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Effects of transformations in the urban structure on the quality of life of city residents in the context of recreation

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Abstract. Accumulating over time, spatial transformations in Kraków have been changing the city's structure. The contemporary image of the city is creating a new model of life and has a major effect on the functional and spatial conditions for its residents. Life in the city is dictated by the rhythm of daily routines, and the time of leisure has been reduced to a minimum. Less and less frequently are public and semi-private urban spaces used in the traditional manner and their number is decreasing. A considerable role in the decrease in the space for relaxation in the city is played by the purchasing power of money which is winning for itself the space for new residential estates.

The disappearance of green areas can be best illustrated by the example of the green areas between Kraków and Nowa Huta. Historically, Nowa Huta was set up as an organism separate from Kraków. In 1956, Anna Ptaszycka presented a new plan for Kraków spatial development which curbed industrialisation and promoted Howard's ideas of garden cities. In 1966, the largest park in that area was established, its basic function was to isolate Kraków from Nowa Huta and the steel plant there.

As a result of the projects developed in recent years, the compact greenery is smaller, and more and more areas are being taken over for various projects. Spontaneous development of Kraków, without any master plans, for some small parts of city structure, is a huge threat to the preservation of existing leisure areas. Because of this, precise guidelines are needed for the intended use of areas neighbouring environmentally sensitive grounds, defining their type, scale and impact, in order to protect the landscape attractions which are amongst the desired recreational characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Accumulating over time, spatial transformations in Kraków have been changing the city's structure. The contemporary image of the city is creating a new model of life and has a major effect on the functional and spatial conditions for its residents. As a result of the changing urban functions, a different quality of the city's structure is becoming noticeable. Life in the city is dictated by the rhythm of daily routines, and the time of leisure has been reduced to a minimum. Less and less frequently are public and semi-private urban spaces used in the traditional manner and their number is decreasing. The background for these transformations is complex and they result from the changing realities, the new model of life where leisure time is becoming a marginal portion of existence. A considerable role in the decrease in the space for relaxation in the city is played by the purchasing power of money which is winning for itself the space for new residential estates. The continuous reduction of areas for relaxation for Kraków residents is not counter-balanced, and the new urban structures do not offer proposals for the time of leisure. Because of this, it seems vital to maintain the city areas with traditionally natural attractions in order to balance the growing density of Kraków's structure. Initiated in 1989, the process of systemic changes in Poland resulted not only in essential political changes but also permanent modifications of the structures of many urban complexes which were amongst the first to take in the Western culture. Spatial transformations in Kraków commenced in the 1990s with the first truly avant-garde projects of the time, such as St. Jadwiga's Church (1). One of these changes manifested itself through the increasing number of residential and commercial buildings. The filling-in of areas located at strategic points in the city became a natural consequence of that process.

2. Materials and research methods

The result of the changing functions in the contemporary city is that on today's city map recreational green areas look like randomly scattered spots of parks, green squares and wasteland, which do not make up any system and thus it is hardly possible to refer to leisure zones in the city. Writing about recreation in the city, one cannot fail to mention open areas in its historic part. These include small recreational green areas which, over history, have resisted transformations. The only large green area are the Błonia commons ⁽²⁾ which remain a recreational meadow in the city centre for mass events, with a helipad, and which are used for individual recreation as well.

Kraków residents are offered a wide range of places where they can relax and spend their leisure time (see Ptaszycka, 1950). Busy and tired people like to spend their free time differently and definitely more intensely than several decades ago. The city now proposes many places for recreation and entertainment – cinemas, theatres, museums and, like in any other big city, restaurants, cafes or pubs where people can passively spend their free time with friends. Those who prefer active exercise can use one of the numerous sports facilities, such as swimming pools, aquaparks, gyms, fitness rooms, climbing walls and many other places throughout the city. However, all these are enclosed locations without contact with the surroundings, air and space. Enthusiasts of relaxation in open air have to satisfy themselves with small green areas along water courses (3) which, along some of their sections, have been adapted for recreational purposes – (see Dąbrowski, 1952).

