

Analysis of the local communities focused around improving the quality of urban space on the example of activities in public space and cultural activities in Bytom.

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Abstract

Bytom is a polish, post-industrial city which is looking for a new vision of the future. City dwellers are between a history related to coal and new challenges. It is not easy for them to understand that industry is a thing of the past and you need to look for yourself and your identity again. Groups of social leaders are trying to show a different picture of the city and engage more and more people to act for the city. Building the city's identity and new image are basic ideas. However, in the era of global discussion about climate change and the technologization of city life, it becomes important to become aware of the role of greenery and community. In the article I want to show how Bytom social activists promote and animate the local community in the spirit of collectivism and improving the quality of life in the city.

The assumption of the described groups was the maximum involvement of residents in activities to improve the space in Bytom. In the article I want to show what tools they used and what effects they obtained. Particularly important here are activities that contribute to making the community aware of the role of greenery and pedestrian space.

The effects of social activities show more clearly how important are strong communities opposing local authorities and supporting good investment decisions. Analysis of the activities of social groups showed how important local leaders play and how various methods and tools used by them gave measurable effects in the city space. The bottom-up activity helped to understand the advantages of a pedestrian city, which is Bytom, and to show how little it takes for the city to gain a new image.

Keywords

Communities, resilient cities, space changes

1. Introduction

Bytom has been close to me since my high school days, when I took part in various, extracurricular activities. Going out into the urban space with art has taught me to be sensitive to what is happening in the city and the impact of cultural activities involving residents on the lives of residents. During our studies, we decided to live in Bytom and that was when my social activity in the public space began. As an architects and urban planner, we believe in the inhabitants of Bytom and their potential in building a vibrant city, open full of initiatives.

The decision to choose the research topic is the result of our own observations of the changes that are currently taking place in Bytom. The activities of our organizations and other social groups showed us how long we have come in 5 years. In our opinion, the increase in activity resulted from the frustration at the lack of activity of local authorities in building strong communities among the inhabitants. The increase in activity resulted also from the decision of the European Union to support the revitalization of the city with additional funds. This decision was a great opportunity for us to build something common. We believed that by organizing with other social activists, we would build a revitalization program that would serve everyone and that the authorities of Bytom would accept our point of view with openness. Meanwhile, accused of trying to appropriate a large amount of money, we decided to build a group of activists who would take on the burden of education and activities related to the revitalization process in opposition to officials. The word revitalization was changed in different ways and there were myths about what the president will build with EU money.

Bytom achieved worse and worse results in diagnosing social problems, including unemployment. This situation plunged the city and in the absence of a clear vision of the city authorities and inactivity in the area of gaining real regional support, signs of the city's decline were visible. There was an opinion all over Poland about the city collapsing through the mines. Inside, there was a struggle with coal concerns about the destruction of housing and attempts to further expand coal mining despite the enormous consequences in the form of mining damage. Meanwhile, the media circulated photos of collapsed apartment buildings and devastated city districts. During the conference, we repeatedly showed photos of Art Nouveau, multi-story tenement houses in the city center to show the value of our culture. The image was so bad that our interviewees were surprised by the photos of the buildings of our schools and institutions, which bear witness to our rich cultural, architectural and urban history. The frustration of social activists slowly turned into a willingness to act to change the image and develop ideas to change the difficult situation of the city.

The analysis of social activities in the period 2015-2020 was based on research questions:

- Were the events organized by local communities important in the city's transformation?
- Is the activity of city leaders visible and tangible in the urban fabric? What activities have a direct impact on municipal investments?
- To what extent is Bytom a city resistant to changes?
- What role do strong communities play in building a resilient city, supporting good investment decisions?
- What is the importance of city history in building a resilient city?

2. A city with challenges

2.1 City history

The history of the city is very important for the inhabitants of Bytom and their activities in the city space. References to medieval history can be found in research initiatives. Organized research walks are of the nature of historical walks, which attract residents and enthusiasts like magnesium. This form of engagement allows engaged users of urban space to join the discussion about the city. During the discussion about the potential Bytom there is a feeling of pride in the rich history of the city.

