

# CHERISHING OUR CLOSEST SURROUNDINGS

Transformation of urban space: construction of the Łódź Fabryczna railway station and early stages of the new Łódź city center, covering approx. 75 hectares

Spatial planning is a form of public management of a distinctive public good. It covers a range of activities and decisions affecting our environment.



TADELUSZ MARKOWSKI

## Tadeusz Markowski

The Interdisciplinary Centre of Urban Studies  
at the University of Łódź

Spatial planning has been commonly understood as referring to the management of the physical arrangement of human activities requiring permanent buildings or major anthropogenic (human-caused) land-use conversion. Today, however, we look at space and spatial planning as more than just a socioeconomic issue. Space must be seen in a broader context, as the four-dimensional environment in which our lives play out. Spatial planning must take account of more than how we arrange the space around ourselves from the social and economic perspectives; it must also consider space as a public economic good, and as a distinct “spatial fragment” separated out from the common good.

In a four-dimensional sense, space is relative and variable in time. Poorly organized transport networks increase costs and diminish the economic value of a given space. In contrast, a space which is well organized in terms of internal and external accessibility has a high economic value. Space must also have high absorption properties and be able to renew natural systems. Its assessment cannot be limited to short-term economic and financial benefits. The spatial planning system creates fundamental, natural contradictions between the goals of individual users and the entire community. This is due to a natural problem of social traps involved with the use of a common good: without adequate regulation and protection, this can lead to the degradation of a common good or its next stage – a public good.

Public policies set by the authorities aim to avoid these social traps and external costs of managing space and its resources. This should minimize the negative and even destructive impact of human activity on the natural world and steadily increase the value of space as a common good and as functioning natural systems.

When we discuss space, we must be aware that it is a unique, not-reproducible good in humankind’s economic activities. This also applies to flat, two-dimensional space – non-renewable regions. This means that market mechanisms that “create” new land for development are unreliable and bear the cost of preventing the land from performing other functions, such as natural habitats. All spaces also have third (height and depth) and fourth (time) dimensions. This raises an important question about the right of ownership.

## Assessment

How would we rate the phases that make up effective spatial planning in Poland? Due to its strategic importance and the need to act holistically, entire projects should be overseen by the government, with support from organizational structures able to plan spatial development in an integrated manner while monitoring the changes. Additionally, such institutions must have long-term public interests at heart and must remain impartial to pressures from political parties. Poland currently lacks such organizational structures, and spatial development policies tend to be obfuscated and absent from public documents.

Local government units, which are responsible for planning, also have a weak position in administrative structures, not just due to the lack of expert staff and weakness on a systemic level. Under the current legal framework, they are unable to protect public interests. Additionally, local authorities are frequently influenced by partisan-politics criteria when recruiting planners to management positions, thus bringing down the professionalism and expertise of local administration and planning.

Spatial planning on the regional level is largely just a façade in Poland; it mainly serves evaluative and informative purposes but does not have the regulative

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power that might oblige local government units to introduce voivodeship-level guidelines into local regulation systems. Spatial planning systems on a local level are especially flawed, since they serve the interests of property owners. They are selective and unjust, open to speculation and irrational in outcome. Additionally, they are continually weakened and undermined by extraordinary legal acts, operating outside the jurisdiction of local planning regulations.

Planning on a praxeological level – that is, strategic and operational planning – is only declarative in nature. It is most commonly regarded as a precondition that needs to be met in order to obtain external EU funds, whereas decisions usually get made outside of the planning system.

Economic instruments do not provide motivation for rational action on the part of local authorities or



**Prof. Tadeusz Markowski**

is the Director of the Interdisciplinary Centre of Urban Studies at the University of Łódź. Between 2001 and 2019 he chaired the PAS Committee for Spatial Economy and Regional Planning, and is currently its first deputy chair. Member of the Municipal Urban and Architectural Commission in Łódź.  
tadeusz.markowski  
@uni.lodz.pl

## ACADEMIA FOCUS ON Management

property owners. The system supports land speculation and excessive and predatory appropriation of space. Substantive laws, including those covering land management, as well as property taxes, do not account for the value of space. Financial systems of local government units do not take into account correct relationships between increasing the value of developed space, the urban spatial order, and local budgets. Such local authority income systems have a negative impact on the rationality of local spatial management. The practice of using elastic and potentially largely effective information instruments, including territorial marketing, reveals that they are not being used appropriately in terms of long-term development.