Besides that, the proposal to relax in green areas is limited to several historic parks (4) and the Planety green belt in the city centre which, rather naturally, do not offer much by way of free recreation.

In the post-Galician bourgeois tradition of Kraków bordering on prudery, exercise in the open air in urban areas is not a common practice. For similar reasons, parks located within the immediate proximity of residential areas are not used for recreational purposes (except for children). Thus, the offer which would really comprise green areas in which to recreate in Kraków is limited and decreases together with the pressure from developers. There are eight parks with the average area of several hectares each, which are most willingly visited for relaxation purposes (5). An exception in size is Park Lotników Polskich covering almost 600,000 sq. m.

Until recently, most of these green areas were relatively large but, as a result of an increase in the market value of land and the pressure from developers upon the city authorities, they have been transformed in developed areas. This is particularly true for green areas with locations attractive from the perspective of the city's development.

The spatial policy of Kraków should concentrate on improving its urban quality and protecting the city's cultural and natural environment. The actions taken in that regard should emphasize and display the rich and unique structure of the city. The form of urbanized Kraków is constituted by the main city area with compact structure which provides for the basic demands of its residents for urban services. The form of open landscape dominated by areas not to be built-up, constitutes the green belt around the city which forms a wedge entering the city's compact structure and which is most exposed to the risk of slow decay as a result of the transformations in the city's structure.

The Kraków study of the conditions and directions of spatial development proposes, as part of both land development forms, to separate structural entities with varied landscape and functional characteristics. Because of this, the following sections will be identified: city centre structures; high- and medium density residential and commercial areas; university campuses and service facilities which require large plots of land; office and administrative buildings, and technological parks; large-area commercial and shopping centres; large industrial structures, warehouses and wholesale facilities; and urban green areas.

The structure of the open landscape is planned to be outlined more clearly. However, the planned

rate of its increase indicates that, over time, areas intended for urban development will absorb open areas or the latter will be treated as reserves for future development, with traffic routes to be located there since a general rule for the extension of urban development will continue to be the use of new areas for public transport purposes.

The disappearance of green areas can be best illustrated by the example of the green areas between Kraków and Nowa Huta (Fig. 1). Historically, Nowa Huta was set up as an organism separate from Kraków (6), initially forming a compact system having only transport links with Kraków. In 1958, Anna Ptaszycska presented a new plan for Kraków's spatial development which curbed industrialisation and promoted Howard's ideas of garden cities. The plan was approved by the municipal authorities of the time (Anna Ptaszycska was then head of Kraków's urban planning office and had a chance to direct the city's development towards the creation of a network of green areas). However, the plan was rejected by the socialist central government. Nonetheless, the direction for the development of green areas was preserved and, over the subsequent years, the green belt separating the two "cities" was consolidated. In 1966, the largest park in that area – Park Kultury i Wypoczynku, now called Park Lotników Polskich – was established. The basic function of the park planned as the largest one was to isolate Kraków from Nowa Huta and the steel plant there, named after Tadeusz Sendzimir (formerly after Vladimir Lenin). Originally, the park, together with its sports infrastructure, was to occupy an area of 2,300,000 sq. m., and its development was to continue until 1980. Ultimately, its first section of 80,000 sq. m. was opened in 1965, and the entire work was completed in 1966. Currently, the park covers an area of about 600,000 sq. m., of which 60,000 sq. m. in its southern part have been taken for the commercial project of the Garden of Experiences (Ogród Doświadczeń), and from the side of the Fort Pszona stronghold, a residential estate has been built, thus restricting the smooth stretch of open areas. As a result of projects developed in recent years, the compact greenery is smaller, and more and more areas are being taken over for various projects (Fig. 2).

