GREEN PLANNING OF PUBLIC SPACES AS A WAY TO CREATE A NEW IMAGE OF MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES

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ABSTRACT

Motives: Cities in today's world are facing demographic challenges, social and economic problems, limited natural resources and the effects of climate change. In order to address these issues and create a healthier living environment, cities should prioritize sustainable urban planning, including consideration of green public space.
Aim: The aim of the study is to present changes in the design and development of public spaces in six selected cities, which have lost their traditional economic functions and are facing problems. Cities should design a new functional layout that is adapted to the new conditions. Special attention has been given to the transformation of public spaces as a way of shaping the contemporary image of cities.
Results: Cities should actively promote socially equitable and integrated urban planning. Green planning should take place in an inclusive manner to ensure that all residents have access to and can benefit from green public spaces. Green planning improves the quality of life for residents and increases the attractiveness of the city as a place to live, work and invest.

Keywords: green public spaces, green planning, urban planning, medium-sized cities, liveable environments, spatial accessibility

INTRODUCTION

Considering green urban planning can support cities of all sizes around the world and promote sustainable, liveable environments while addressing civilisation challenges such as climate change, rapid urbanisation, structural transformation of the economy, demographic processes and social change (Foth, 2017, pp. 21–36). To address these issues and create healthier living environments, cities need to change their planning approach, move away from traditional designs and prioritise green public space planning. This approach involves designing urban spaces focused on people and their needs, with green

streets, corridors and public areas serving as hubs for community life. Green infrastructure not only improves the quality of life but also plays a critical role in combating climate change and fostering ecosystem resilience. The public space is considered to be the essence of the city, serving as an essential venue for social interaction, community engagement, and cultural expression (Gehl, 2010). Transformations of public spaces are an integral part of city life. The processes identified, although addressing site-specific problems, are universal to urban centres of all sizes in European countries struggling with deurbanization, social exclusion, depopulation, migration, mass tourism, climate change, pollution or economic changes (Li et al., 2022, pp. 479–486). Urban public space has become a key element in spatial, functional, social, and image-related dimensions of the city. These processes raise important questions about the future of public space as a shared resource and facilitator of inclusion, spatial justice, and transformation in many contemporary cities. This calls for a renewed approach to urban public spaces, especially in medium-sized cities that have lost their traditional economic functions.

The aim of the study is to present changes in the design and development of public spaces in cities. The selection of cities was based on a ranking of medium-sized urban centres losing their socio-economic functions. The delimitation criteria for this ranking included factors such as an ageing and shrinking population, human capital drain, an unstable labour market, and difficulties in attracting new investments (Śleszyński, 2018, pp. 82–85). For the purposes of the analysis presented in this article, cities from the ranking with a population not exceeding 50,000 residents were selected: Sieradz, Skierniewice, Ciechanów, Ostrołęka, Krosno, and Tarnobrzeg. These cities should design a new functional layout, adapted to the new specific endogenous conditions. It is becoming essential to redefine the role and image of the city and to take measures to adapt to climate change. The authors' ambition is to present changes in the design and development of public spaces in these cities. Special attention has been given to the

transformation of public spaces as a way of creating their new image. The basic research question was how to transform the public space of medium-sized cities in order to create an active, accessible, interesting, inclusive and climate-neutral environment for residents and what factors are necessary to shape public spaces that would result in active public spaces? In order to ensure the successful implementation of green public spaces, cities need to recognise the determinants affecting sustainability and define the social objectives they wish to achieve. Urban planners and city planners need to know the key factors influencing sustainability and set achievable goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cities currently face many challenges, and their management requires a holistic approach. As part of counteracting climate change, cities are implementing the process of green planning (Going Green 2013, pp. 19–26; Kabisch et al., 2022, pp. 1388–1390), which includes four basic components: energy, greening and green-blue infrastructure, revitalization and water and sewage management (Stobbelaar et al., 2022, pp. 1–10). Such a broad approach to this issue is to determine the success of the undertaken projects. A special area of green planning is public space, which is defined in various ways, and according to Nawrocki (2011) and Madanipour (2010) it is an ambiguous concept (Madanipour 2010, pp. 1–15; Nawrocki, 2011). Carr et al. emphasize that public space is open, publicly accessible places where people stay to carry out group or individual activities (Carr et al., 2009). Interpersonal contacts are also an important feature defining public space according to Lorens, who indicates that public space is "that part of urban space which – through the way it is arranged and its location in the urban structure – is intended for the implementation of direct contacts between participants in social life and other social needs of the communities using it, while remaining physically accessible to all interested persons" (Lorens & Martyniuk-Pęczek, 2010, p. 10). At the same time, this author indicates the possibility of limiting the temporary access to this space for safety

