainly with the years of neoliberal, market-oriented policies that have reduced urban planning to a complex legal and administrative procedure. Such reduction of the role of central planning and apparent procedural simplification as an incentive for private businesses has radically depreciated the status of an architect/urban planner as a profession of public trust. [8]

The fact that in 2014 it was deleted from the list of public trust professions further deepened the crisis the urban planners faced. Legal deregulations in urban planning meant that professional qualifications in urbanism were no longer subject to any verification. Many experts and academics criticised the changes. Nevertheless, this disrespect for the urban planning expertise knowledge has done a lot of harm in consequence of questioning the know-how and rejecting the proposed urban solutions. This topic may be another area of research that could truly reveal the backstage of the decision making process within space management.[9] As the President of the Society of Polish Town Planners, Sławomir Gzell, maintains:

*urban planning as a discipline of science is a conglomerate of many disciplines aimed to plan and design the cities of the future. The disciplines that aspire to be part of that conglomerate must consider how much they value the historical descriptive data and their assessments and how much - the prospective proposals for the future. Deprived of the planning for the future, the city shall fall prey to the profit-oriented key players ruthlessly exploiting and appropriating urban space. The effects thereof are anyway visible today. Should these players gain a dominant position, it will be too late to discuss any education and art of building the cities. The duty to face and challenge them falls within the professional liabilities of an urban planner if he feels an academic expert in the field. [10]*

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The applicable division of disciplines and sciences, included in the urban planning program of study<sup>2</sup>, deprives spatial planners of any competences in the area of creative, aesthetic and compositional solutions of spatial problems. Whereas, the architects/urban planners have insufficient basic knowledge of legal regulations, methodology of designing, sociotechnics or methods of collecting and processing spatial data. This specific dichotomy results, on the one hand, in overlapping competences in the area of designing qualifications, and on the other hand, in the lack of tools for comprehensive and integrated investment project management. At present, universities either provide the program of study in the field of architecture and urban planning intended for architects, which highlights the engineering and aesthetic aspects of the profession that are to serve the purpose of implementation of investment projects (private and public) or the program of study in the field of spatial management intended for spatial planners, which highlights the role of growth in social and economic terms but excludes any education on spatial form creation, which underlines the environment of the social and economic trends that are the subject matter of the planning.

As a result of breaking the links between spatial planning and architectural designing and urban planning, urban planning started to be perceived as the area of know-how and skills based on the divergence principle, mainly aimed to create bolder and bolder spatial forms with ambiguous program of functions, whereas spatial planning started to be understood as a discipline focused on working up procedures - based on the convergence principle and focused on the scientifically-oriented optimisation of solutions.

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<sup>2</sup> The Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 20 September 2018

Thus, how to find the middle ground for the two, totally different approaches to urban planning? Can anyone be an urban planner? What qualifications and competences should distinguish an urban planner?

Modern urban planning based on the participatory planning paradigm will require an architect able to provide proper consultancy, able to act as an activist and propagator of reconstruction processes and knowledgeable in engineering, social and aesthetic aspects thereof rather than a visionary architect. Regardless of the efforts made by the local authorities to increase social participation, there will always be the 'silent majority'. Here is where an architect/urban planner has an important role to play as an activist, actively participating in a dialogue with the representatives of the local authorities and the experts representing the interests of the investors or members of local communities. [11] In this context, it is important to appropriately shape a model architect/urban planner. The monograph dedicated to one of the pioneers of social participation in architectural designing and urban planning, i.e. Ralph Erskin, includes the following fragment "The driving force behind his work was what he kept in his heart from his young age - his attitude to man, his willingness to find the middle ground..." Erskin had no intention to impose his own ideas or solutions on the future user, he only tried to encourage and advise others to use them. [12]

A modern urban planner must be able to work up visions of the future (models) using his expertise knowledge and advanced technologies. To do so, he must, on the one hand, refer to the theoretical knowledge on how the spatial forms function and, on the other hand, he must be able to undertake appropriate spatial intervention in practice. Such a spatial intervention may be of a varied nature and should be implemented with the use of economic, social or spatial management tools but it must always directly transpose into shaping the actual physical space. Urban planners, whose role is to focus on the physical transformation of the urban tissue, must understand and identify the consequences such an intervention will entail in all other spheres of life. [13] An architect urban planner should have comprehensive knowledge in combined fields of specialty: sciences and heuristics, management and creative activities. Only then will he be able to find the middle ground for totally different approaches to urban structure and solutions to multifaceted and interdisciplinary problems.

