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## Problems on the conceptualization of the contemporary city

**Abstract:** The article presents the problems connected with the conceptualization of the contemporary city. These problems result, among other things, from the variability of a city as a research subject and the complexity of urban studies. The new face of the city is formed by six co-occurring trends: the restructuring of the urban economic base, the formation of a global system of world cities, a radical change in urban spatial patterns, changes in the urban social structure, uncontrolled urban sprawl, and changes in the visual form of urban reality. Radical changes in urban studies are determined by three factors: the need to work out new conceptualizations and analytical tools, criticism and revision of the current knowledge as well as generational changes in the community of researchers. A characteristic feature and a development factor of urban studies is the plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches. Model approaches aim at the elimination or alleviation of the negative symptoms of urbanization at the turn of 21st century.

**Key words:** city, conceptualization, theory, methodologies, models

### Introduction

It is widely believed that the existence of cities is a distinctive trait of civilization. Since the beginning, the process of their development has been accompanied by the discourse concerning the city itself, i. e. what H. Paetzold (1996) calls the philosophy of the city which concentrates on common aspects of urban space and what E. Rewers (2005) calls the identity of the city, i. e. what it really “is” and what is “should be”. One may say that this type of reflection is as old as the city itself.

This “double” thinking determines our concept of the city, making it as if it was “spread” between the two types of conceptualization of this phenomenon. On one hand the city is considered to be a real unit, a specific thing existing here and now, being the subject of our recognition which is credited with special features, relation and processes on the basis of research and, on the other hand, using the cultural anthropology and philosophical terminology, it can be discussed as a certain idea, value or metaphor for that matter.

This first line of research is expressed in an attempt to identify the features or the urban criteria which make it possible to differentiate the city from other types of settlements. These attempts usually lead to providing various universal definitions of the city, i. e. such relating to all cities in time and space, and allow

to select them as a distinctive way of settlement, or such characterizing the cities of the specified developmental stage or region.

The second line of research is based on the assumption that the city is something more than the real body. It constitutes a certain idea or the conception of curing the civilization problems or the ideal model of social community structure of its inhabitants. Different concepts of the city serve as the example, depicting it as the ideal of social organization, a model representation of the space where people coexist together, the ideal place where people and space create a perfect unity or the embodiment of growth and which offers a lot of convenience otherwise unavailable (cf. Jałowiecki, Szczepański 2006). Various conceptual elements are included in this kind of thinking: idealization, mythologization, metaphors, allegories etc.

The area between these two lines of research provides the opportunity for discussion which has been present in different works of human thought. The above-mentioned conceptualizations overlap at times so that it is sometimes unclear whether we refer to the city as a real place defining what it is, or to a certain projection specifying what it should be like. The differentiation between theory and practical solutions is similar in difficulty. All of this proves the complexity of the subject under discussion.

In order to discuss it further it is essential to specify the term 'conceptualization'. In this article it has a two-fold meaning: 1) as the processing of cognitive intuition into concepts and 2) as organizing the concepts of cognitive processes. These solutions can be treated as subsequent stages of the conceptualization of the tested phenomenon or two ways of concept learning of the tested reality. In the first case, a cognitive intuition can be, similarly to a metaphor (cf. Chojnicki 2003), a trope, a rhetorical figure which are used to name and enable to organize the concepts in the following stage into a more or less consistent group or theoretical concept. A transition from understanding the city as an organism by F. Ratzl to models presenting the stages of the city growth or a transition from the vision of the city as the way of life defined by R.E. Park to the models of Chicago school of social ecology can serve as examples. They indicate that the primary cognitive intuition can affect its own theories and models. The second method of conceptualization is related more or less expressly to a defined theoretical concept, which introduces a certain conceptual schema that serve to describe and explain the tested phenomenon. In the following article the reflection on the conceptualization of the contemporary city will refer to both these concepts.

## **Problems connected with defining the concept of the contemporary city as a real phenomenon and the subject of empirical research**

The discussions concerning this subject **take a significant amount of risk**. The problem is even harder as it relates to the phenomenon and a field of knowledge which are most variable and unpredictable and these are:

1. the contemporary city which is continuously changing and this fact creates the difficulties in its conceptualization as a real object,
2. modern urban studies which are subject to radical changes today and which are diversified on various levels of analysis: issues, theory, philosophical and methodological orientation and the research methods.