Spatial monitoring remains a major weakness of Poland's entire spatial planning system. It is incomplete, inconsistent, and continually lagging behind the latest EU directives, which are themselves conservative in the face of the latest challenges. As it is, it does not even allow for investigative scrutiny or slightly delayed corrective decisions driven by social and economic changes, which are in turn driven by market forces and signals. Research is an important element of monitoring systems. Research institutions

are financially weak, dependent on party nomenclature and constantly struggling for survival; they function in a clientelism-based system and are prone to apologism for decisions taken by authorities rather than protecting public interest.

Spatial economics research at universities remains outside the main priorities of official research programs. Public understanding of spatial economics unfortunately remains fragmented and dispersed.

The source of all our current problems – the “original sin,” so to speak – was the 2003 abolition of the obligation to have local plans as the basis for local investment processes, while at the same time not requiring general and urban spatial development plans. The legal vacuum left behind by local and general plans has been plugged by something of a facsimile: unreasonably and irrationally interpreted administrative decisions on zoning permission.

Poland's spatial chaos is made all the worse by legislation covering the right to development, which does not adopt the principle of understanding space as a public good. Such a pathological interpretation of a ruling on development was drawn up using a provision in the Act of 27 March 2003 on Planning and Spatial Development (*Dziennik Ustaw* 2003, no. 80,

Vertical spatial  
development, Hong Kong



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An example of three-layer spatial development, Hong Kong (pedestrian route)

item 717). Article 6.2 of the Act states that “everyone has the right, within the limits specified by the act, to develop the land to which they have a legal title, in accordance with the conditions set out in the local spatial development plan or the decision on building conditions and land development, provided this does not violate public interest protected by law and third parties.” The act is interpreted to mean that in the absence of a local plan, everyone has a right to develop their land on the basis of building conditions without planning or analysis of the reasoning and direction of development. This allows for an extremely loose interpretation of administrative decisions, with no public oversight.

## What needs changing?

Poland must adapt its existing spatial planning and management system from one rooted in the industrial era towards a system following a modern value-based economy. This will require broader understanding of economic laws dealing with real estate and the effects of private ownership rights being limited by land-use planning considerations. We are also increasingly entering spaces high above the Earth’s surface by launching satellites and transmitters of digital information into orbit. Similar problems also apply to spatial planning for sea and ocean regions. It is growing increasingly necessary to develop international and global

planning and regulation for humankind’s activity on the oceans, which had hitherto been regarded as a free good. Without successful planning on a national level it would not be possible to be a partner in an international planning and decision-making system. Such open and soft spatial planning must be based on facts and interdisciplinary research.

Spatial planning on the national level should be closely tied with the development of new systemic instruments on all levels of public government and administration, or improving the existing ones. This kind of strategic and long-term planning, based on prospective diagnoses, should indicate the direction of legal frameworks for regulating procedural and substantive laws in spatial development.

Poland should take up the challenges involved with the role of space in sustainable growth as soon as possible; this would require creating a new, adequate, integrated development planning system tied with regulated spatial planning. We must be aware that a high quality of the natural and anthropogenic environment determines the quality of territorial capital in urban systems – currently our most important resource. Such a strategic resource of accumulated knowledge, skills and innovation of city residents can only be developed in an integrated manner and only in functional territorial systems; in other words, territorial capital is a unique kind of intellectual capital driven by the quality of the urban environment. ■

Further reading:

Markowski T., *Uwspólnianie czasoprzestrzeni miasta – fizyczny i ekonomiczno-społeczny (relacyjny) charakter czasoprzestrzeni [The mutualization of the spacetime of the city – the physical and socioeconomic (relational) nature of spacetime]*, in *Uwspólnienie zasobów i dobra wspólne [Mutualization of resources and common goods]*, 2021.

Markowski T., Borska M., *Miasto, polityka, planowanie [City, Politics, Planning]*, 2021.

Markowski T., *Nowy metabolizm miast [The New Metabolism of Cities]*, *Pomorski Thinkletter* 1/2022.