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'Close to the city centre, close to the university'. Are there symptoms of studentification in Gdańsk, Poland?

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Abstract. Students are increasingly recognised as important actors of urban change in contemporary cities. The article presents an analysis of incipient studentification processes in Gdańsk. Its general aim is to reveal patterns of students' presence and activity which translate into spatial and socio-economic transformations of a post-socialist city at the level of neighbourhoods. The study consists of a survey on students' residential behaviour, complemented by field and desk research. According to the results, due to the fact that Polish students' housing and lifestyle choices are limited by their low purchasing power, student-dedicated services have a rather negative impact on the quality of urban space. Furthermore, under these conditions studentification may not be regarded as a stimulus to the gentrification process, which is rather driven by hipsters and affluent foreign students.

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1. Introduction

One of the features of knowledge-based societies in the ongoing information age is the growing number of students in academic centres across the globe. While the share of population pursuing higher education varies across cities, this specific group of actors is increasingly impacting urban space (Wolaniuk, 2010). Student-driven processes of change at the local level have been theorised as studentification. A relatively new term, it was coined by D. Smith (2002) in his study of the effects of students' concentration in one of the residential neighbourhoods in Leeds. The term itself denotes a process engendering 'the distinct social, cultural, economic and physical transformations within university towns, which are associated with the seasonal in-migration of H[igher] E[ducation] students' and has clear links to the theory of gentrification (Smith, 2005: 73). Students are thus identified as 'apprentice gentrifiers, i.e. potential future gentrifiers (Smith and Holt, 2007) or even actors of marginal gentrification (cf. Grzeszczak, 2010). However, there are also other social groups of young people invading inner cities, such as young urban professionals and bobos (Short, 1989; Bromley et al. 2005), and therefore it is difficult to separate students' influence on urban space. For instance, the mushrooming of inexpensive vegetarian bars and restaurants, a service typically targeted at students, is not only created by student demand.

Research on studentification across Central Europe has been scarce. Furthermore, most of the scholarly publications which deal specifically with the topic concern Polish case studies, while in other countries the same phenomenon is usually embedded, if not only mentioned, within a broader framework of processes reshaping post-socialist (inner) cities (Bednář et al., 2009; Makkai, Gyüre, 2012). Analysis of studentification processes in Polish academic centres has so far been carried out in only a few of them, namely Poznań (Gaczek et al., 2006), Łódź (Jakóbczyk-Gryszkiewicz, 2013; Jakóbczyk-Gryszkiewicz et al., 2014), Kraków and Gdańsk (Murzyn-Kupisz and Szmytkowska, 2012). In general, the research undertaken has focused on diagnosing students' residential preferences and prevailing symptoms of the increasing student presence within the cities. For instance, all findings point to a dispersion of student accommodation with an inclination for flats in the inner city and adjacent prefabricated housing estates which are both conveniently located and relatively inexpensive. Less attention has been given to changes observed at the neighbourhood level in those areas which exhibit symptoms of even initial studentification. Thus the aim of this article is to identify students' micro-scale residential patterns and the effects of their presence and activity on urban space as well as to provide a reply to the question whether students are becoming significant actors of change in Polish cities, using the example of Gdańsk.

In Poland between 1999 and 2013 the number of higher education schools noted a 58-percent growth, while the number of students during the same period increased from 1.421 million to 1.549 million, with 1.939 million as the maximum value in 2005 (Local Data Bank, 2015-03-30). It was caused by the dramatic change in the educational paths (Frankowski, 2014) – also visible in Pomorskie Voivodship, where Gdansk is located.

Gdańsk has performed the role of the main academic centre in the north of Poland since the end of the Second World War, even though the share of students in the whole population is average, as compared to the other regional cities (Fig. 1). The Gdańsk University of Technology and the Medical University of Gdańsk emerged in 1945 and a year later a Higher School of Education was established, to be transformed in 1970 into the University of Gdańsk - the youngest, yet until now the largest public university in the city (Table 1.). Other public universities include the Academy of Fine Arts and the Academy of Music, both transferred from Sopot in, respectively, 1954 and 1966, as well as Jędrzej Śniadecki University of Physical Education and Sport in Gdańsk, founded in 1969. Private schools have flourished in Gdańsk since the beginning of the transformation and as of 2014 there were 12 of them.