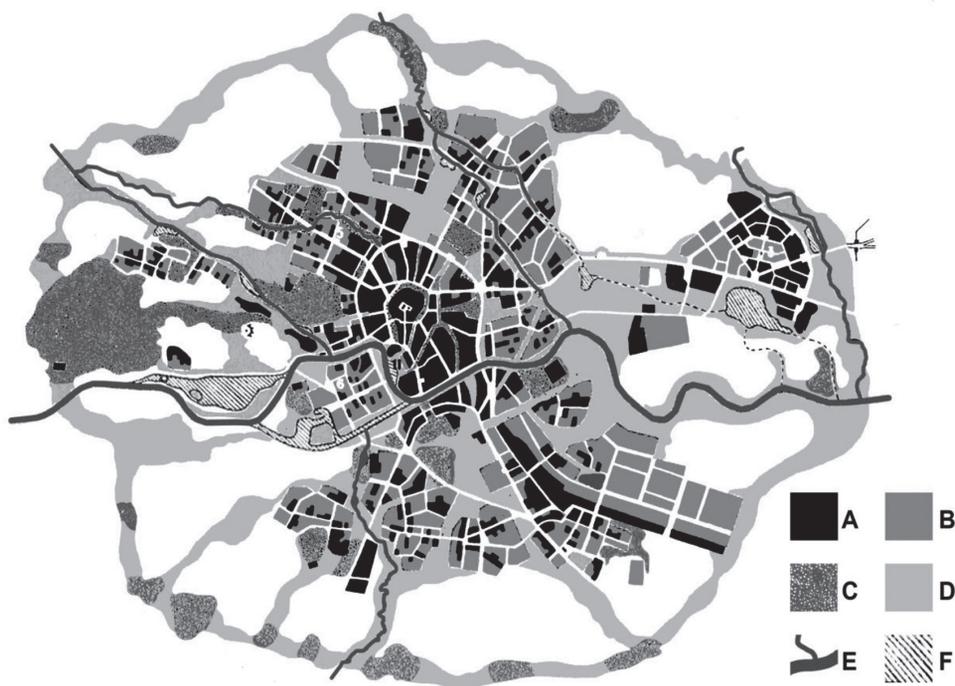


Fig. 1. Green buffer area between Kraków and Nowa Huta, as proposed in a very progressive plan for the development of Kraków from the time when back-up facilities were constructed for the steel plant

Explanation: A – existing buildings areas, B – designed buildings areas, C – existing green areas, D – designed green areas, E – the Wisła river and existing rivers or water areas, F – designed water areas

Source: <http://fotopolska.eu/86262,foto.html>, DoA: 27 August 2011, PM 3:00:32 CET

