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Public space that excludes: A case study of Warsaw

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Abstract

Accessibility of public space plays vital role in integration of citizens, who have problems with moving around urban area. Public objects in cities, such as buildings, squares or even multilevel intersections, may constrict possibility to travel for many users, who are unable to use specific places, due to their inaccessibility. Inadequate design of space excludes certain groups of users from full access to city resources and conduces social exclusion.

The aim of this paper is to discover which groups and how suffer from spatial exclusion in Warsaw. Despite many initiatives of non-governmental organizations, citizens still encounter many barriers in public space. The capital of Poland might be considered as a good example of inaccessible city, mostly due to historical reasons. This issue will be investigated using data from project [“Warsaw Map of Barriers”](#), run by SISKOM - Association for Warsaw Transport Integration. Problematic locations are displayed on interactive map on internet webpage.

Making city accessible requires comprehensive knowledge about specific users' needs, which must be respected. The outcomes of this analysis can be transferred and used in different cities and countries, which still cannot fulfil demand for universal design of space.

Spatial exclusion as a specific form of social exclusion

Public space in Polish cities is arranged in such manner that it is more conducive to social exclusion than to integration. The designers' failure to take into consideration the needs of particular groups of users, such as physically underprivileged persons, who encounter numerous barriers, limit such users' ability to move around the public space. In fact, this problem pertains to a much larger number of members of the community, who include cyclists and elderly people. Inaccessibility of public space is of structural character, and the scale thereof results in creation of social disparities, connected with unequal access to public resources, such as employment, education and health care. This paper analyses the example of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, in which many NGOs lobbying for increase of accessibility of public space for particular groups of users.

In the public discourse no-one is questioning the necessity of assuring the possibility to use the infrastructure and the public transportation to various groups of citizens. Thanks to mass media, the problem of public space inaccessibility in the capital city is a topic discussed more and more often in the public debate. Yet, despite growing social awareness, new inaccessible places are still appearing. The modernisation processes of the already existing technical infrastructure gain special importance, since investments aimed at increase of accessibility, such as installation of additional ramps or elevators, are neglected for saving's sake. This problem was described in the context of evaluation of transportation policies. Bert van Wee and Kart Geus (2011) claim that the presented standard approach to assessment of transportation policies and investments represents the utilitarian values. It is therefore aimed at maximisation of the usefulness within the scope of available resources (funds), and any additional investments are justified only in the case of reaching a relevant rate of return. The Dutch researchers postulate adding such elements to the criteria of the, which shall assure egalitarianism of public transportation, namely equality of all groups of users and equal access for all of them.

Spatial exclusion is a much bigger problem than just the issue of the presence of certain facilities in public places. What is as important as the architectural barriers, are the mental barriers, which set the framework of perception of the users of the space and their interests. Ali Madanipour (2011: 189) identifies 3 arenas of social exclusion: economic, political and cultural. Particular social groups are excluded from each of the abovementioned arenas of social life in various ways. In this case the most dangerous is the conflict between

persons excluded from all three arenas and the fully integrated system, since such situation may cause alienation of the system from the true life of citizens and increase of frustration. For the purposes of the below deliberations, one may use three examples illustrating the multidimensional character of social exclusion:

- Economic arena: a person with physical disability, who is on a wheelchair and who is unable to get to work, since they are not able to get to the nearest bus or tram stop.
- Political arena: a cyclist fighting for construction of a bike route in his/her neighbourhood, whose postulates are ignored due to the poor social support for their cause.
- Cultural arena: an elderly person, who is unable to see a theatre play, since every way leading to the audience has steep stairs.

The discrimination discourse is clearly visible in the discussions on public space. Krzysztof Nawratek (2012) refers to the example of the Doma Laukums square in Riga. This central square, deprived of any public transportation, in his opinion has been constructed only for young men and drivers, but it totally passes over the needs of other users. The economic arena (arrangement of the square) is in this case intertwined with culture, politics and the law.

The spatial aspect is often ignored by researchers dealing with social exclusion, despite the fact that, as observed by Miller (2005), social exclusion always takes places in a specific time and spatial context. The answer to the question concerning the reasons for such omissions might be a lack of any deeper sociological reflection on the importance of space for social life. The authors of *Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (2006: 604) note that the issue of space is one of the most embarrassing issues for sociologists. It is difficult not only to formulate a sociological definition of space, but also to determine the manner in which sociologists could include space in their analyses. Such state of affairs results however in limitation of the possibility to analyse and interpret social order, whose emanation may be the spatial planning.

