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back to the sense of the city

MICRO-SPATIAL AND URBAN EPHEMERA: BOTTOM-UP AND TEMPORARY INITIATIVES IN PUBLIC SPACE

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Abstract

The concept of adaptation currently seems to best embody the specific nature of contemporary transformations of urban structures within the context of concurrent changes generally taking place in civilization, economics, and society. Cities since their very beginnings have adapted and transformed their structures to the current needs and conditions of every era. Today however it is difficult to conceive of broad, all-inclusive improvement projects: the focus has shifted in the direction of creating strategies, laying out goals and their means of achievement, and then the flexible adaptation of said means to the dynamically changing conditions of cities. In the transformations of today's Western cities the voice of urban residents has become louder and louder over the years, and the practice of participation has been known for decades. This issue has only recently become publicized in Poland. The author of this article would like also to bring attention however to other types of citizen participation in the transformation of public spaces, a kind of micro-adaptation, actions by which people spontaneously on their own initiative have always adapted to and adapt to the space that surrounds them. The following article discusses selected Polish and foreign examples of grassroots movements in the process of the "production" and adaptation of urban space¹, in addition to diverse ephemera: spatial events initiated by bottom-up community users of public urban space. The author's contention is that in today's intensely expanding urban structures, which often tend to lose their human scale, an important aspect of the development of public space will not only be the voice of users, but also bottom-up micro adaptations and often temporary social-space interventions whose growth are a sign of our times.

¹ Notion of the „production of space” derived from Henry Lefebvre's thought, see: Lefebvre H., Publisher: Blackwell Publishing: Victoria, Australia 2009.

Modern cities have become such complicated structures, and not only in spatial terms, that complete control and planning their evolution is from a practical point of view unrealistic. 16th century thought about cities as ideal plans, modernist ideas in the reorganization of urban structures, and also 20th century and contemporary projects and realizations of cities built from scratch in diverse parts of the world represent attempts at creating utopias. Critiques of these types of plans usually focus on the fact that they conceive cities as eternally perfect, non-evolving systems existing beyond the realm of space and time.² But we should not forget the fact that certain types of utopian thinking represent a spiritual condition, the faith in the possibility of planning improvements in the living conditions of humanity,³ and are the essential elements of every planning thought, every project. Without this faith or a certain naive urge to change humanity we would be unable to achieve progress. This is why it is not possible to completely discredit such endeavors. However, in the case of confronting utopia with reality or attempts at implementing utopian concepts contrary to reality and its participants, utopian plans acutely reveal their weaknesses, impracticality and radicalism⁴. This is especially apparent in the case of architectural and urban realizations as well as in interventions in public space.

In modernist projects the role of the enlightened architect was to reorganize space, implement changes and a new order, which were intended to bring an end to all previous spatial and even social urban ills. However, in those days they certainly did not ask city dwellers about their opinions on the subject of shaping a new, better reality. Plans instead were the result of the imagination of professional architects and visionaries. As Le Corbusier was want to say „city planning is an activity too important to leave to city inhabitants”⁵. Although this totalitarian approach to planning was already severely criticized in the 20th century, and despite the fact that today decidedly more democratic methods are in place for the reshaping of city space, it is not rare that today one may glean certain radical aspects in various architectural and city planning projects. Obviously it is much simpler to consolidate the entire conceptual process and the carrying out of projects in the hands of the architect, city, or municipality, while it is much more difficult to harness the voice of city inhabitants, the users of public space. And once again, in many Western European countries and in other parts of the world certain logistics have been created in conjunction with well functioning means of communicating with inhabitants and public participation. They are extremely valuable and are constantly evolving processes, although not at all easy to enact.

Despite all kinds of attempts at democratizing planning processes, they do not always produce the desired effect. Consultation and close cooperation with city inhabitants on the plans of, for example, the usage of a local square, is much more likely to result in the place truly serving the local social needs and possessing a spatial functionality, but it is unrealistic to expect that the

² Jędruch D., Utopia jako kłopot [in:] Autoportret. Pismo o dobrej przestrzeni 2(34) 2011, Publisher: MIK, Kraków 2011, p.15-16.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Fishman R., Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howar, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, Publisher: Basic Books, Nowy Jork 1977, s.239; after: Rewers E., Post-polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta, Publisher: Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 263.

space will always be ideal. It is safer to say that as a kind of compromise and result of the discussion of many sides the plans will be the best possible option, which does not have to mean mediocrity.