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reasons or using it for a specific purpose. Similarly, Wejchert refers to the accessibility of public space for all people and its designation for relationships between people, he also emphasizes the diversity of space (Wejchert, 1993, p. 220). Similarly, Carmona, Magalhães and Hammond note the importance of accessibility (Carmona et al., 2008). The feature of accessibility was also indicated as significant by Parysek, who emphasized its openness, shared use and the need to maintain public space in good condition (Parysek, 2011, p. 53). Public space is associated with an area of special cultural values, which stimulates emotions and encourages reflection, expressing one's own opinions, in this area there are networks of streets, squares, important buildings, monuments, urban greenery (Dymnicka, 2009, pp. 17–28; Dymnicka, 2013, p. 53; Marody & Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004, pp. 268–274). The authorities focus on the development of public spaces to achieve goals such as improving the quality of life of residents and other users of the city, influencing the perception of the city outside and its competitive position. Public spaces often have special significance, for various reasons, e.g. size, historical significance, central location and then they constitute representative spaces that affect the image of the city. Shaping a positive image of the city is one of the basic activities of the city authorities, which competes with other centers for users and consumers (Ashworth & Voogt, 1994, p. 39) and uses various instruments for this purpose (Junghart, 1996, p. 35; Markowski, 1999, p. 214; Meffert, 1989, p. 275; Szromnik, 2012, p. 29, 146). The foundations of building the city image have been widely described in the literature (Avraham, 2004; Chrząścik, 2012; Florek, 2013; Glińska, 2016; Hudson et al., 2016; Lutek & Gołoś, 2010; Łuczak, 2002; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Piątkowska, 2010; Pomykalski, 2000; Razmus, 2010; Stanowicka-Traczyk, 2008; 2009; Szwajca, 2009; Wrzosek, 2004), where the focus was on strategy, advertising campaign, territorial marketing, message, identity, key city resources, image life cycle, etc. The potential to create a positive city image through the thoughtful development of public spaces that bring together people, emotions, expressions, feelings have not been sufficiently explored; the way they are developed may also affect the climate in the city and maintain the biodiversity of these areas. Problems arising from the improper development of public spaces, particularly representative ones, are often the result of long-term overuse of concrete in these areas. This was related to the previous aesthetics, fashion and comfort. Development based on "concrete" was convenient, cheap and easy to keep clean. This style introduced an apparent spatial order, which influenced the positive image of the city, at the same time raising concerns related to the image of soullessness of space. The extensive use of concrete in public spaces contributed to the creation of an urban heat island, which additionally had a negative impact on the climate. The green planning of public spaces in the city is to reverse these negative trends and stimulate a positive perception of these areas and influence the image of the city, i.e. green space in the city is to increase and grey space is to decrease (Akyildiz, 2022, pp. 104–106; Blomquist, 2020, pp. 17–19; Krzywicka & Jankowska, 2021, pp. 203–205). In addition, urban greening activities bring a number of benefits to residents, e.g.: higher quality of life, increased physical activity, improved health (including mental health), aesthetic qualities, as well as influencing a sense of identity with place; these aspects have been highlighted by Brom et al. (2023, pp. 1–3), Breed et al. (2024, p. 2), Coisnon et al. (2024, pp. 2–3). A number of studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between urban green spaces and the wellbeing of their users (Dobson, 2021, p. 1).