Both the public and private universities actively compete by continuously expanding the range of courses on offer and thus contributing to the growth in the number of students, which in the academic year 2012/2013 totalled 90.3 thousand, i.e. 19.6 percent of Gdańsk's population (*Information on social...*, 2013). Due to the limited capacity of the dormitories and the changing preferences of the

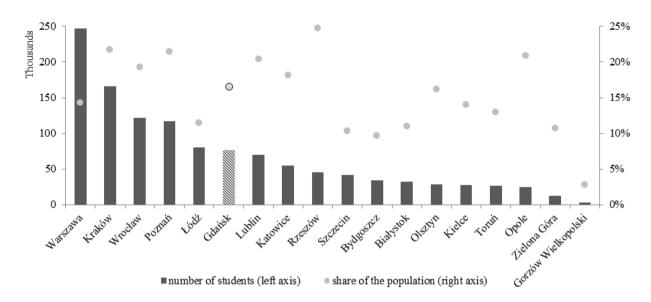


Fig. 1. Number of students and their share in overall populations of Polish regional cities (2014)

Source: Local Data Bank, Central Statistical Office of Poland

Table 1. Five largest public universities in Gdańsk in the academic year 2012/2013

Name of university	Number of students (in thousands)	Location (district)
University of Gdańsk	28.7	Oliwa
Gdańsk University of Technology	25.2	Wrzeszcz
Medical University of Gdańsk	5.4	Wrzeszcz
Jędrzej Śniadecki University of Physical Education and Sport in Gdańsk	3.1	Oliwa
Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk	0.9	historic city centre

Source: Łysoń, P., editor, 2013, Szkoły wyższe i ich finanse w 2012 roku, Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny.

students, who increasingly opt for comfort and independence, the number of student rentals has been on the rise (Grabkowska, 2012). The available student accommodation is most often small studios and two-room flats or larger units with rooms let to students individually, otherwise known as flatshares. More and more extralocal students, usually still dependent on their parents, purchase flats which after graduation may be upsized if the owner decides to stay in Gdańsk or sold if he or she chooses to leave the city. This sector of the property market has already been recognised by developers who openly address their advertisements to students (Photo 1.).

Since the students' impact on the socio-economic and spatial structure of Gdańsk seems worth in-

vestigating, the purpose of this analysis is to find answers to the following two research questions:

- 1. What are their accommodation choices?
- 2. How do they contribute to the socio-spatial changes in Gdańsk at the neighbourhood level?
- 3. Is it justifiable to name them apprentice gentrifiers?

2. Material and research methods

A few research methods have been used for the purpose of the study, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. They include a computer-assisted



Photo 1. New housing estate advertised at the platform of the Gdańsk Przymorze – Uniwersytet stop of the light railway ("Close to the city centre, close to the University of Gdańsk")

Author: Maja Grabkowska (28.02.2014)

telephone survey and field research, complemented by a desk research analysis. All questions were closed-ended, precoded and input into the database.

The survey, financed by the National Science Centre grant, aimed at investigating the socio-demographic characteristics of students owning or renting flats in Gdańsk, their accommodation choices and lifestyle behaviours, was conducted in early 2013. Only the students owning and renting accommodation were included in the sample since students living in their family homes or dormitories have far less influence on the choice of location of their dwellings. The sample comprised 1,100 proportionally selected representatives of three public universities located in three central districts of Gdańsk: the University of Gdańsk (584 students), the Technical University of Gdańsk (499) and the Academy of Fine Arts (17).

Among the respondents, who were mostly undergraduates, almost 90 percent originated from outside Gdańsk and in particular from outside the Pomorskie voivodship, namely Olsztyn, Toruń, Elbląg and Bydgoszcz. Such a distribution conforms with earlier findings indicating the extended migration catchment area of the Tricity universities, which reaches out to the neighbouring voivodships of Warmińsko-mazurskie and Kujawsko-pomorskie (Herbst, 2009).