All these facts create a new situation in urban studies based on three planes: cognitive, theoretical and methodological.

It is worth emphasizing that the new face of cities was being created at the second half of the 20th century. Just as industrialization left an imprint on the 19<sup>th</sup> century city, the postindustrial period cause the meaningful changes in the character and structure of the contemporary city called by many scholars a postindustrial city. All in all one can distinguish six trends which collectively shape the new face of the city. These include:

1. restructuring of the urban economic base which caused the radical change in the organization and production technology and consequently the change in the social and spatial division of labor,
2. the formation of a global system of world cities – its expanding impact brings more and more globality to the urban backroom raising its capital and providing work,
3. radical restructuring of urban patterns which makes the spatial planning of the postindustrial city differ significantly from the city structure at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,
4. changes in the urban social structure, manifested in the intensification of fragmentation, segregation and polarization processes, causing the diversity of inhabitants' life and the growing disparity of wealth.
5. uncontrolled urban "sprawl", „cancer-like", which causes growing difficulties in the city management by local authorities and intensification of social conflicts as a result of the different development of urban areas and the division into good and bad districts,
6. radical changes in the visual form of urban reality, that is in the visual culture of the city.

The difficulties in the overall reconstruction of the contemporary city image are expressed by the influx of new notions concerning this phenomenon by adding another identifying adjectives such as: a postmodern city (Rembowska2008), a kinetic city or post-polis (Rewers 2005), an information city (Castells 1998), an innovative city (Domański 2000), a global city (Sassen 1991), electropolis etc.

Together with these changes and in connection with them there is a change in the theoretical basis of urban studies which take place under the influence of different factors affecting one another such as:

1. **blurring the disciplinary boundaries,**
2. expansion and fragmentation of the studies researching the contemporary city,
3. growing impact of the radical structuralistic, humanist and postmodernist orientations which is **expressed in different types of turns:** cultural, spatial, political and economic, postmodernist, linguistic etc.,
4. perception of the contemporary city as a system filled with tension and conflicts.

Awareness of these changes make researchers look for new descriptive and urban phenomena defining tools as well as taking the vast achievement of social and humanist studies under consideration. On one hand a lot of traditional concepts have lost its power (e. g. theory of urban economic base, concepts of Chicago school, functional approaches), and on the other hand new theoretical concepts connected with new methodology and research issues have appeared.

At the turn of the **centuries** we could observe the changes in the methodological component of the research. They were manifested, among others, in the form of:

1. dynamic growth of new orientations and methodological approaches (e. g. feminist or postmodernist),
2. aggravation of methodological conflicts between proponents of different models and philosophical and methodological orientations,

As a result, urban studies have become even more confusing as far as methodology is concerned than it used to be (Lees 2002). The situation appears to be even more complicated than several decades ago. Then, urban studies seemed to be able to integrate within the structural and functional approaches.

Taking it altogether, one may say that there were three mutually supporting factors which decided on the radical changes in urban studies:

1. the need to work out new conceptualizations and analytical tools, useful in the research of the postindustrial city or broadly speaking the city of postmodern era that functions in the scope of information society,
2. criticism and revision of current knowledge from the perspective of fashionable orientations as well as philosophical and methodological approaches (post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, hermeneutics etc.),
3. generational changes in the community of researchers from various disciplines, which supported the criticism of traditional approaches and existing knowledge systems.

## **Plurality in theoretical and methodological approaches as a characteristic trait and the development factor of the urban studies in the 21st century**

The contemporary city, accumulating the most important phenomena together with the pathologies of the postmodern world, has become the subject of intensive research of many scientific disciplines. These include: economy, sociology, geography, social and cultural anthropology, city planning and cultural studies. Each one of them added a specific point of view and research traditions, which consequently created the richness and diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches.

Over the centuries, urban studies have become an open discipline, subject to the influence of various methodologies and theoretical solutions. The richness of methodological and theoretical approaches in this field is difficult to be systematized particularly because the “roots” of the particular concepts are not always easy to find.

Trying to organize a set of modern urban concepts one may distinguish four trends within which they grew and developed:

1. economic (political and economic)
2. social,
3. cultural,
4. humanistic.