The image evolution of cities related to the green planning concerns primarily activities focused on investments affecting the 'greening' of urban areas, green infrastructure (Pauleit et al., 2017, pp. 3–5), climate change mitigation (Derdouri et al., 2025, pp. 1–3), adaptation to it, efficient use of resources (especially endogenous resources), reduction of pollution levels, combating biodiversity loss, increasing biologically active areas in urban and functional areas, reducing soil sealing, nature-based urban investments with associated vegetation solutions, sustainable stormwater management systems including green-blue infrastructure and nature-based solutions, and revitalisation

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of buildings and public spaces (Schäffler & Swilling, 2013, pp. 2–3). Such changes are also expected by residents, who want to live in a friendly environment, among greenery, and want urban planning that protects the environment (Wallhagen & Magnusson, 2017, pp. 6–8).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The country's new administrative division, introduced on 1 January 1999, resulted in the loss of leading functions of some medium-sized cities. They also had to face the challenges of the contemporary global economy and develop new directions of development. Sustainable development has become an important aspiration for these centers.

The analysis included 6 cities with up to 50 thousand residents (Sieradz, Ciechanów, Tarnobrzeg, Krosno, Skierniewice, Ostrołęka – Fig. 1), which lost the functions of a provincial city as part of the country's administrative reform. Currently, most of the analyzed cities have the status of a city with county rights (Tarnobrzeg, Krosno, Skierniewice, Ostrołęka). Sieradz and Ciechanów are now district towns.

The main data for this study were obtained from the: Local Data Bank, planning and strategic documents of municipalities, economic programs, projects using funds for sustainable development, Open Street Map (spatial data).

The following research methods were used: critical review of planning and strategic documents, literature review, review of completed and planned projects, expert method.
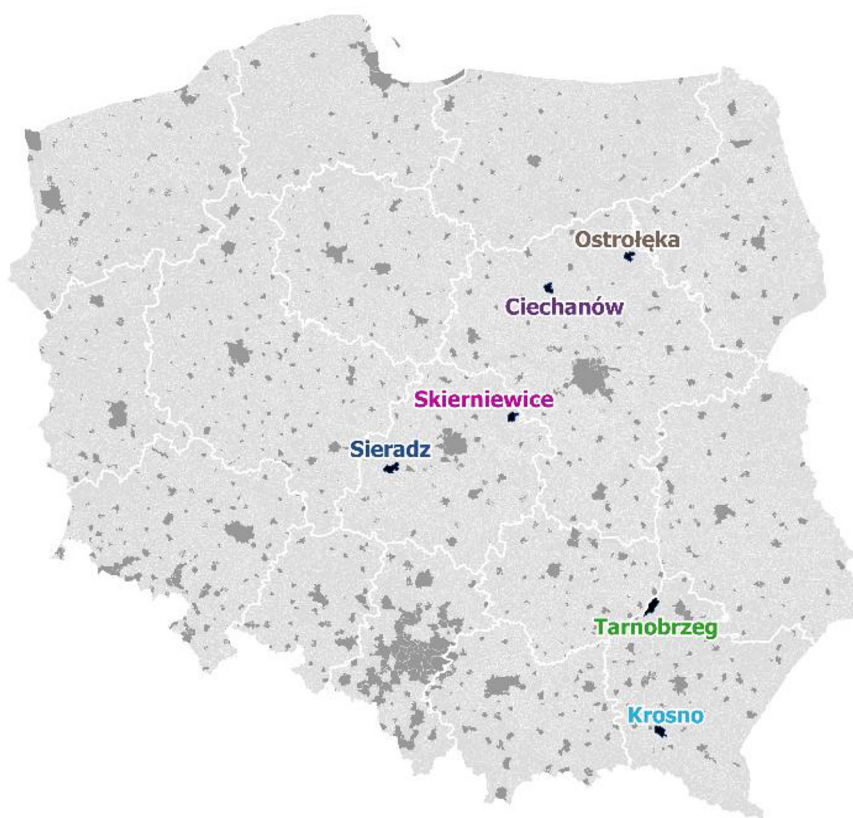

Fig. 1. Location of selected cities in Poland
Source: own elaboration based on materials from the state geodetic and cartographic
resource (2024).