Foreigners may be underrepresented in the survey, since there were only 5 of them in the sample, whereas in the academic year 2012/2013 alone 175 Erasmus students followed courses at the University of Gdańsk, large numbers of international students, especially Chinese, enrol each year at the Academy of Music and at the Medical University the number in the English-speaking division reaches almost 500 attendees, largely from Scandinavia, the United States, Canada, India and Nigeria. The distinctly better financial situation of the latter group has significant spatial and socio-economic outcomes,

which are discussed in a later section of the paper. Within the sample most of the respondents, even the postgraduates, did not work and over a half of them did not have their own revenues. While only one in five of the surveyed students had a part-time job, over two thirds lived off their parents.

Since 774 students provided their detailed addresses of residence (429 from the University of Gdańsk, 333 from the Gdańsk University of Technology and 12 from the Academy of Fine Arts), it was possible to prepare a map of the spatial distribution of their dwellings. It should be noted that the lack of representatives of several universities in the sample may have resulted in the underestimation of the number of students in some districts. Moreover, a considerable proportion of students, especially from the University of Gdańsk, live in Gdynia and Sopot, because of the very good transport connections and due to the fact that some departments are located in these two cities. Nevertheless, the map shows some general tendencies and therefore it is analysed and discussed in detail further in the text.

In order to examine student-driven changes in the local services inventories of commercial premises were undertaken in 2007 and 2015, partly within a fieldwork course in social geography by students of the University of Gdańsk, with a special focus on selected places in Wrzeszcz. These include Wajdeloty Street in Wrzeszcz Dolny, a local communication axis, recently renovated within an urban regeneration programme and undergoing rapid upgrading, perceived as a site of marginal gentrification. In addition, a desk research analysis of available publications and data sources related to the ongoing student-related processes was applied in order to gather context information.

3. Results

According to the results of the survey, the two predominant criteria for the choice of accommodation are price (44.7%) and proximity to the university (28.6%). The quality of the flat ranked as only the third most important factor (13.1%), followed by public transport accessibility (6.2%). Such issues as proximity to the city centre, layout of the flat, proximity to recreational grounds and safety were

mentioned by fewer than 5% students each. Since the low purchasing power of students is the decisive factor in their accommodation choices, small and inexpensive flats are the most popular options. Consequently, the respondents preferred to rent in blocks of flats (73.4%) rather than townhouses (16.5%) or detached houses (6.7%). Apart from the low price of accommodation in blocks of flats (including relatively low heating costs), they are, in general, conveniently located. In Gdańsk, as in other large Polish cities, both the sizeable socialist housing estates and smaller clusters of blocks of flats are typically situated close to the city centres and within a dense network of public transportation systems.

Over a half of the students rented a 2-room flat with a separate kitchen, twice as popular as 3-room flats and even 5 times more in demand than studios, inhabited by one in ten respondents. Furthermore, a considerable number of students (42%) declared that they did not pay any rent, which indicates that at least some of them may occupy unused flats owned by relatives and in return for the supervision only have to pay for the media. As for the other renters the median monthly payment is the same for accommodation in blocks of flats and detached houses (600 PLN) and considerably higher in townhouses (685 PLN). Considering the fact that prices of dormitory accommodation range between 300 and 440 PLN for a single room, renting outside the campus is still not a budget choice.

Throughout their studies the respondents were relatively immobile - a vast majority of the graduates claimed to have changed accommodation no more than once or twice and were usually motivated to move only because of finding an offer with a better price. Most frequently the housing arrangements consisted of two to four people per flat, usually friends - only about 5% of respondents share the flat with a stranger and twice as many live alone. According to the results of the survey, the students live in quite mixed neighbourhoods. While their neighbours usually represented middle-income (27%) and elderly one-person households (19.5%), very few respondents indicated the presence of either rich or poor people in their immediate surroundings. Furthermore, the share of reported conflicts between the residents of inhabited buildings, mainly related to noisy behaviour and only occasionally to alcohol abuse or family rows, was lower than 10%. These results would point to the lack of full-blown studentification processes, which often entail disagreements with local residents, and especially close neighbours, resulting from differences in age and lifestyles, interests and needs. However, they may also be interpreted along the lines of M. Murzyn-Kupisz and M. Szmytkowska (2012), who attribute the low level of students' conflictuality to their practice of separation of spaces of rest and spaces of play.