It is impossible to describe approaches and concepts briefly – I will mention some of them which in my opinion inspire effectively empirical studies. All of them intend to describe and explain the mechanisms that shape the development processes of the contemporary city. They differ among themselves in conceptualization and diagnosis of the contemporary city’s condition and its development prospects, taking into account other mechanisms (factors) and problems.

The representatives of the economic trend (political and economic) perceive the city in broader categories as an element of the capitalist mode of production and consumption, concentrating on the subject of power and city management, issues of urban policy and social justice. The urban processes, such as space planning, functioning and the city development are considered in broader perspective of political and social changes (cf. Harvey 1973, 1982, 1985, 2012; Castells 1083, 1985, 1998).

D. Harvey perceives the city as the center of interest in capital investment and the basis of social conflicts. In his opinion urban space is formed under the influence of dynamics connected with the capital accumulation and class conflict. Various factors decide on its continuous restructuring – location choices of large companies, the degree of state control over the land management and industrial production, the private investors’ business in terms of property market. M. Castells treats the city not only as a selected area, but also as the inseparable part of the collective consumption processes, which constitute the integral part of capitalism. This conceptualization has become the basis for the city evolution studies

of the information era (aka the information city). In his opinion the functional and spatial structure of the city reflects social conflicts between different social groups and results from market mechanisms and state authorities decisions.

The ideas concerning the role of great cities in the domestic and global economy can be included in the economic trend (cf. Hall 1966; Friedmann 1986; Sassen 1991; Parysek 2004). The concept of the global or world city suggested by S. Sassen (1991) played an important role among these ideas. It identifies new strategic aspects of the big cities' role as "the posts" to manage the global economy, central location of the most technologically advanced services and markets, on which the financial sector products and services are bought, sold and managed in different ways, played an important role among these ideas.

The social approach focuses on the issues of structures and social processes in the contemporary city which intensify the social differences and social exclusion as well as pathological phenomena. Several concepts can be included in this conceptualization trend: a dual city (cf. Lisowski 2000), gentrification, the city as an arena of social processes or a stage on which daily life of city dwellers carries on (Goffman 2000).

Cultural conceptualizations stem from the contemporary culture research and are inspired by its philosophical and sociological perception. This research is based on the so-called urban philosophy which includes, among other things, the conceptualization of the city as a socio-cultural entity. One of the inspiring solutions is the concept of the "kinetic" city perceived as a cause and effect model (Rewers 2005). It opens new prospects of urban research, which emphasize the role of new elements in urban space and present the functioning of the city "in motion", in time and space. Treating the city as a kind of palimpsest, one tries to find **traces and emptiness** in the cultural space of the city, identifying the phenomenon of so-called "cultural cleansing", e. g. in the post-socialist landscape.

Humanistic conceptualizations focus on intangible aspects of the city. Human beings are in the center of research, their experience, perception, values. One of the interesting suggestions is the conceptualization by K. Giedroyc (cf. Sławek 2010) which assumes that the city "spreads" between the "lower" city represented by the architectural and urbanistic system as the settlement of the daily life of inhabitants and the "upper" city expressed by the consequence of human actions and history. The latter is the projection of the states of consciousness of city dwellers created to regain the sense of "we" or a palimpsest of the elements that have been superimposed on one another and which can be understood in two ways: in aesthetic and philosophical categories. This approach "initiates" the philosophical reflection on the city as a certain existential idea.

To sum up this part of the article one may state that the multiplicity and diversity of given solutions are hard to systematize, because some of them are many-sided and interdisciplinary in character. And thus, in the systematization of approaches suggested above there is no place for the concept of the postmodern city which has been developing by the so-called Los Angeles School. It is treated as the passage from the modernist view on the city, characteristic for the Chicago School, to postmodernist thinking about the urban reality (cf. Maik 2012). This

concept is often called a research project of the contemporary city planning which encompasses the views of the Frankfurt School established within the limits of the critical social theory and the ideas of the traditional Chicago School. According to the representatives of the Los Angeles School the combination of these both approaches creates the basis for a new analytical way of the contemporary city at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Model visions of the contemporary city

Model approaches stem from the different sources – they come from the Greek philosophy (polis), Cartesian urban ratio, Age of Enlightenment ideas or urbanistic utopias from the 17th century (cf. Rewers 2005), but also from the contemporary ideas of sustainable development (cf. Mierzejewska 2009) or IT visions of the city functioning in the information society and heterogenic (cf. Domański 2000; Castells 1998).