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RESULTS

Changes in the Economic Structure and Green Planning in Selected Cities

All the cities included in the analysis are facing population decline and an aging society to a greater extent than the national average in Poland (Fig. 2). The direction of economic changes is set by the modern services sector. Almost all of the studied cities have a higher registered unemployment rate compared to the national unemployment rate in Poland. Most of the cities have undergone an evolution in their socio-economic structure, transitioning from traditional industry to the services sector and high-tech industries.

As part of a sustainable economy, cities aim for a harmonious development that integrates social, economic, and environmental dimensions, ensuring a balance between contemporary societal needs and the preservation of natural resources for new generations. This involves the implementation of a green planning process aimed at increasing climate neutrality while simultaneously maintaining the quality of the natural environment and not limiting the potential for socio-economic development. To achieve this goal, careful spatial planning is undertaken within cities, with the goal of introducing circular economy practices, low emissions, utilizing alternative energy sources, and promoting compact urban spaces where possible (Fig. 3).

Main Public Spaces in selected cities and creating a new image

Green planning refers to a comprehensive approach to development aimed at promoting more sustainable and environmentally, socially, and economically friendly practices. This also applies to urban spaces that function as showcases of the city. These spaces can function as model examples of sustainable design, for instance, by implementing solutions related to stormwater retention systems, increasing the green area ratio, enhancing biodiversity, counteracting the
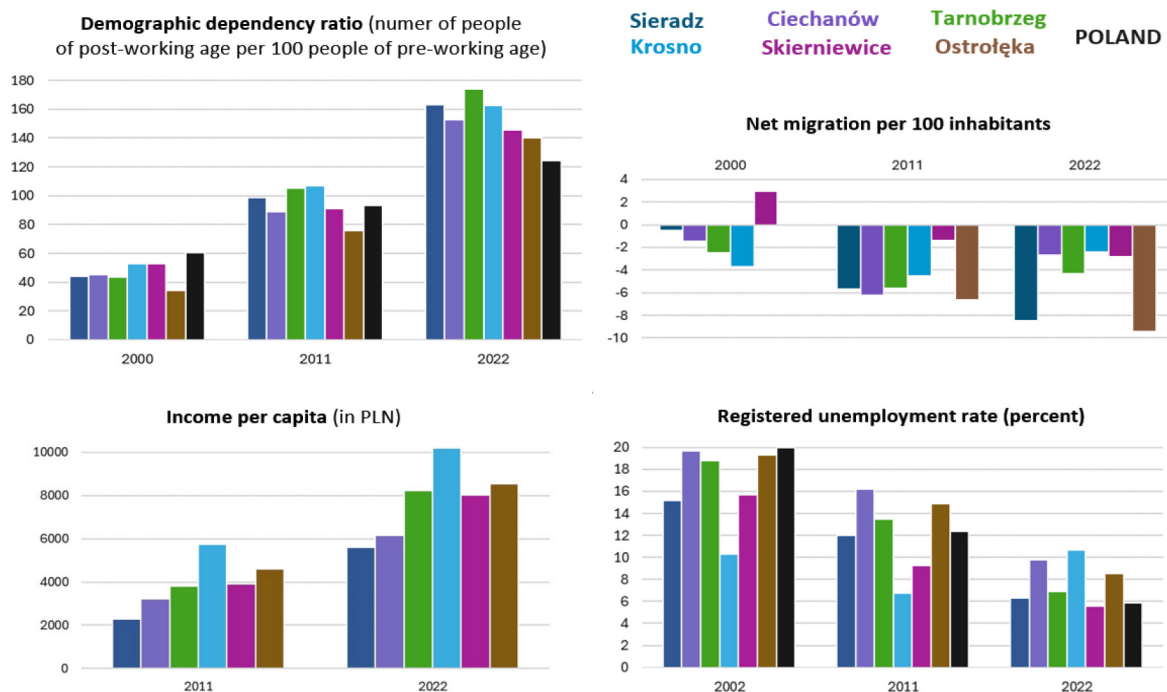