Adopting such an approach to urban planning entails the need to change the model of education in this area. The changes in the classification of scientific disciplines have brought the dichotomy of urban planning into an engineering discipline (architecture and urban planning) and civics (social and economic geography and spatial management). They both are defined to include planning and designing of spatial structures and this only obscures the recognition of professional competences of the qualified urban planners. As a result of such division of competences, universities offer study programs intended either for architects/urban planners highly competent in shaping the urban forms but poorly comprehending the processes related to spatial policies or for spatial planners/geographers capable of describing the said processes, yet incapable of solving problems related to spatial composition and aesthetics. The graduates of neither of the study programs will be fully able to meet the challenges of modern growing cities because they operate using different axioms and different research and project methodologies. The problem could be solved via the extension of architectural education with urban planning aspects with the account for the interdisciplinary nature of this discipline.

In the light of the above stated, it can be concluded that an urban planner - expected to solve complex problems with the use of the academic knowledge as well as the creative abilities, being the public trust profession - should acquire the qualifications of a super architect satisfactorily competent in other disciplines involved in urban growth studies in order to become a partner or even a coordinator of urban development.

Unfortunately the system of architectural education offered to future architects/urban planners in Poland<sup>3</sup> - and in other European countries - seems to prepare them to a larger extent to act as star figures conceiving futuristic spatial forms rather than experts capable of solving global problems of the sprawling modern cities. This trend has been created not only under the top-down pressure from the municipal authorities and investors aspiring to take advantage of architecture for marketing purposes but also under the approach of the students, who, influenced by mass media, expect the university to offer such program of study that will guarantee their top ranking positions in renowned competitions and prestigious awards rather than a program that will teach them how to solve spatial problems to increase social and ecological quality of space. [14]

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<sup>3</sup> Compliant with the recommendation of the Bologna Process seeking to bring more coherence to higher education systems across Europe.

The guidelines pertaining to the teaching standards in the field of architecture and urban planning<sup>4</sup> defined in the regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 2019 allocate equal value to architectural designing and urban planning and classify them into one group of design subjects, with 1,245 hours of instruction at the minimum within the first cycle of studies (engineer degree studies) and 330 hours of instruction at the minimum within the second cycle of studies. A student may acquire other qualifications necessary in urban planning practice by studying relevant subjects classified within the groups of subjects called “context of designing” and “supplementary subjects”.

TABLE 1 The guidelines of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education pertaining to the first cycle of studies.

A. DESIGNING	1,325 hours
A1. Architectural design and urban planning	1,245 hours
A2. Rural design, interior design and special design customised to local conditions	80 hours
B. CONTEXT OF DESIGNING	900 hours
B1. Theory and history of architecture and urban planning, landscape architecture, heritage protection, cultural studies, environment protection and ecology, economics of an investment process, law in the investment process, ergonomics	300 hours
B2. Engineering and technology: construction and materials technology, building structures, statics and mechanics of civil engineering structures, building systems and town infrastructure	300 hours
B3. Workshop design: drawing, painting, workshop techniques, computer techniques, modelling, mathematics, geometry	300 hours
C. SUPPLEMENTARY SUBJECTS in particular: foreign languages and electives: philosophy and aesthetics, art history, environmental sociology and psychology	120 hours
D. PRACTICAL PLACEMENTS	-
E. DIPLOMA: preparation for the submission of diploma thesis and taking the diploma exam	50 hours

TABLE 2 The guidelines of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education pertaining to the second cycle of studies.

A. DESIGNING	430 hours
A1. Architectural design and urban planning	330 hours
A2. Historical sights conservation design, spatial planning and special design customised to local conditions	100 hours
B. CONTEXT OF DESIGNING	285 hours
B1. Theory and history of architecture and urban planning, heritage protection, cultural studies, archaeology and theory of historical sights conservation, law in the investment process, professional ethics, ergonomics	95 hours
B2. Engineering and technology: advanced technical aspects of designing	95 hours

<sup>4</sup> This is how the regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 2006 defines the proper name of the field of studies but most of the technical universities removed the ‘urban’ part of the name compound.

B3. Workshop design: integration of design processes and methodology of academic work	95 hours
C. SUPPLEMENTARY SUBJECTS in particular: foreign languages and electives: philosophy and aesthetics, art history, environmental sociology and psychology	40 hours
E. DIPLOMA: preparation for the submission of diploma thesis and taking the diploma exam	100 hours

It may be concluded from the table presented above that the program of study is dominated with design subjects not only during the first cycle of studies (ended with the engineer degree), which is obvious, but also during the second cycle of studies, which, in accordance with the ENHSA [15] guidelines, should include more theoretical and more interdisciplinary subjects. Urban planning is a vital part of the planning practice concerned with the shape of man built urban structure; being a basic planning value, it should above all serve the public interest to safeguard social equality and sustainable development.

Nevertheless, in view of the hours of instruction allocated per respective groups of subjects under the teaching standards regulations, even if the university authorities should have the best intentions to offer the highest educational standards, they are unable to offer comprehensive education to future urban planners that are to exceed the role of mere designers and are to be well qualified to practice as organisers, coordinators and educators in the area of urban development.

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