Bytom received city rights in 1254. At that time, the characteristic urban planning of the city with the market square in the center took shape, which today is the main urban skeleton of the center of Bytom.

Historically, Bytom underwent various ups and downs, and it experienced the greatest urban boom at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries under the German banner, when the industrial city needed to provide a living for workers from nearby mines, steel mills and factories.

Now, beautiful tenement houses and buildings of municipal institutions are the most appreciated value of Bytom. The technical condition of the infrastructure is one of the factors hindering the involvement of residents in talks about the future of the city. Older people and people interested in the history of the city often refer to the times of its development and find it difficult to cope with the current problems in the city space.

2.2 Post-industrial city

After the Second World War, the whole of Silesia became the driving force behind the extension of Warsaw and beyond. At the same time, post-German industrial plants were still modern to ensure a steady income, and, robbed of cultural values by the Soviet system, they destroyed the attachment to the culture of the region. Bytom was a center teeming with life, where one had to live in order to achieve a high social and material status.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bytom was slowly losing its value, which was influenced by many circumstances, including Closing unprofitable mines without any idea of ensuring a future for employees of these industrial plants. In the course of social research, the topic of losing a job in a mine and steelworks appeared many times as the beginning of a difficult situation. Many residents of Bytom, telling their stories, pointed out that the moment of losing their job was the beginning of their personal decline. The situation was aggravated by the lack of an alternative for these people, but also by the destruction of the history of the places where they grew up, built their values and established social relationships. The demolition of the industrial infrastructure for the workers of these industrial plants was associated with enormous emotional losses. People were losing something that gave them a sense of belonging and importance, and they got nothing in return to deal with the loss. From a psychological point of view, workers in industrial plants were rejected, deemed unimportant, which for many people ended up with a patch of "pathology" poisoning the city.

2.3 Shrinking city

Bytom is a shrinking city (Kantor-Pietraga and others 2014). The city policy in Bytom has for many years avoided social problems resulting from economic and social changes that took place through the gradual phasing out of the coal industry in Poland. According to doctor Robert Krzysztofik (2014) the process of rolling up Bytom was initiated by the decision to build the first railway line in Katowice, and not in Bytom at the beginning of the 19th century. It was a difficult to understand decision of the city's authorities, especially because Bytom was then the most important urban center in the region, and Katowice was still a village (now the capital of the province). Since the 1990s, the city has been gradually depopulating, which has a direct impact on the degradation of public space, architecture and difficulties in involving local communities.

Difficulties in engaging the local community to cooperate were often manifested by sentimentalism about the city's former glory. At each meeting with the residents, the following needs were present, regardless of the topic being discussed:

- Renovation of historic tenement houses and buildings of municipal institutions,
- demolition of buildings in poor technical condition,

- Tidying up ruins in public space,
- In the background were matters related to the aesthetics and image of the city.

2.4. Revitalization

Bytom has qualified to the areas defined as areas of social, economic, spatial and environmental degradation. Therefore, from 2015, intensive revitalization activities were launched, in which the social activists played the main and decisive role. (link 1)

Before, information about the funds granted to the city was widely reported in the media (link 2), and at the same time the NGO Office began networking activities with similar interests (link 3). The result of these networking activities was the creation of a group under the slogan of Monuments. The group included people interested in the city's architecture and raising the standard of living in Bytom. In the context of social activities, all formal barriers were a big barrier. For this reason, the group invited to its meetings various officials, including the Conservator of Monuments, Building Inspector, Mayor of Towns responsible for municipal investments and other officials. The aim of the meetings was to work out the direction of change and a way to convince reluctant residents to act for the city. At that time, the issue of revitalization emerged, and the first group was invited to write out ideas for revitalization activities. At that time, there was also a big discrepancy between the expectations of local leaders and officials, for whom it was a difficult and unnecessary job. Entering Bytom on the list of cities that are to blaze trails across the country was for some a chance for a fresh start, and for others a problem.