A city as a spatial exclusion arena. The Warsaw context

From its very beginning a city is a place of residence of various social groups. The populations of cities have always been varied with respect to such features as age, gender or ethnic origin. The cities have also always been inhabited by persons with physical disabilities.

For a long time nobody cared for the social space or the public transportation to be friendly also for the groups of users with special needs. This is one of the conditions of their social inclusion. It is obvious, after all, that existence of architectural barriers has an exclusion effect on certain groups of users. This is also emphasized in the European Union policy, where on the webpage of the European Commissioner for Transport, Siim Kallas, it is possible to find an assurance that *Everyone has the right to travel*¹. Such statement is understandable, since more than 1 in 5 Europeans has difficulties with travelling due to various physical disabilities.

In a modern city it is impossible to function fully without being constantly in motion, and a distinguishing feature of a modern city is the number of interactions, which the citizens enter into with one another (Nawratek 2012: 15). Although a considerable part of our activities is shifted to the Internet, the number of travels which we make as a part of our functioning in the city is not decreasing, but growing even. We travel to work, to school, to visit our friends or to do shopping. Life requires us to play many roles everyday (the role of a student, an employee, a friend, etc.), which means that we need to travel between the places which are vital for some of our activities. If we do not move, we fall behind, we do not follow and we become isolated from others. Face to face meetings with other citizens are therefore an important aspect of the life in a city, which despite the modern forms of electronic communication, is not losing its significance (Glaeser 2011: 35).

Presently, there is no single definition of space accessibility. From the citizens' perspective it is the most important to have access on to levels: accessibility of buildings and accessibility of public space and public transportation, which makes it possible to travel efficiently between travel destinations. For the purposes of this paper subject to analysis is the accessibility of public space managed in Warsaw by a local self-government composed of the City Hall and the authorities of eighteen districts. A complicated ownership structure of public land is one of the barriers in expedient removal of barriers, since it requires coordination of actions of various municipal institutions, whose interests are often divergent.

It might seem that accessible transportation and accessible space are two separate problems. In fact, however, there is no accessible transportation without adequately designed stops or stations, and one cannot speak of accessible stations without a fleet of vehicles adopted to the needs of physically underprivileged persons. This error is made in Poland quite often. It turns out that it is impossible to get out of the tram stops where the low-floor trams stop. It sometimes happen that despite a reconstruction of a train station disabled persons

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/transport/passenger-rights/en/index.html>, accessed: 12/06/2013

cannot use it, since none of the trains on a given route has been adapted to their needs. As long as there is no full access to stops and vehicles, a part of persons who have the right to use public transportation will be excluded from the group of passengers.

One needs to remember of course, that the problem does not pertain only to persons on wheelchairs. Disabled persons mean also persons with impaired sight or hearing, as well as mentally unprivileged persons. Similarly, elderly people, parents with children or persons travelling with large luggage (this pertains mainly to stations) have their special needs. We may therefore say that cities have been designed above all for young and strong persons, who have no trouble at all with climbing stairs and high kerbstones or getting through narrow passages. The reason for such state of affairs is insufficient recognition of the users' needs, as well as the perception phenomenon, which results in the fact that the space designers perceive the users as persons similar to themselves (Bell et al. 2004). This is conducive for omission of the needs of groups with very special needs with respect to the shape of the space.

The issue of improvement of accessibility of Polish cities has been becoming more and more significant. Purchase of low-floor busses and trams has practically become a standard by replacement of the fleet. A lot has also been invested in the reconstruction of public buildings and municipal streets. Yet, the same errors are still made. Above all, improvement of accessibility is seldom the principal purpose of an investment, it is more an unpleasant obligation resulting from legal regulations or the requirements of EU funding. Additionally, we are still lacking the abovementioned holistic approach, which would include modernisation of more than just transportation. Since different companies are responsible for objects which are spatially next to each other (e.g. the pavement and a bus stop or an entrance to a building), then it would be advisable to establish an entity coordinating these tasks and assuring that the already applicable standards are complied with. Finally, it would be worthwhile to ask and listen to the users themselves. In most Polish cities there are associations representing various groups of citizens, which are anxious for someone to hear them out. Obviously not all of their postulates can be fulfilled, however it would be possible to avoid many errors which are often quite expensive. The present legal regulations secure the interest of physically underprivileged persons, yet they do not exactly specify, how full accessibility of construction objects should be assured to this group of users.