Spatial distribution of the respondents' accommodation once again confirms the hypothesis that the proximity to the university is one of the most important values shaping residential behaviour of students. While relatively few respondents, regardless of which

university, live in the peripheries, there is a considerable clustering of students in large housing estates and neighbourhoods in and around the inner city, where the transportation is the most accessible. Consequently, most of the students in the sample lived in Wrzeszcz Górny (14.5%), Wrzeszcz Dolny (8.9%), Oliwa (8.0%) and Przymorze Wielkie (7.6%) (Fig. 2). However, when these results are compared with the total populations of the districts, the most "studentified" districts besides Wrzeszcz Górny and Oliwa are Strzyża, Przymorze Małe and Zaspa-Rozstaje. The seeming concentration of students in the large housing estates of Przymorze Wielkie, Zaspa-Młyniec or Piecki-Migowo is caused only by the greater overall number of residents in these districts, who are also the most aged in Gdańsk.

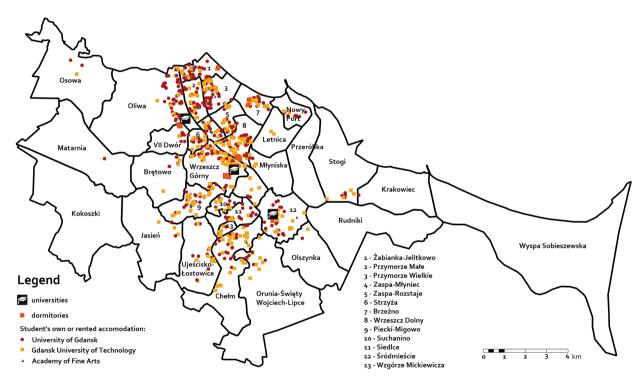


Fig. 2. Spatial distribution of flats rented by students in Gdańsk by districts *Source*: own elaboration based on survey results.

The importance of good transport accessibility is observed also at the intra-district level. Within the sample the most residentially attractive streets are Do Studzienki and Wita Stwosza, both bordering the university campuses. Moreover, students' dwellings are highly concentrated near the main arteries of Gdańsk, such as Kartuska, Jaśkowa Dolina, Po-

morska, or close to the major transport nodes, like the junction of Kołobrzeska Street and Al. Rzeczpospolitej.

Students from the University of Gdańsk dominate in Oliwa, Przymorze and Żabianka. In Zaspa and Brzeźno the number of students is quite similar. Wrzeszcz (both Dolny and Górny), the Main

City, as well as the "upper terrace", were preferred by the students of the Gdańsk University of Technology, although Wrzeszcz Górny, the most studentified district of Gdańsk, was highly attractive also to the students of the University of Gdańsk. Taking into account the addresses from the whole sample, the geocentre of gravity lies exactly in this district. To the residents of Stogi, transport accessibility apparently matters much less than price, which is confirmed by a similar number of students from two different universities. It should be noted that the spatial distribution of student accommodation in Gdańsk is likely to change significantly after the opening of the Pomeranian Metropolitan Railway, due at the end of 2015, which will make outer-city districts, like Jasień, Brętowo and Piecki-Migowo, more accessible and therefore more attractive.

The spatial distribution of student accommodation does not show a higher concentration of students in places where gentrification is observed – only a few individual student dwellings were found in Wajdeloty Street (Wrzeszcz Dolny), Lawendowa, Piwna and Ogarna (the historic Main City). Probably the rent in these places is too expensive and despite their attractive location students rather choose accessible neighbourhoods a little further away from the centre. Interestingly, quite a few of the students' dwellings were located close to the university dormitories. Perhaps the explanation of this phenomenon lies in the students' rootedness - when moving from dormitories to individual flats, they prefer to stay in the same district, close to the already domesticated environment and their established social networks.