Anxiety and curiosity caused the group to establish an association called Miasto Dla Mieszkańców Bytom (eng. City for habitants Bytom in the text MDM) and actively participate in the process of revitalizing the city. Members of the association began to build a network of contacts with representatives of the ministry and voivodship so as to show the willingness to work together, not to notice or not to notice the representatives of the city hall. The emerging conflict with city officials caused the social activists to start educational and engaging activities on their own. At that time, social work seemed redundant, but with time the effects of NGOs' activities were incorporated into the Municipal Revitalization Program. The initiative group operating in the MDM association has repeatedly reported its willingness to cooperate in developing a city revitalization strategy. However, many public activities were made known to them after the fact or not at all. That is why it was decided to build its own recovery program for the city and involve residents and experts from many fields in its creation. It is worth mentioning that the initiatives gained recognition in the Ministry and Marshal's Office, which resulted in support in the organization of many events. The support of higher institutions made it possible to build a platform for cooperation with many non-governmental organizations from all over Poland, and as a result gave strength to oppose the policy of local authorities.

3. Social impact on municipal investments

The first meeting concerning the city space was the debate on the Transfer Center - an investment planned by officials. (Fig. 1). The investment seemed to be oversized and not appropriate in the context of the residents' needs. While the project was the reason for organizing the meeting, the main aim of the event was to start a discussion and transport in the city in the context of city and regional plans.

As a result of the discussion, at the beginning the investment was suspended in its original form and new works were started on the creation of a system integrated with regional investments. It was also important to talk about the problems with the location of many stations, including the train, bus and tram stations, which were not integrated with each other. Currently, there is still a debate about

improving the quality of urban transport and its improvement in the context of the location of public facilities and pedestrian traffic in the city.

The next stage of social activities was joining the debate on the city's revitalization strategy and the development of the Municipal Revitalization Program. Local authorities were not willing to co-plan municipal investments with community activist. Due to the great resistance and reluctance to implement initiatives focused on broad education of Bytom's residents in the field of Revitalization, members of the association decided to organize a large event combining social animation with education and information on Revitalization, called Re-Bytom (Fig. 2). The patronage over the event was taken by the Ministry of Investment and Development and the Marshal of the Silesian Voivodeship. The whole project involved the organization of workshops in the city space, workshops with property managers and a scientific conference. The organization of the event was one of the most difficult activities of social activists due to the difficulties that arose on the part of the city hall and city mayors. However, the event was attended by over 300 people, including representatives of neighboring cities, officials, scientists and social activists. It was the first event on this subject in Region I that allowed many people to learn about the provisions of the act and the social point of view of revitalization. The program of the scientific conference will include threads regarding the methods and tools of involving residents in the revitalization processes.



Figure 1. Debate on the Transfer Center. Source: M. Jasiński



Figure 2. Information about event Re-Bytom. Source: P. Jakoweńko

Due to the effect caused by the event and positive opinions on the substantive knowledge of the organizers, the officials decided to involve the association in the development of strategic documents. The MDM Association received an order to develop a Diagnosis of the Revitalization Sub-area - Rozbark, which was one of several diagnoses needed to develop a municipal document. When starting work on the diagnosis, the representatives of the association did not have access to any municipal data regarding the needs of the district's inhabitants, nor any data on the economic and social situation. Therefore, planned and conducted meetings with municipal social institutions, the police, the prosecutor's office and institutions responsible for municipal property. These meetings allowed for the development of the direction of research on the needs of residents, but also showed the state of the city's preparations for transformation. With the support of the researchers, interviews were conducted among the inhabitants, which revealed many years of neglect in the social, infrastructural and educational spheres. The researchers also included city planners and architects who conducted workshops with residents and children of local schools using models (Fig. 3). The developed diagnosis was included in the diagnostic documentation and became the basis for the development of the Municipal Revitalization Program. (link 4)