Participation, understood as being the direct and indirect, formal and informal, individual and collective participation of citizens in the undertaking and realization of decisions concerning the common good⁶, is not however the only display of bottom-up intervention in urban landscapes. For centuries, by making small changes in their nearest surroundings people have adapted the built environment. Such phenomena could be called mirco-adaptation. It seems that exactly this concept of such ordinary adaptations is closest to today's perception of city formation processes on the macro scale, and their motivations. Ordinary evolution, what ever it applies to, is of course a process of adapting to changes over time to conditions in the surrounding environment. However, because we have arrived at this point in our considerations, we must ask if the durability of many architectural and town planning solutions that are planned for years ahead is not in conflict with the fact that contemporary cultural, social, economic, and civilization changes progress at a much quicker pace than in preindustrial times? So is it possible to adapt cities to conditions which one is able to perceive and comprehend often after an elapsed period of time? Of course this is a rhetorical question and it would be difficult to find a clear answer, which is why the paradoxical necessity of coming to terms with a certain amount of uncertainty with respect to the predictability of the consequences of all sorts of interventions in urban space seems to be an altogether wise solution. Leaving behind however the city scale and coming to the human scale, it is perceivable that regardless of various studies and scientific evaluations, adaptation also takes place, or perhaps most of all, on the micro-scale level of urban small spaces. These kinds of minor appearances of reshaping surroundings by the people who live in them, may also be considered an important kind of participation in the formation of the urban environment.

Durability and adaptation

Urban space is a record of events and the evolution of a city and the lives of its inhabitants. Many scholars also see it as a space where happenings occur, a Kinetic City, where a special role is played by building corners, intersections, nodal points, places that collide with others, with the unexpected, with the foreign.⁷ The history of cities, as the cultural theorist Ewa Rewers writes, creates a web of occurrences that take place over time and space, onto which overlap other webs connecting minor episodes, simple narrations into the dense fabric of an epic story⁸. One of the reasons for which such an interpretation of the problem of urban space is especially

⁶ Laurusz N., Wprowadzenie do partycypacji społecznej w Polsce [in:] Ćwiklicki M., Frączek M., Partycypacja społeczne w Polsce. Atlas dobrych praktyk, Publisher: Fundacja Gospodarki i Administracji Publicznej, Kraków 2013, p.24; after: Olech A., Kaźmierczak T., Modele partycypacji publicznej [in:] Partycypacja publiczna – o uczestnictwie obywateli w życiu lokalnej wspólnoty, Publisher: Fundacja Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa 2011.

⁷ Rewers E., Post-polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta, Publisher: Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 6.

⁸ Rewers E., op.cit., p. 80.

interesting, is the examination of the role of time and the significance of those „minor episodes” and „simple narrations” from which the Kinetic City is woven. Architecture's durability is mentioned by Vitruvius as one of its main traits, and this means that we know its roots, and we can admire historic works of architecture and town planning. Architecture often outlasts its builders and original inhabitants. City space is a backdrop for the lives of later generations.