In general, studentification in Gdańsk in its present phase barely affects local retail and services. Services typically addressed to students which have appeared in the cityscape within recent years include launderettes, located next to the campus of the University of Gdańsk and in the centre of Wrzeszcz, as well chains of inexpensive fast food restaurants, photocopying and printing facilities situated along the routes most frequented by students. The "epi-centre" of student-driven economic activity is observed in Wrzeszcz Górny, along and around Grunwaldzka Street, in the vicinity of the Gdańsk University of Technology campus. The area abounds in kiosks, 24/7 shops, shot bars, photocopy booths,

kebab shops, pizzerias and milk bars which target mostly, although not exclusively, students. Since it is has optimal transport accessibility, with a major communication node at the crossing of Grunwaldz-ka/Do Studzienki streets, it is frequented by a large number of passersby, among whom students are predominant customers. A quite different situation takes place around the campus of the University of Gdańsk, relatively remote from the city centre and situated within a much less dense urban structure, neither of which foster "student" services.

The fundamental cause of the lack of a more evident student-driven specialisation of the local economy is the low purchasing power of this consumer group. Apart from a preference for cheap goods and services, students usually apply all sorts of economisation strategies - for instance, they buy alcohol in low-cost supermarkets and stay in rather than go out and spend money in pubs and bars. This again conforms to the previously cited observations of Murzyn-Kupisz and Szmytkowska (2012), who indicate that 'as many as 70 percent of the surveyed students in both agglomerations [i.e. Cracow and Tricity] prepare their meals by themselves, which is mainly caused by financial limitations'. It could also be an explanation for clustering of the surveyed renters close to dormitories - the social life is less expensive in private than in public space.

For similar reasons, students' impact as buyers on the real estate market is at present marginal, with the exception of foreign students, whose activity may already have an effect on the prices of high-standard flats. For instance the typically welloff students of the English-speaking division at the Medical University of Gdańsk can afford to rent high-standard apartments in more prestigious locations than their Polish counterparts. In Gdańsk there are at least three neighbourhoods where students from overseas are overrepresented: the Aniolki district, where the medical university is situated, the Lastadia Street within the historic city centre and the Garnizon estate in Wrzeszcz Górny (Photo 2.). These primary results call for further research since they suggest distinct patterns of residential choices made by international students, which appear to vary distinctly from those revealed by existing studies conducted in larger urban centres (e.g. see Collins, 2010 for evidence on the development of large low-quality apartment complexes targeted at Asian students in Auckland). As mentioned in the introduction, one novelty is the flats in new housing developments marketed to students – small and therefore relatively low-priced and at the same

time conveniently located (Photo 2.). Even if at the moment they may be considered a niche, their appearance on the market holds a potential for expansion in future.





Photo 2. Apartment buildings at the Lastadia (left) and Garnizon (right) estate inhabited by numerous foreign students *Author*: Maja Grabkowska (08.03.2014)

The impression that some areas of Gdańsk are studentified may be evoked by other urban actors responsible for gentrification of urban space. These are usually young and middle-aged representatives of the middle class - also leading urbanite lifestyles but having higher purchasing power than students. Perhaps the notion of "hipsterisation" of urban space is more applicable here. Such is the case of Wajdeloty Street in Wrzeszcz Dolny, which between 2013 and 2015 underwent a metamorphosis following a renovation and upgrading of the technical infrastructure co-financed through EU funds. Cutting through a dense housing development which consists mostly of eclectic townhouses dating from the end of the 19th century, for the last decades the street suffered from dilapidation. The buildings were in poor technical condition and the commercial premises located on the ground floors were often vacant despite the quite central location. Today, while the transformation is still ongoing, the change in the street's profile is already evident as several traditional local services have been replaced by stylishly designed establishments, such as a vegan cafe-patisserie, a vegan bar, a small pub with a wide range of craft beers, a trendy hair salon and a noodle bar (Fig. 3).