Generally speaking, the contemporary model solutions stem from the need to eliminate or mitigate the negative effects of urbanization at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It reminds the situation from the industrial revolution when, together with the intensification of the negative phenomena of the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial world, new social and urbanistic concepts appeared. They intended to reverse the negative trends in former urbanization. Some of them aimed at reconstructing the socio-spatial structure of the whole society (Charles Fourier's and Robert Owen's ideas), others wanted to ensure the efficient functioning of urban systems (the concepts of the linear development of the city, garden cities, the ideal industrial city etc.).

Today, the model analysis applies to the main threats of the **rapidly increasing urbanization**. These are mostly environmental issues manifesting themselves in the degradation of urban environment, uncontrolled demographic and spatial development and in the growth of different types of irregularities in the urban systems.

Numerous concepts and city formation models are included in a broadly defined subject of sustainable development (Mierzejewska 2009). New urbanism manifests itself in different concepts of the city such as models of an eco-city, a compact-city, a smart growth city, an equitable balance city. Different kinds of models include the improvement of life quality in the city and the balance of the city's economy (e. g. a self-reliant city, a slow city, a just city, an XXQ city etc.)

The fact that the contemporary city is connected to the cinema, visual culture and new technologies requires abandoning traditional "paths" of thinking about the city space (Rewers 2010). It creates, among other ideas, a concept of the Expanded City, which combines philosophical, technological and artistic aspects of our visions of the contemporary city.

Contemporary urbanization develops in the era called information civilization (Wierzbicki 1995). Its growth is determined by investment and work as well as by information and knowledge, which are becoming the basic **driving force of**

the city's development. In these circumstances urbanists look for the solutions that would provide the inhabitants of the city with unlimited access to information network. The information era shapes a new urbanistic form – the information city and the Edge City as a new model of the core process of the modern urbanization. The city planning concepts must include such phenomena as the intensification of the relation between the virtual world of the Internet together with the television and the real everyday life in the electronic “house”, in the information city and society.

A concept of a virtual village, which is designated by “technological utopia” in Helsinki (Giddens 2009) is an example of the solution for problems of the contemporary city functioning in the information society. The project intends to completely change a new housing estate into the first wireless society in the world by providing the inhabitants with new infrastructure and wireless services. The computer will not be necessary to log in to the network, the telephone will do. This new wireless intimacy has a revitalizing effect on social relation, widening the circle of friends.

## Conclusion

The above review of concepts, models, theoretical and methodological approaches proves the theory about the pluralistic development of urban studies (cf. Maik 2012). When looking into the future, the question, what will be the role of theoretical and methodological plurality in the development of urban studies in the following years, is worth considering. Will it be positive and inspiring for this area of studies or will it be disintegrating and manifesting itself by fragmentation and closing the particular subareas in small, orthodox ranges. I realize that the comprehensive answer to this question is impossible today.

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## Problemy konceptualizacji współczesnego miasta

**Zarys treści:** W artykule przedstawiono problemy związane z konceptualizacją współczesnego miasta. Wynikają one m.in. ze zmienności miasta jako obiektu badań oraz zróżnicowania dziedziny studiów miejskich. Nowe oblicze miasta kształtuje 6 współdziałających tendencji: restrukturyzacja bazy ekonomicznej miasta, formowanie się globalnego systemu miast światowych, radykalna zmiana miejskich układów przestrzennych, przemiana struktury społecznej miasta, „rozlewanie” się miasta w sposób niekontrolowany, zmiana wizualnej postaci rzeczywistości miejskiej. Radykalne zmiany w dziedzinie studiów miejskich warunkują trzy czynniki: potrzeba wypracowania nowych konceptualizacji i narzędzi analitycznych, krytyka i rewizja zastanej wiedzy oraz zmiany generacyjne w środowiskach badaczy. Cechą charakterystyczną i czynnikiem rozwoju studiów miejskich jest pluralizm ujęć teoretyczno-metodologicznych. Ujęcia modelowe mają na celu likwidację lub łagodzenie negatywnych przejawów urbanizacji przełomu XX i XXI w.

**Słowa kluczowe:** miasto, konceptualizacja, teoria, metodologie, modele