Figure 3. Workshops with children in the Rozbark district. Source: G. Pronobis

Parallel to the activities directly related to the planned revitalization of the city, social activists responded to spatial problems by involving their neighbors in joint activities. An example here is the initiative concerning the Szynol Park. The districts: Downtown and Rozbark lack greenery that would meet the need for access to recreational and green areas. In April 2015, a group of Bytom residents organized the cleaning of a fragment of the Rozbark district (the district is adjacent to Downtown) (link 5). The action was aimed at drawing attention to the potential of wastelands called by the local community Szynol. For many, it is a place that functions as a park, but is not developed. During the action, this place was "nobody's" (Fig. 4). After the media campaign, the residents presented the Szynola development plan for the City Park. Thanks to the revitalization process in the first stage of investment works in Szynol, the area was rebuilt and now serves as a public space (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. Szynol Park before revitalisation. Source: Miasto dla Mieszkańców, 04.2015



Figure 5. Szynol Park after revitalisation. Source: S. Widzisz-Pronobis, 09.2020

Another project related to green spaces is an initiative of the inhabitants of Katowicka Street. The residents of this street organized themselves around the street renovation carried out by Koleje Śląskie (regional investment). On the wave of joint action, they decided to submit the project of the Green Zone of Katowicka Street to the Civic Budget (fig. 6). Architects from Pronobis Studio (authors of the article) helped them to design and prepare the budget. The project did not win a public vote, but received funding from a different financial pool. The inhabitants of Miarka Street are also struggling with a similar problem related to the lack of greenery, as they had previously formed an initiative group. Both streets are important communication routes, but Miarka Street is a national road. Due to a different rank, the inhabitants of Miarka Street did not receive support for their ideas for introducing greenery into the street space.



Figure 6. Promotional poster of the Green Zone project. Source: The initiative of Katowicka Street

The idea of greening the city resulted in the action of planting plants in pots at the BCK building in Downtown (Fig. 7). Showing the need to care for the greenery of the city, we provoked changes in the renovation plans of this institution. Currently, the pots are not only planted with vegetation, but also as part of the Mozaika campaign, they are decorated with decorations made by the residents of Bytom (Fig. 8).



Figure 7. The action of planting plants in pots at the BCK 09.2016. Source: M. Jasiński



Figure 8. Mosaics on pots at BCK Bytom 09.2020. Source: BCK

An important factor in increasing involvement in neighborhood activities was the project implemented by the Mickiewicz Street Initiative, which with time became a role model for the inhabitants of other streets. The inhabitants of this street decided to take it upon themselves to find solutions to the problems: arranging car parking, heavy traffic, arranging greenery on the street, improving the quality of the street space and courtyards. The initiative group involved its neighbors to take care of their neighborhood and designed a new street space together with experts. The concept was consulted with the residents during neighborhood picnics and submitted to the first edition of the Bytom Civic Budget. It used to be problematic street for “hoodlums”, now an interesting place with new shopping and cultural points.

Showing the pedestrian potential of the central parts of the city has become the starting point for the initiatives of several organizations. Pedestrian Bytom is a group of residents showing the potential of the city, but also absurdities in public space that make it difficult for pedestrians to move around the city. Among the more interesting initiatives was the visualization of radical changes in two important intersections in the center of Bytom. Wolskiego Square (fig. 9) and the intersection of Chrobrego and Piłsudskiego Streets (fig. 10), in the vision of the portal's creators, have become city salons where pedestrians are safe. These visions can be treated as a provocation and started a discussion in which pedestrian traffic is a priority, and not only a side effect of planned road investments.