Seeing that along with the development of civilization human needs and life styles gradually undergo changes, people strive to adapt their surroundings to their current needs. It's not always possible to make radical or structural changes, which is why it often possible to observe in the nooks and crannies of urban space temporary, makeshift changes intended to adapt the nearest surroundings. It would be possible to cite many examples of spatial adaptations in Poland that took place in large housing projects consisting of pre-fabricated panel apartment blocks. These vast housing estates from the era of the People's Republic of Poland that were created as a symbol of economic and technological prosperity where built rather quickly without much attention to quality, but based on the assumption that they would last for 50 to 70 years. And in truth they are still standing after 30 or 40 years, and in many places, despite their poor reputation, a new generation of inhabitants is living in these buildings. Adaptations of public space in housing estates occurred in the area between buildings as well as within their interiors, i.e. hallways, stairwells, basements, and attics, which in the past were public areas due to the lack of intercoms and became an extension of apartments' private space. Sofa beds, couches, easy chairs, cabinets and shelves began to appear here and there in hallways and landings. Flower pots, embroideries, pictures were hung on walls and balustrades. Patterned vinyl floor coverings were placed atop the cold concrete floors, which meant that upon exiting the elevator one immediately felt at home. It was a kind of shared space which in later years for the most part began to disappear for a variety of reasons: the growing gap in people's level of material wealth and increasing instances of theft of decorative elements within apartment block hallways, in addition to the stronger and stronger urge to close up and to prevent break-ins. Stricter fire code restrictions also played a part in this reduction. In spite of the fact that housing estate inhabitants have become older or died or moved away and new residents have moved in, the old bonds of these micro-societies are still visible. Today's public spaces of Polish housing estates are an excellent reflection not only of the societal, civilizational, and political changes which have occurred in Poland over the last quarter century, but also the metamorphoses which take place here and now, both positive and negative. It is much rarer to see in apartment block corridors these days the furniture arrangements mentioned previously, while stairwells, basements, and drying rooms on the upper floors are no longer the domain of children's games as they were in the past. Access to stairwells is limited by intercoms, and many inhabitants have equipped their homes with double doors and anti-theft locks.



Source: Small gardens in front of Polish high-rise apartment blocks (photo: Jarosław Matla).

The space surrounding apartment blocks also no longer belongs to children, or at least not to the extent as it did in the past. The process of adaptation has expanded to balconies, which have become enclosed, and what is interesting, to small gardens. What in the past was a neglected small piece of lawn with a few bushes located at a building's entrance that was notoriously trampled by everyone, today has become a well-cared reason for pride, an object of rivalry between apartment blocks in housing complex competitions for the prettiest and best looked after garden. And they have also become a meeting place for older residents. Benches located in front of apartment blocks are still used as meeting places and as locations for exchanging local gossip, although less and less often. Housing cooperatives (not everywhere) that have been active for a couple of decades have led to the thermal modernization of apartment high-rises, and to the creation of parking lots for the constantly increasing number of cars. New commercial spaces and shops have arisen, and the area between blocks has been filled by a web of sidewalks, steps, ramps, often built directly over dirt paths that had been trampled in the lawns by local residents.

The reshaping, furnishing, and the decoration of one's nearest surroundings are not the only indications of bottom-up micro-adaptations. Guerilla gardening, which has gained enormous popularity in many countries, could be included into this type of intervention; in other words, the act of sowing plants (not necessarily legally) by residents and activists in various parts of cities. If when we talk about green spaces, even the smallest of completely legal acts, for example the creation of gardens on balconies or apartment building roofs, or the beautifying of building courtyards (neighborhood contests for the most beautiful balcony flower garden or movements to revitalize courtyards are becoming widespread) by local residents influence not only their own residential environment, but the esthetics of surrounding areas, streets, etc.

Spatial ephemera

Urban space with the weight of its record of strata accumulated over time, is full of contradictions, can be capricious, and is never perfect, but the discordant changes that take place slowly during the lifespan of an average human being, stimulate the start of changes. However, because cities, with their buildings and structures, are a lasting record of history and events, is there any point in implementing in them temporary, fleeting interventions which will often be imperceptible? Do such interventions have any meaning and is there any way that they can be studied? If we look at them through the prism of the Kinetic City, that is, the city of events, perhaps it would be possible to classify them as spatial events, social-spatial, architectural events or events bordering on the realm of art and architecture. Many architectural installations erected in urban space are frequently surprising, provocative, stirring. They stimulate the senses and require us to look at the space in which they appear in a new light or they completely change our perceptions of their setting. They make us aware of a particular place and its problems, or conversely they divert us from the magnitude of a place and bring us back down to the human scale. Initiatives whose goal is this kind of temporary intervention in urban space are often organized by various associations, non-governmental organizations, collectives, thus one could say that although many of these groups benefit from various grants, subsidies, or private sponsors, they are happenings that for the most part are of a grassroots, public service nature. Even when they are coordinated by architects, artists, students or cultural impresarios and city activists and not by local inhabitants themselves, they are often a collaborative work thanks to the participation of the local community or volunteers. When temporary objects appear in the space between buildings they always contain some sort of message, and by way of their short-lived existence always embody some kind of contrast, polarity with the surrounding urban environment. Later they disappear, leaving behind only memories, publications, articles, photographs, or short videos. Regardless, their role in enlivening not only public space, but in the awakening and strengthening of people's relation to public space cannot be underestimated. One of the key factors in the attractiveness of public spaces is their abundance of urban activities, and essentially the more there are within the area of a particular place, the greater the chances that the space will be dearer to users, and also recognizable even on the scale of the entire city.