Even though Wajdeloty has been increasingly regarded as a student hotspot, there are relatively

few student dwellings in the immediate neighbourhood. This happens probably due to the students' reluctance towards renting in townhouses. However, their increased presence and activity has added to the recent spatial and economic changes. Especially the roundabout in the eastern part of the street is likely to become a fashionable hipster hangout, like Zbawiciela Square in Warsaw (Intersection: The Warsaw Way, 2013). A one-day street festival organised by a cultural city institution in June 2014 has already proved the capacity of this spot, and at the same time, triggered a conflict with the local inhabitants, unused to noisy crowds. Nevertheless, the high-standard quality of the services differentiates the unfolding processes from the ones observed in the Grunwaldzka/Do Studzienki area. It may be argued that while the latter stand for de-aesthetisation through studentification, the former is rather gentrification through hipsterisation and the students' contribution to this type of upgrading is minimal.

4. Conclusions

The results of the research on the spatial distribution of rented student accommodation in Gdańsk confirmed observations from the previous studies

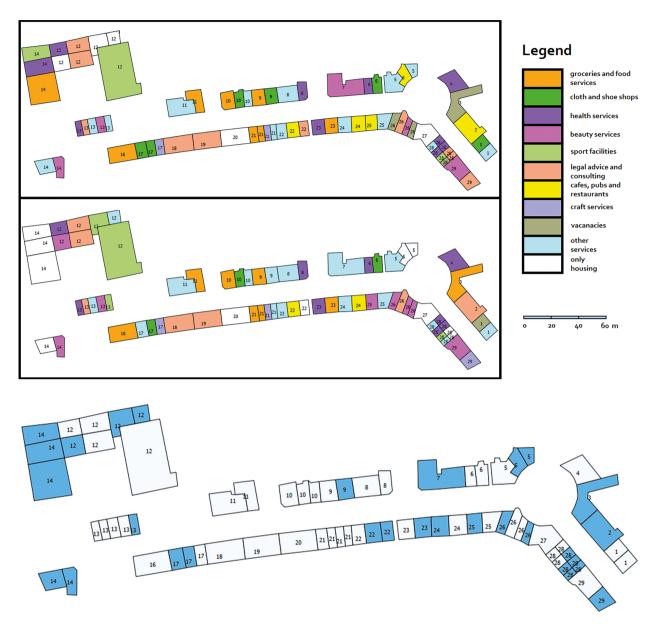


Fig. 3. Inventory of commercial premises at Wajdeloty Street in 2007 and 2015 (top) and the change (bottom) *Source*: own elaboration based on field research.

of similar processes in other Polish cities. The key factors influencing students' residential choices are price and convenient location of the flat. There is a strong preference for blocks of flats located close to the university, although the accessibility is of higher importance than the physical distance. This may be viewed as a characteristic specific to CEE cities, where large housing estates are typically located quite centrally. At the level of the neighbourhood the flats situated near transport nodes and communication axes are considered to be the most attractive places to live. Relatively few students decide to

buy flats, with the exception of foreigners, especially students of the Medical University of Gdańsk who are able to afford high-standard apartments in prestigious new housing estates. They are, however, isolated cases

Due to the students' dispersion and low mobility, their impact on urban space is quite weak and translates into a proliferation of poor-quality food services and photocopying facilities in the vicinity of the campuses, increasing the existing spatial disorder. Therefore, it may be stated that "student" services corrupt urban space, unless they are con-

nected to hipsterisation and only then may they have the gentrification effect. The generally low purchasing power of students prevents them from "hipster" behaviour, so they are not prone to becoming pioneers of gentrification, unlike their counterparts in Western Europe. Also the declared low conflictuality with local inhabitants and the lack of a dynamic expansion of the student-dedicated services prove that the studentification processes in Gdańsk differ from those observed in cities in the West. It would be recommended that future research investigates other actors of urban change, more capable of becoming the pioneers of gentrification, namely hipsters and foreign students.

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