Figure 9. Vision of a pedestrian square on Wolski Square. Source: D. Kazmierczak, Pieszy Bytom



Figure 10. Vision of a pedestrian square at the intersection of Chrobrego and Piłsudskiego Streets. Source: D. Kazmierczak, Pieszy Bytom

The initiated discussion on safety in the city repeatedly touched the city promenade, which in 2018 was a standard road and parking lot. Due to the start of design work on Dworcowa Street, the association started researching the needs of the users of this space (Fig. 11). Among the basic needs is the improvement of the street's image and the improvement of pedestrian safety. In order to develop the discussion on the needs of the city residents in terms of public space, the WSZA association organized workshops for high school students, during which they were to empathize with the role of people with disabilities (Fig. 12). Their conclusions directly influenced the shape of the street reconstruction project, but also started a discussion on the removal of architectural barriers in the city.



Figure 11. Workshops with students about Dworcowa Street. Source: S. Widzisz-Pronobis

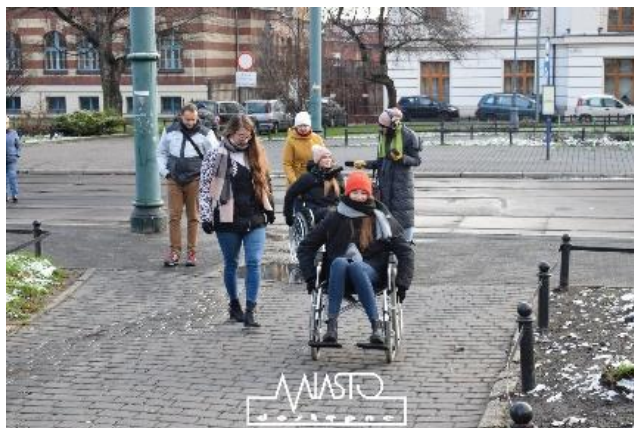


Figure 12. Research walk, audit of public space with students. Source: G. Pronobis

4. Events focused on improving the city’s image and building a community

At a time when more and more information in the media about subsequent demolitions and social problems in Bytom, a group of women decided to do something to show that Bytom is doing well. The upcoming women's festival was a pretense to organize an event that will bring a smile to the faces of the inhabitants of Bytom. Running on high heels on the paved city square was to show the problem faced by women walking on the Market Square on a daily basis (Fig. 13). The event gave an additional socio-spatial dimension to women in urban space and the absence of integration events.

The success of the running event meant that the members of the Beautiful Side of the City Association organized another event in the city space. The main message of the Bytom Sznyt project was to show the city's fashion history. The event included a fashion show with a catwalk located along Rycerska Street at the Market Square (Fig. 14). Additionally, there was an exhibition of works by local artists. The show attracted a very large audience and showed potential among young and creative people who prepared outfits for the models.

In addition to the described cultural events in the city space, a group of women also organized projects related to the history of the city, but all their activities were aimed at building a community around matters important to Bytom. Both the promotion and the social dialogue were moderated on social networks, which meant that the recipients were both residents of Downtown and other parts of the city. An interesting graphic form and a positive tone attracted the media and interested in the potential of Bytom.



Figure 13. Run on high heels “High heels versus pavement”. Source: E. Zielińska



Figure 14. Bytomski sznyt in the public space. Source: E. Zielińska

Clothes and flower exchangers.

The Free Association of Green Artists (WSZA) organized a clothes exchange called SWAP PARTY as a social event in the fall of 2019 (Fig. 15). The event was attended by over 40 people and aroused great interest among residents and passers-by. The great interest in the next edition of the event was a success. Unsold clothes were donated to charity, which also had a positive impact among the project participants. On the wave of the success of this form of social involvement, in the summer of 2020, the Beautiful Side of the City association organized a plant exchanger called Bytom Flowerbed. The project has both ecological and historical overtones. As part of the event, various workshops and animation activities for children and adults are held. (Fig. 16)