A material issue for the citizens is also to be informed of the barriers existing in the city space, both temporary and permanent. If certain objects or streets cannot be quickly adapted to the needs of all users, then all persons which are likely to find themselves in such place should be informed thereof. Development of accessibility maps is still a new idea in

Poland, and moreover most of such initiatives are carried out by NGOs, operating for the most part thanks to the ardour of their members. Projects based on the British *fix my street* concept, where the citizens could report needs, are still in the development stage in Poland, and Warsaw has still not implemented any solution, which could make the above possible.

A source of information on the existing barriers in the capital city public space may be the data collected within the framework of the 2011 Warsaw Map of Barriers project, coordinated by SISKOM - the Association for Warsaw Transport Integration. Data on travelling barriers are collected in six categories, which are then indicated on an interactive map, available on the webpage of the initiative. The mapped barriers include:

- dangerous and inaccessible pedestrian crossings,
- bus and tram stops,
- stairs with no access facilities,
- inaccessible underpasses,
- inaccessible overpasses,
- other barriers, including too narrow pavements.

Diagram 1. presents the percentage share of particular categories in the set, which in June 2013 included 935 places. Barriers, which have been removed are also indicated on the map. The most numerous category are dangerous and inaccessible pedestrian crossings, constituting 35% of the collected places. The second category are the public bus and tram stops (28%), and the third category are the stairs (12%). Over- and underpasses had the share of 7% each, and other barriers constitute 5% of the data collection. Fixed places constitute 6% of the data collection.