Source: Folly for a Flyover by collective Assemble Studio (photo: Matthew Black © CC BY-SA 2.0).

Stimulating unconventional events and situations in public spaces is one of the concerns of, among others, the London collective Assemble Studio, who have been responsible for such singular endeavors as the Folly For a Flyover (2011) project, a temporary structure located in Hackney, one of London's neighborhoods, under an overpass, which brought together in this previously oppressive and unpleasant place throngs of people as part of workshops, film screenings, and other organized events. One of the results of this intervention, organized as part of the Create Festival, was the involvement of the city government in this part of the city and the speeding up of improvements on the neighborhood's infrastructure. You could say that, beyond the momentary creation of a sort of genius loci, ephemeral actions also brought about in this case a permanent change.

We could also include the initiatives of the very active French collective, „Collectif Etc” in the category of urban architectural-social events. They install seats, temporary urban furniture, arrange meeting place, look-out points, city gardens in diverse places that attract local residents and public space users in general, to their endeavors. All of „Etc”'s works display a drive to stimulate interpersonal interaction, to create or increase circumstances that encourage one to stop and to meet. As was previously mentioned, nearly all of the collective's actions could be qualified as architectural events, however, amongst the broad spectrum of their most recent works, it is worth mentioning two which especially feature a civic aspect. The first, La Halle Puget (2015) in Marseille, on one of local town squares „Etc”, along with the Les Têtes de l'Art association and the artist Jihanne El Meddeb, created a kind of temporary installation. For almost a half a year they enlivened the square through the use of various events and by altering the "furnishings" of the space. The entire event was connected with a larger effort led by local activists that had been going on for a couple of years intended at reactivating the potential of this empty, underutilized square located in a busy and crowded part of town. The second project, carried out in 2015, was a mobile discussion platform "Le PaPoMo- Parlement Populaire Mobile". The modular structure could be moved from place to place depending on needs and easily reinstalled. The entire structure was a kind of semicircular miniature amphitheater, on whose benches debaters could sit. While mentioning "Collectif Etc" in this context, it seems natural to mention other, earlier initiatives, namely the arrangement of abandoned, unused city plots in Saint Etienne, at the junction of Cugnot and Rue Ferdinand streets (2011). The so-called Place au changement (later known also as the Giant Square after a piece of wall graffiti), which could be translated as "Square of Change", originated as a mirage, as the imaginary space of improvised apartments and courtyard in a non-existent corner building. With the slogan "Make yourself some room" (Fr. Faites-vous une place!), neighboring residents were invited to participate in the creation of this fragment of neighborhood that in recent years had been developing rapidly. The initiative was intended to give residents a chance at active participation in this development instead of just being passive observers. During the six-week duration of the event, participants along with members of the collective and also artists who were invited to take part, first and foremost created a place, because it was a kind of construction site. Simultaneously there were concerts, exhibits, food markets, tango sessions and other activities at the site, which attracted hundreds of guests and integrated the local community. After two years, in 2013 "Collectif Etc" returned to the place one again organizing similar events.

Among the plethora of examples of various architectural, artistic, and social-spatial "events" in Polish cities it is certainly worth acknowledging the works of the Polish artist Iza Rutkowska. Her humorous, colorful, buoyant installations sewed from colorful fabrics divert us from our daily routine. Example like "Jeż" (Hedgehog) 2016 or "Przytulanka" (Cuddly) 2013 strive to

domesticate public space, make it warmer and in a certain sense more intimate. "Hedgehog" was created as part of this year's "Wrocław – backyard door" project and was intended to enliven the grey tenement courtyards of one of the most neglected neighborhoods in Wrocław, while also encouraging residents to leave their homes and integrate with other local residents. The great cuddly bear – "Cuddly", on the other hand, at first appeared in various parts of Warsaw, and then in other cities, and even outside of Poland. It was proof that in a certain sense urban space can become a "home" for users.