Figure 15. Swap Party. Source: G. Pronobis



Figure 16. Flowerbed in Bytom. Source: Piękna Strona Miasta

5. Strong communities build the city’s resilience

Resilience is "the ability of a system to be disturbed and maintain its function and control" (Gunderson & Holling, 2001). The meetings organized by the MDM Association attracted people who care about the city's development and who often repeated that Bytom was unlucky and that we would fall. Economic

analyses prepared by the members of the Association showed that the city must go bankrupt within a few years. Meanwhile, in 2020 it may not be perfect, but the city has not gone bankrupt, but is slowly changing its image. It is difficult to talk about development, but you can say that the city is changing direction. As M. Polese writes [M. Polese 2010] the fact that the city does not achieve high growth and does not change direction immediately, does not mean that it is not a resilient city and has no chance for a new future. On the road to resilience, the big obstacle mentioned by M. Polese is the still living carbon culture. "Invasive rentier syndrome" [Polese 2009, Polese and Shearmur 2006] is visible in every debate on new directions in which Bytom should go in order to return to the development path. In the context of the search for a new development path, it seems interesting to compare the changes in Bytom with the processes that took place in Boston. As the American example of Glaeser [2005] describes, Boston has become an example of a city that is constantly being rediscovered in the face of technological changes. One analysis shows that the key to success was the residents who created the adhesive that attracted new residents. Mining damages and the economic situation of the city are topics that often hinder dialogue with residents who cannot imagine another world. That is why all activities in the city space had a positive impact with a clear message about the city's potential. This message is important because all the needs research showed that the inner image of the city is the worst. Residents lost hope of improving the quality of life in the city. The residents met during the events often talked about burnout and discouragement to act for the city.

The initial frustration resulting from the lack of a social dialogue on the revitalization of the city initiated the urban movement focused on the fight to improve the quality of urban space. The analyzes of civil involvement in Poland by Anna Domaradzka (2010) show a division into various motives that are equally important and allow for building a strong community. Domaradzka also pointed out that nowadays there is an increase in the need to create new social ties, which are manifested in various forms of social activity. The development of the network of connections allowed for the exchange of previously unannounced problems and needs that various neighborhood groups had (U. Beck 2002). Common values and the idea of restoring the former beauty of the city meant that many people decided to find time for social activity. It was also no less important that the bonds that were being built brought other people from the circles of friends closer to a common cause. As D. McAdam (2003) noted, it was necessary to build a network and ideological compatibility to notice real changes in the public space within a few years.

Referring to the example of Boston [Glaeser, 2005], the activities of non-governmental organizations in Bytom resemble those American struggles with building common values and beliefs. The undertaken activities became a seat for several new residents who, indicating the reason for moving to Bytom [from Warsaw, Katowice], indicated the residents' involvement in urban matters and their determination in the fight for the quality of urban space. This is, of course, unrepresentative for drawing conclusions about the reasons for changing the place of residence and choosing a city with many social and economic problems. However, the attraction process is visible in the circle of acquaintances of people most involved in urban life. Building a common identity is also a way to build a strong community focused on city renewal. (Maretto & Scardign, 2014)

6. Conclusions

The importance of strong local communities is particularly evident in crisis situations, when local authorities are not able to react quickly to difficult situations.

The most important factor supporting social activists was strengthening the intellectual capital of the inhabitants. The role of experts and supra-local projects aimed at building awareness of changes that may affect cities is important. Besides, in order to strengthen the local community, it must be equipped with methods and tools to react to changes independently.

Building supra-regional networks serves the exchange of knowledge and experience. In building strong communities, the role of nationwide organizations providing expert knowledge, access to proven operating tools and exchange of experiences is important.

The importance of social groups can be examined by analyzing their impact on the city scale, not only on the scale of the neighborhood space.

Local authorities should involve the local community in decision-making processes (strategic and investment) in order to avoid conflicts and strengthen the residents' sense of identity. Conducting Social Investment Processes is a challenge throughout Poland, but the exchange of experiences of local authorities in many cities, e.g. in the URBACT Model Urban Revitalization project, allows to improve attitudes towards this form of democracy. Each city should develop its own path of social dialogue and treat it as a practice in developing a continuous dialogue about the city.

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Links:

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