Fig. 2. Socio-economic situation of selected cities
Source: own elaboration based on Local Data Bank, Statistics Poland (2024).

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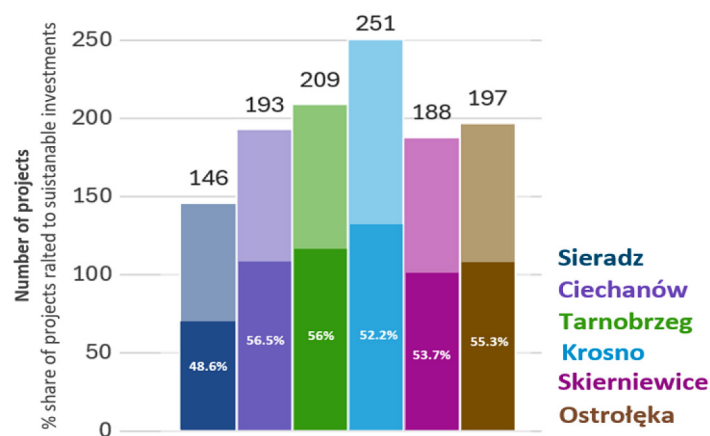
Fig. 3. Number of projects funded by EU resources, 2004–2020 (including the percentage share of projects related to sustainable investments)
Source: own elaboration.

effects of urban heat island, reducing noise pollution, and improving air quality.

Particular attention should be paid to representative public spaces, as they have the greatest impact on the city's attractiveness to tourists and investors. The quality and manner of their development reflect the priorities of local authorities. Ecological solutions enhance the prestige of a location, promoting the image of the city as modern and sustainable. This is particularly relevant given the ongoing discourse in recent years regarding the need to reduce the excessive concretization of public spaces and limit the space allocated to cars in favor of alternative forms of transportation. Implementing ecological solutions not only improves the quality of life for residents but also highlights the city's commitment to climate change adaptation efforts.

Currently, the most greened representative public space among the selected cities is J. Bem Square in Ostrołęka. Press reports indicate that this square is undergoing renovations related to traffic organization. In Ciechanów (Pope John Paul II Square) and Tarnobrzeg (B. Głowacki Square), public consultations are currently underway regarding redevelopment plans. Krosno (Market Square) is also planning similar actions. All visualizations emphasize increasing green areas (Fig. 4). The Market Square in Skierniewice

was renovated in 2024, while the renovation of the Market Square in Sieradz took place 10 years earlier (in 2014), and the project was even awarded by the Polish Town Planners Association, although it is lacking in greenery (Fig. 4).

IRMIR Reports (Mróz et al., 2023; Warchalska-Troll & Pistelok, 2023) suggest that local governments are often hesitant to implement projects with a significant green space component. They typically justify this by citing the complexity or insufficient understanding of issues related to underground infrastructure, as well as decisions from heritage conservation authorities regarding the permissible scope of interventions. It is often overlooked that greenery, despite the high initial investment and maintenance costs, brings long-term benefits to residents in a much broader sense.

A critical indicator of urban sustainability is the availability of open green spaces (Gómez et al., 2010, pp. 311–326). The proportion of green areas in the urban space and their appropriate management have a positive impact on environmental aspects. In particular, this aspect has a positive impact on reducing air pollution and increasing catchment areas in urban areas. In addition, green spaces can become a valuable public space of the city and function as a centre of social activity or as a meeting place for the local community.