Source: "Jeż" (Hedgehog) by artist Iza Rutkowska – temporary, movable installation that appeared at the tenement courtyards of Wrocław (photo: Maciej Landsberg © Biuro Festiwalowe IMPART 2016).

During various festival initiatives connected with cities (i.e. Street Art Festival in Katowice, Narration in Gdańsk) many interesting temporary installations and structures appear. And at the same time this is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon, often as part of regularly scheduled annual city events. During such events surprising and clever murals appear on building and tunnel walls, while on squares and streets diverse structures divert us from the everyday monotony of city landscapes. In Poland, these types of situational actions that take advantage of urban backdrops in order to inspire spontaneous events and which operate on the fringe of disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, urban studies, and art are becoming more common. The Krakow Collective Palce Lizać (Finger Licking) has for years focused its actions around urban space and their efforts combine various genres: artistic performance, social endeavors, cultural events, or minor, temporary interventions in city space, all with the aim of involving local residents and space users. CPL conducts their initiatives not only in Krakow, but in other Polish cities and abroad. Another Polish artist, Izabela Bołoz is also active outside of Poland. She currently reside and works in Eindhoven, Holland. Her works are mostly types of urban installations: modular chairs, temporary taxi stands. These are places for waiting or stopping, located for a certain amount of time in a spot where normally there is no place to sit.

Forms of participation

The opportunity for citizens to actively influence the decisions made on higher levels of authority is also a form of active participation in the transformation of urban space. While many western practices of participation are today being revised or criticized as being empty modes of placating and not actual forms of initiating change⁹, in Poland the issue is only just in its infancy. The inclusion of city residents in the process of planning urban development, understood as their participation in the management of community issues to whom they belong¹⁰, is a subject that is receiving greater attention. It is a kind of goal that many city leaders willing profess, although in reality this is merely a facade, and participation is marginalized and unappreciated. Only recently have the mechanisms for the creation of a participation platform for cooperation between the public administration and urban community begun to form. Society as well is gradually opening up to such collaboration and in sense is learning how to take advantage of this tool in a constructive way and how to recognize situations in which participation is proposed in a disingenuous manner¹¹. It is assumed that a democratic government is a strong force of civic society.¹² The issue of strengthening the involvement of urban residents in the decision making processes that effects their city is not a simple matter in a country where due to the political situation for decades a feeling of distrust towards authority and a conviction that people had no real influence on government decisions became deeply ingrained. Regardless of this however, after the passing of twenty five years since the overthrow of the communist system a very clear change is apparent in peoples' attitudes towards this matter, and it's more than just a generational change, it's a change in mentality. More and more associations are forming in many Polish cities, along with civic projects, social action objectives, and their ability to effect the decisions of city governments is gradually increasing. These type of endeavors are at the same time aimed at various „players” in city life: residents, private companies and non-governmental organizations. As part of the program of social action that operate on the basis of crowdfunding it is possible to present various ideas related to urban public space projects. Projects may be of a manifold nature: temporary or permanent, and also of varying type. Residents stimulate and organize also in the realm of internet social networking services where they prepare protests, inform about important meetings with local authorities, and exchange comments on parts of the city that interest them.

Recently an area that has become a proving ground for interesting processes is the Polish city, Łódź, which it is worth noting, that due to the collapse of local industry has been in a state of crisis. Łódź has earned the unenviable epithet of the Polish Detroit, the - *shrinking city*¹³. Over the last decade local city authorities have desperately grasped at various attempts at stimulating local development by large, or even spectacular in terms of the scale of the city, investments, such as the revitalization of the former Israel Poznański factory which was transformed into the so-called Manufaktura Łódź, a commercial-service district featuring some cultural and entertainment elements. The refurbishment of the former EC1 power plant into a sort of city cultural center, and the ongoing construction of a new neighborhood called the New Center

⁹ Miessen M., Koszmar partycypacji, Publisher: Bęc Zmiana, Warszawa 2013, p.65.