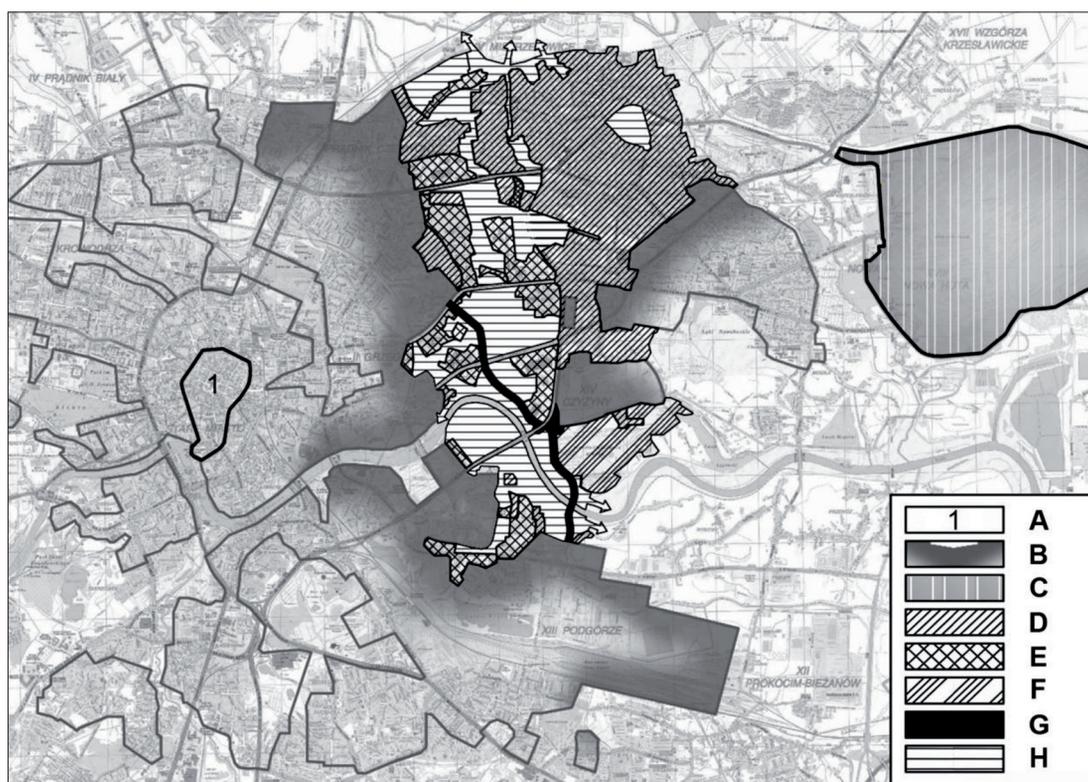


Fig. 2. Contemporary image of the city absorbing green areas

Explanation: A – historical town Center, B – city growth by A. Ptaszycka Master Plan, C – steelworks plant, D – housing development, E – commercial development, F – industrial development, G – road infrastructure, H – green areas

Source: Authors' compilation



Fig. 3. Areas in Kraków covered by land development plans

Explanation: A – existing local development plans, B – approved local development plans, C – local development plans under procedures

Source: <http://planowanie.um.krakow.pl/bpp/>, DoA: 14 September 2011, PM 4:18:16 CET

The biggest ones include: Park Lotników Polskich; Plaza, M1, and Decathlon shopping centres; Polish Aviation Museum; Cracow University of Technology; Academy of Physical Education; Special Economic Zone: Cracow Technological Park; exhibition and congress centre, totalling 36,000 sq. m.; sports hall for 10,000–15,000 spectators; and the construction of Lema street (as an extension of Meissnera street – a project undertaken by the municipal infrastructure and transport department), and residential buildings.

Around the former runway and the Polish Aviation Museum, an aviation culture park is being developed on an area of 320,000 sq. m., at the place which used to be the Rakowice-Czyżyny airfield; until recently, the area was covered by vast green areas of allotment gardens. The project has changed the existing manner of use of the green areas but, following the tradition, the area has been planned as a green leisure zone.

Other sections of the city are also threatened by the loss of naturally green areas, even though this threat is not so explicit there. The up-market district of Wola Justowska too – which used to be very green – has been losing exceptional nature over time, and the green squares, parks and the area around the Kościuszko Mound (Kopiec Kościuszki) are being taken over by single-family residential projects (Fig. 3). Like in other districts of the city, open areas are gradually taken for development purposes because there are no urban planning guidelines in place in Kraków to protect the green areas of the city for future generations. The current Kraków study of the conditions and directions of spatial development is now being adopted. However, emphasis is placed therein on intensifying urban development and urban functions whilst pushing the recreational functions to the city's outskirts with the presumption that such functions will be fulfilled by the entire Kraków's metropolitan area. This idea is unrealistic because areas which still have some "green background" are not usually provided with good transport links with the city itself, and the leisure infrastructure is poor there. On the other hand, places which have traditionally been used for recreational purposes exceeded their capacity in terms of the numbers of tourists a long time ago and are currently finding it difficult to serve the weekend traffic from the Kraków ur-

ban complex. The structure of Kraków should be transformed with due respect for the existing attractions and with an understanding of the need to retain open areas for them to form a network and enable natural functioning of ecosystems. City parks used for Sunday family walks and, daily, by parents with little children are an exception here. Whilst serving city residents, most of them neither have any exceptional natural characteristics nor form networks, and can function independently. However, it would be desirable for new housing estates to be provided with areas which are green not only nominally but in reality as well. Housing estates with names like Gardens of Żabiniec (Ogrody Żabińca), Park Hill (Parkowe Wzgórze) or Green Residential Estate (Zielone osiedle) are green only to the extent required under the law which sets the size of naturally green areas or the distance from the neighbouring house. Oriented at generating a profit, developers would concentrate on the plot the maximum number of residential units (PUM) (7) rather than care for the beautiful view, the quality of public space and recreational areas. They do understand, however, people's need to live in proximity to nature and greenery. With due regard to the ever increasing size of developed areas, intensive construction activities and the pressure to develop land for construction purposes, efforts should be made to offer particular protection to open areas in the neighbourhood of existing urban structures, since they are most exposed to the threat of being absorbed by development projects.