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	SIERADZ	SKIERNIEWICE	CIECHANÓW	OSTROŁĘKA	TARNOBRZEG	KROSNO
SQUARE AREA	7 908 m2	12 106 m2	15 135 m2	6 588 m2	13 833 m2	9 816 m2
NUMBER OF TREES (per 1 thousand m2)	1.2	5.7	4.1	5.8	3.7	0.7
GREEN AREA RATIO (GAR)	ok. 0.51%	ok. 6.25%	ok. 4.85%	ok. 38.06%	ok. 1.49%	ok. 1.88%

Fig. 4. Green infrastructure in main public spaces
Source: own elaboration based on OpenStreetMap Data (2024).

Climate and environmental challenges are creating the need for the cities studied to change their approach to public space management. Previous concepts do not meet the requirements for attractive and effective public spaces.

DISCUSSION

The conducted literature review reveals a broad and multidimensional approach to the image of the city and its public spaces. They concern: the city's marketing strategy, identity, place, territorial marketing, branding, and the effectiveness of using social media. However, the relationship between the development of public spaces and the need to counteract climate change and build a new image based on the strategy of creating green public spaces has not been fully described. The study focused on the evolution in the design and development of representative public spaces, which affects maintaining a high level of their attractiveness.

Medium-sized cities in Poland recognise the benefits of a green approach to urban planning, as it has great potential for lowering urban temperatures, mitigating air pollution and building environmental resilience (Du Plessis, 2022). Transforming public

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spaces towards sustainability plays an important role in addressing the contemporary challenges facing medium-sized cities in Poland.

Cities should therefore increasingly incorporate integrated and sustainable, socially just urban planning. Green planning should be inclusive, ensuring that all residents have access to and can benefit from green public spaces. Community involvement is key to the successful implementation and maintenance of green public spaces. Active participation by residents helps build a sense of ownership and responsibility for these spaces (Foth, 2017, pp. 23–32).

City authorities should include funding in city budgets to support green spatial planning initiatives. Green planning of public spaces benefits all users of a city, improves the quality of life for residents, and increases the attractiveness of a city as a place to live, work and invest. Through thoughtful design and planning, urban environments can be effectively shaped to inspire and serve residents while respecting their cultural heritage and environment.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Influenced by global processes, the surveyed cities have oriented their economies towards sustainable investments.

2. Sustainable investments are being made with a large share of funds obtained from the European Union budget and have become an important element of the green planning of public spaces in the surveyed cities.

3. Cities should include adequate funding in their budgets to support their green urban planning initiatives and use a variety of funding sources, including public-private partnerships, European Union grants and municipal investments, to finance their ambitious projects and ensure long-term sustainability.

4. Green infrastructure improves the quality of life of citizens in the cities surveyed and enables them to adapt to climate and environmental challenges.

5. The medium-sized cities green planning initiatives ensure that all residents have access to and can benefit from green public spaces.

6. Community involvement in green planning is crucial to the successful implementation and maintenance of urban green public spaces. Residents and stakeholders should be actively involved in the planning, development and management of these spaces, fostering a sense of common ownership and shared responsibility for them.

7. The basic finding of the survey makes it possible to point out that not all surveyed cities have adequately carried out 'green' planning of representative public spaces, but that this is an ongoing process and efforts in this direction should be strengthened in the future.

8. The 'green' planning processes insufficiently adapt the surveyed cities to climate change, with a largely technical dimension, while the social dimension (education, public participation, sharing economy) should become a priority in the years to come.

9. The green infrastructure of the surveyed cities reinforces their image as places for better living, leisure and social activities.

10. Green planning of public spaces has strengthened the image of the surveyed cities among residents.

11. By adopting the principles of green urban planning, such as those implemented in medium-sized Polish towns, it is possible to transform public space, improve the quality of life for residents and address the important issue of climate change.

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