SHARE OF CATEGORIES IN TOTAL NUMBER OF COLLECTED BARRIERS, N=935

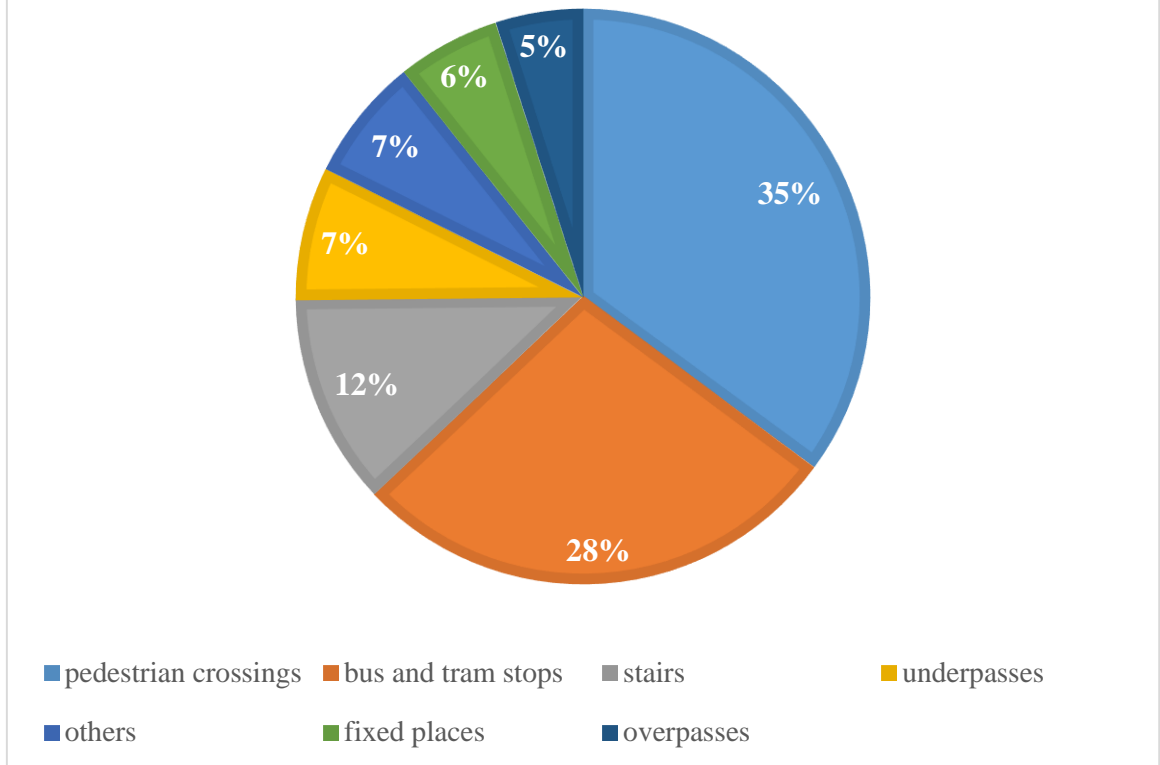
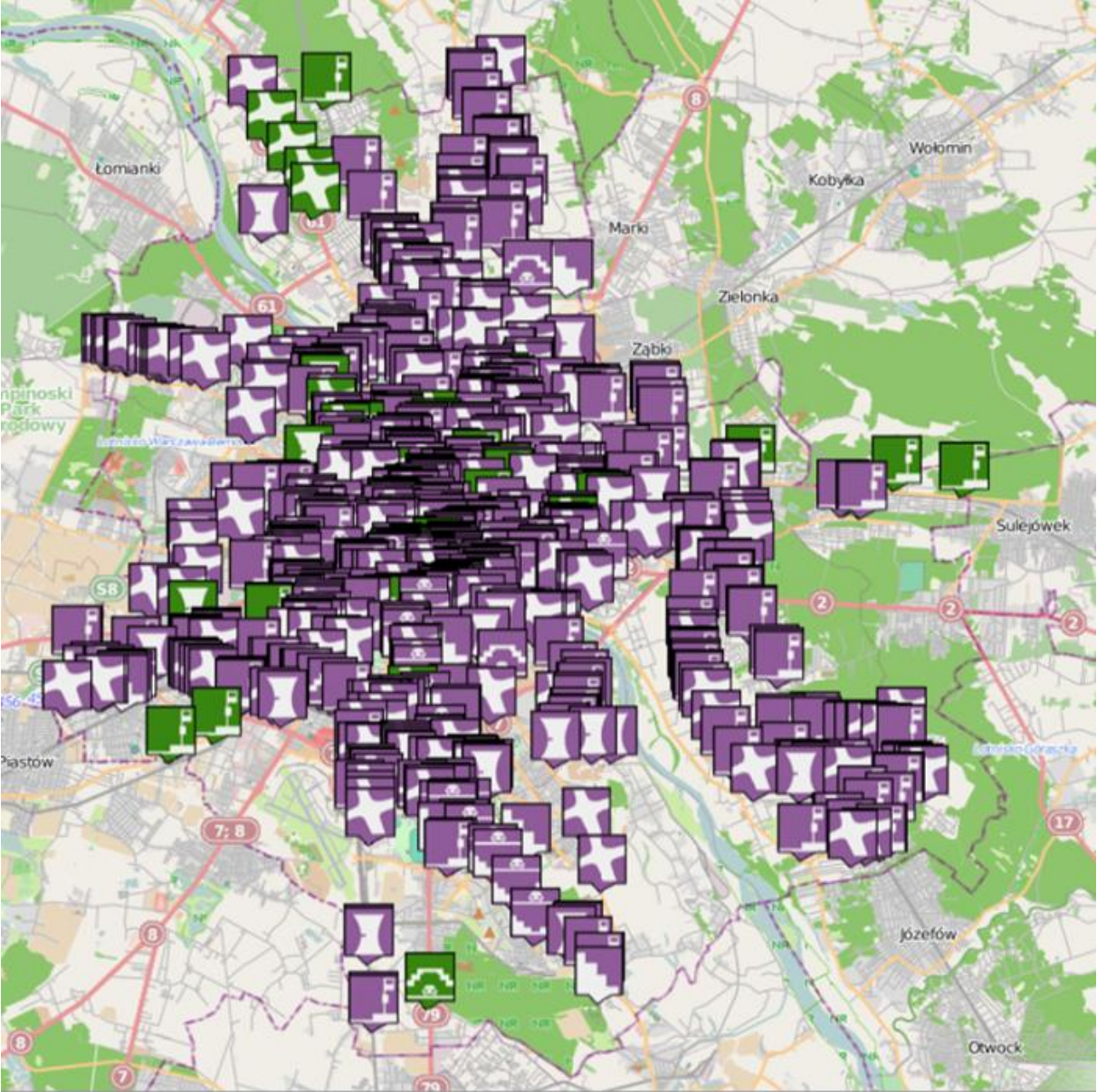


Diagram 1. Share of categories in the total number of collected barriers. Source: Warsaw Map of Barriers.