In Kraków, there are many places with exceptional natural attractions. Many of them are protected, and many, too, are to be covered by protection measures in the nearest future (8).

3. Conclusions

The most serious threat is related to extending development projects, and such projects coming closer and closer to environmentally sensitive areas, because disturbance of the ecosystem will irreversibly destroy the existing values. This is what has happened to the pond which neighbours a large shopping centre. Despite the assurances from the centre's owner and the legal clauses in the applicable docu-

ments that the water reservoir would remain intact whilst the centre is in operation, it is now deprived of its original natural values and has become a place at the crossroads where someone would sometimes feed birds. It is impossible to intensively use an area in the immediate proximity of an environmentally protected area. Ensuring non-invasive use of neighbouring areas would be a desirable guideline to be included in the requirements set for the location of projects in the proximity of green zones.

Preserved open areas should be generally available and, when adapted should combine recreational functions with the maintenance of biodiversity of their habitats.

Kraków has exceptional cultural and landscape attractions and quite a big number of open areas with unique characteristics. These should be preserved for future generations to defy fashion trends and political transformations.

Spontaneous development of Kraków, without any wider plans, just in some small parts, is a huge threat to the preservation of existing leisure areas. Because of this, precise guidelines are needed for the intended use of areas neighbouring environmentally sensitive grounds, their type, scale and impact, in order to protect the landscape attractions which are amongst the desired recreational characteristics.

Notes

- (1) Dated to the beginning of the 1990s when the forerunners of modernity in architecture, detached from the tendencies of the time, were the late Wojciech Obtulowicz as well as Romuald Loegler.
- (2) Błonia commons – a triangular large grassland of 480,000 sq. m., entering the historic structure of the city. The contemporary Błonia commons are only a small portion of the former commons which were pastures on the dried polders on the Rudawa River. Today, however, this is one of Europe's largest meadows in a city centre. Since 2000, the Błonia commons have been on the register of heritage sites.
- (3) According to information provided by the Kraków City Hall, Department of Environmen-

tal Protection, there are about 50 areas of ecological use.

- (4) Apart from the traditional line of the Wisła River boulevards, some small developed riverside areas include those along the Rudawa, Prądnik and Dłubnia Rivers within the Dłubniański Landscape Park and the Dłubnia residential estate.
- (5) These include: Planty Krakowskie of 214,200 sq. m.; Planty Dietlowskie of 49,600 sq. m.; Planty Floriana Nowackiego of 26,700 sq. m.; and the following parks: Park Strzelecki of 14,100 sq. m.; Park Tadeusza Kościuszki of 31,800 sq. m.; Park Henryka Jordana of 213,600 sq. m.; Park Krakowski of 51,400 sq. m.; Park Ludwika Decjusza of 95,400 sq. m.; and Park Wojciecha Bednarskiego of 83,900 sq. m.
- (6) Recreational parks which are most popular with Kraków residents include: Park Krowoderski of 80,100 sq. m.; Park Stanisława Wyspiańskiego of 25,700 sq. m.; Park Lotników Polskich of 591,400 sq. m.; Park Dywizjonu 303 of 60,000 sq. m.; Park Tysiąclecia of 112,900 sq. m.; Park Zielony Jar in the Wzgórza Krzesławickie estate, of 87,000 sq. m.; and Park Bieńczycki with the area around the pond, of 230,000 sq. m.
- (7) Intended by the architects (the general architect of Nowa Huta from 1949 was Tadeusz Ptaszycki) and the authorities as a self-sufficient town for the huge Lenin steel plant which then employed 40,000 people and produced about 6.7 million tons of steel per year. (Currently the steel plant is employing about 3,000 workers and its output is about 1.3 million tons of steel a year).
- (8) Usable area of the apartments.

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