¹⁰ Hausner J. (ed.), Górniak J., Kołdras S., Mazur S., Paszkowska R., Komunikacja i partycypacja społeczna. Poradnik, Publisher: Małopolska Szkoła Administracji Publicznej, Kraków 1999, p.41.

¹¹ Kalisiak-Mędelska M., Partycypacja społeczna na poziomie lokalnym jako wymiar decentralizacji administracji publicznej w Polsce, Publisher: Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego 2015, p.149.

¹² Ibidem, p.141.

¹³ Hanzl M., Przestrzenie miasta – o urbanistyce Łodzi [in:] Architektura i Biznes 03/2014, Publisher: RAM, Kraków 2014, p.54.

Łódź on old railway land. However, these large-scale investments did not have much to do with the real state of affairs in Łódź, and most of all, with the quality of life of local residents. Community consultation was almost entirely overlooked during their planning. Supposedly consultation took place, however the methodology of the social surveys were not appropriate in terms of the size and scale of these investments¹⁴. In every study they declared a desire to improve the quality of life in the city, the living standard of residents and attracting to the deteriorating city an injection of capital, while only recently has public participation taken on greater significance as one of the most crucial elements in changes that are to come. Perhaps the turning point were the results of consultations held regarding the revitalization of a group of workers' houses that belong to a former factory complex known as Księży Młyn, which resulted in a broad and multifaceted plan to improve the functioning of this district¹⁵. The means of revitalizing the city that had previously been taken were seemingly inspired by the known myth of the Bilbao Effect, and only now have they begun to understand in broader terms, the slogan: no revitalization without participation. The revitalization project of the Łódź New Center has begun, as a result of which the city has been divided into zones. This part of Łódź is an area that for decades has been besieged by an array of problems: social problems such as unemployment, crime, dilapidation of buildings and public space, a lack of green space, and in addition the exodus of residents to other cities which is also one of the causes of all these problems. The city center was divided into 20 revitalization zones, and then they began to carry out pilot programs with the aim at creating a model for accomplishing the revitalization of a given section of the project. The pilot programs not only took into consideration the collection of information on the matter of a particular area, but most of all the involvement of local residents in the process of change that was about to take place. Education and the instruction of teachers and schools throughout the city on how to educate about the transformation of the city was an additional feature of the program. At the same time consultations were held in the first 8 priority zones, and now they are being continued in the remaining zones. If the plan is successful there exists the chance that gradually, thanks in part to the participation of the residents and the acknowledgement of their needs, and not the misaimed aspirations of being a great metropolis, Łódź in a few years will become a positive example of well thought-out revitalization.

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Urban space needs to be managed, however in this complicated process the voice of urban residents is becoming louder. For obvious reasons the present article does not exhaust all of the possible examples of temporary and bottom-up initiatives in western countries, nor in Poland, but in accordance with the author's intent, indicates a certain interesting scenario and its difficult to pin down nature. Namely, the scenario of the voice of the users of architecture, of cities and their urban space, along with the scenario of various types of short-lived ephemera in public space, which cannot be planned out by way of executive top-down city planning, architectural design or urban planning. The scenario of a certain kind of self-organization, spontaneous independence in the adaptation of one's surroundings to one's needs, which escapes the traditional way of thought on both management of urban space and its shaping. Thinking about the future of cities and observing how amongst their inhabitants the awareness of people's right to influence the decisions in the co-creation of their space is gradually increasing, it is possible to imagine that in contrast to today's understanding of the mechanism

¹⁴ Madejska M., Wokół EC1. Rewitalizacja NCL w teorii i praktyce [in:] Architektura i Biznes 03/2014, Publisher: RAM, Kraków 2014, p.40.

¹⁵ Hanzl M., op.cit., p.55.

of partnership, participation as such could become someday something greater than just an invitation to share in the space design process. Instead of being just a part of professional planning, professional planning could become one of the elements of participation,¹⁶ broadly understood, and also as bottom-up transformation of one's nearest surroundings, in other words, micro-space.

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¹⁶ Jędruch, D., *Ludzie jako ludziki. Obraz użytkownika w teorii architektury* [in:] *Autoportret. Pismo o dobrej przestrzeni. Partycypacja i partycypacja*, vol. 51, no.4, Publisher: Małopolski Instytut Kultury, Kraków 2012, p.41.