The above data show that the Warsaw public space is unfriendly both with respect to small local streets, as well as large road junctions. Various groups of users encounter barriers within the entire city. The distribution of barriers is more or less regular, with a minor predominance of barriers by the main communication routes. Places designed and constructed in the second half of the twentieth century are particularly problematic. In that time one constructed large civil engineering objects consistent with the assumptions of a modernistic city, such as multilevel junctions, and the interest of the pedestrians was often subordinated to the goal of greater capacity of the roads, which lead to segregation of the users on many different levels. The priority for the urban space planner was to strive at an increase of the effectiveness of the means of transportation, i.e. the speed, the capacity and the fluency of traffic on the city streets (Norton 2008: 104). The design standards applicable at that time did not respect however the needs of the groups of users with limited travelling capabilities, and often reaching a stop or using an underpass was made difficult by steep stairs, which did not offer any alternate access ways. By modernisation of such places one often does not take into account the liquidation of such barriers, since the costs of reconstruction of such objects as train stops or viaducts are very high. The present unfriendly infrastructure is renovated and

maintained, and the state of affairs unfavourable for non-motorised users lingers on. Moreover, another problem is the insufficient supervision over the investment processes, which results in numerous design errors, such as high kerbs at pedestrian crossings.



Map 1. Spatial distribution of architectural barriers in Warsaw. Source: Warsaw Map of Barriers

The City Hall tries to remove the barriers reported by the citizens, if they do not require large investments. It is therefore possible for a citizen to request that a kerb is lowered or a pavement is broadened. It often happens that the citizens themselves are forced to fight for changes which would be favourable for them, and the complicated administrative process protracts even the minor space modifications. A solution could be for the city to implement a

service based on the *fix my street* concept, where the users could easily report places in need of modernisation, without the need of filling unnecessary documents in.

Summary. Towards universal design

In Warsaw, as in other cities, there is a constant fight for space, which various groups of citizens want to access. The excluded groups try to muster their energies and exert pressure, so that changes favourable for them are implemented. This pertains both to persons who wish to move around Warsaw on bicycles, physically and sensorically disabled persons, as well as parents travelling with children. All of these groups have their social representatives, who are trying to achieve changes favourable to them.

Most often, as is the case with bicycle organizations, NGOs represent only one group of space users and work towards changes which would be favourable for this single group of citizens only. And thus the cyclists lobby for new bicycle routes, organizations of persons on wheelchairs on the other hand demand above all more possibilities of access which would offer an alternative to unfriendly stairs. This results only in a conflict between the NGOs which have divergent interests. This conflict is observed also in everyday life. When moving around the city, the users need to come into various interactions, for example by observing one another, in order to avoid a collision (Conley 2012: 220). The interest of the group they represent becomes one of identity determinants, which is clearly demonstrated by the example of bicycle activists. Common needs of space users are today recognized to a very small extent. Better organized groups, such as the cyclists, may for example lobby for solutions unfriendly for elderly people, and therefore contribute to a greater exclusion of these space users.

A solution to these problems might be the idea of universal design, whose principal postulates were developed already in 1997 in the US (*The principles of universal design...*). The principal assumption is full accessibility of space for all users, without development of special solutions, which would result in segregation of the users. Universal design pertains not only to the sphere of architectural solutions, but also to the design of every-day-use items. (*Universal design...* 2007). Moreover appliances friendly for extreme users are also more friendly for ordinary users, which is the cornerstone of the concept of universal design (Błaszak, Przybylski 2011: 11). Such approach is unfortunately seldom, in particular among persons with decision-making powers with respect to public space. The Norwegian Design Council is convincing on its webpage that universal design is beneficial for everyone:

Inclusive design can help you create new products and services in a world where the population is aging and businesses must cater for new user-needs².

To date there has been created no city which would be friendly for all of its users. Poland, including Warsaw, needs to follow the example of other European cities, which implemented barrier removal programs long time ago, and are not able to assure proper living conditions for persons with mobility issues. Using this experience, the Polish institutions are able to materially improve the life quality of groups threatened by social exclusion, and at the same time facilitate travel for other users. It is thereby not necessary to reinvent the wheel, but only to implement the solutions already tested in other countries. Universally accessible space is really in the interest of all citizens, since everyone at some point will need special facilities for travel. All of us will get old, most of us will be parents, and some of us perhaps will need to use wheelchairs in the future.

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² Source: <http://www.norskdesign.no/design-for-all/design-for-all-inclusive-design-article3698-8530.html>, accessed 12/06/2013

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