

## **Półwiejska Street in Transition: Gentrification or Revitalization?**

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on identifying and interpreting the ongoing processes of spatial and social transformation that have recently been happening on Półwiejska Street in Poznań. Półwiejska Street, known to the wider public for the Old Brewery shopping centre and the minority demonstration called “the Equality March,” has become the leading example of ongoing urban change in Polish cities. This paper reports on the empirical findings from press analysis and in-depth interviews, commenting both on socio-spatial transformations and on their cognitive mappings. The case of Półwiejska Street is described in the light of two interpretative grids used for understanding urban change in social theory: (1) gentrification, and (2) revitalization. The empirical study identifies traces of both gentrification and revitalization practices, which overlap in the process of urban change occurring on Półwiejska Street. The author argues that these two notions not only describe the processes of urban renewal, but are also employed to construe discourses on urban change.

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## Introduction

Urban space has always been one of the most crucial conditions for the arising and expression of social change. For philosophers and anthropologists, the figure of the city, the rhetoric of its local and global discourses and practices, has become a metaphor for experiencing the world in contemporary European societies. The spatial forms produced by human action express and perform power relationships between the city, the state, the European Union, and the universe. On one hand, the planning of urban space, and inhabiting it, should be emphasized as a key to mapping collective imaginations; on the other hand, one should also think about political, cultural, and scientific narratives as factors shaping the social understanding of spatial transformations. Under the conditions of postmodernity, politicians, urban practitioners, and ordinary urban dwellers employ various discursive strategies to make sense of the distinctive modes of urban change. The local governments, together with urban planners, seek legitimization for proposed spatial transformations, while at the grassroots level, new forms of social and political struggle involving minorities, races, immigrants, women, and community-based coalitions attempt to find successful ways of creating the counterspaces of politics, cultural practice, and everyday life.

Discourse on urban change reflects the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, growth and shrinkage, planning and practice, reality and imagination, localness and globalness, places and flows, and so forth. Scientific knowledge, together with political narratives and common sense, take part in translating urban transformations for the wider public. One of the types of spatial transition which draws the attention of social scientists and socially investigative journalists is inner city renewal. This paper comments on the two main notions used in relation to the renewal of historic districts – revitalization and gentrification (Miles 2000a; Smith 2002; Ley 2002; Lees 2002). The author argues that these notions not only address the processes of spatial and social transformation, but also are employed to construe political discourses on urban change: the discourse of revival and the discourse of exclusion.

The paper, however, is not an attempt to theorize on the similarities between scientific discourses, but to describe the problems of urban space production in Poland. Although ever since the breakdown of the



Figure 1. People on Półwiejska Street

communist system in 1989 Polish cities have been participating in the same globalized processes of change as those in Western Europe and America, the modes and social outcomes of these transformations are often significantly different. This article comments on the problems of structuring and restructuring urban spaces in Poland by focusing on the case of the transformation of Półwiejska Street in Poznań. The original idea of the empirical research was to look at the ongoing spatial and social transformations with particular reference to discourses on revitalization and gentrification, as well as to the site-specific consequences of urban developments on networks of human interaction. Has Półwiejska Street been revitalized or gentrified? What are and will be the social outcomes of this spatial transformation? How are the changes experienced by ordinary city dwellers? These questions are to be answered on the basis of empirical findings from press analysis and field work on Półwiejska Street, where 30 in-depth interviews have been conducted.



Figure 2. The Old Brewery

## Uncertainties over the revitalization of Półwiejska Street

Półwiejska Street has gone through some major spatial, social, and cultural transformations described by the local government and media as the most spectacular and successful revitalization in Poznań. In recent years on Półwiejska Street, the Old Brewery – a huge shopping, cultural, and business centre – has been built by the richest woman in Poland, and in the years following its construction it has won prestigious competitions to find the best shopping centre in Europe and in the world. The public sector has been involved in the spatial transformation,

funding the new surface of the street, new street lighting, and the most popular monument in the city. The landlords have started renovation works in the historic tenement houses. Półwiejska Street has changed: The Old Brewery – with its hundreds of shops, restaurants, cinemas, clubs, and galleries – has become an icon of Poznań, and the most crowded place in the city. Półwiejska Street is full of people at most times of the day. The newspapers and local authorities have announced the success of the inner city revitalization. There are, however, some uncertainties which question the image of the revitalization.

The revitalization process, in its narrow and distinctive sense, should be understood not only as the social practice which effects the renewal of spatial infrastructure and the functional revival of transformed space, but also fulfils the condition of preserving the intentions of town planning, with regard to the community inhabiting the space in question. This mode of urban change is realized mostly within special revitalization programmes, which have been common in western Europe since the 1970s. Revitalization in this sense is one of the procommunity actions of the welfare state (Heller 2005; Billert 2005; Billert 2006; Guździół 2005).

Although the socio-spatial transformation of Półwiejska Street seems similar to the changes realized within complex revitalization programmes, it is significantly different with regard to some important issues. Firstly, the spatial change consisted of a number of independent transformation processes, which were not coordinated within a broader framework. Despite their complimentary character, the actors responsible for each transformation – the Kulczyk family constructing the Old Brewery, the municipality laying down the new street surface, and various landlords renovating their tenement houses – each decided on their actions and work schedule independently from the others. Secondly, the local community was not involved in the decision making, and so the spatial transformation did not fulfil the condition of communicative planning. The local authorities attempted to consult the local community on their ideas by launching an advisory body called the Półwiejska Street Association, but these attempts did not prove to be successful (Swianiewicz, Klimska, and Mielczarek 2004).



Figure 3. Laundry



Figure 4. Bar on Półwiejska Street



Figure 5. "Ink refilling"

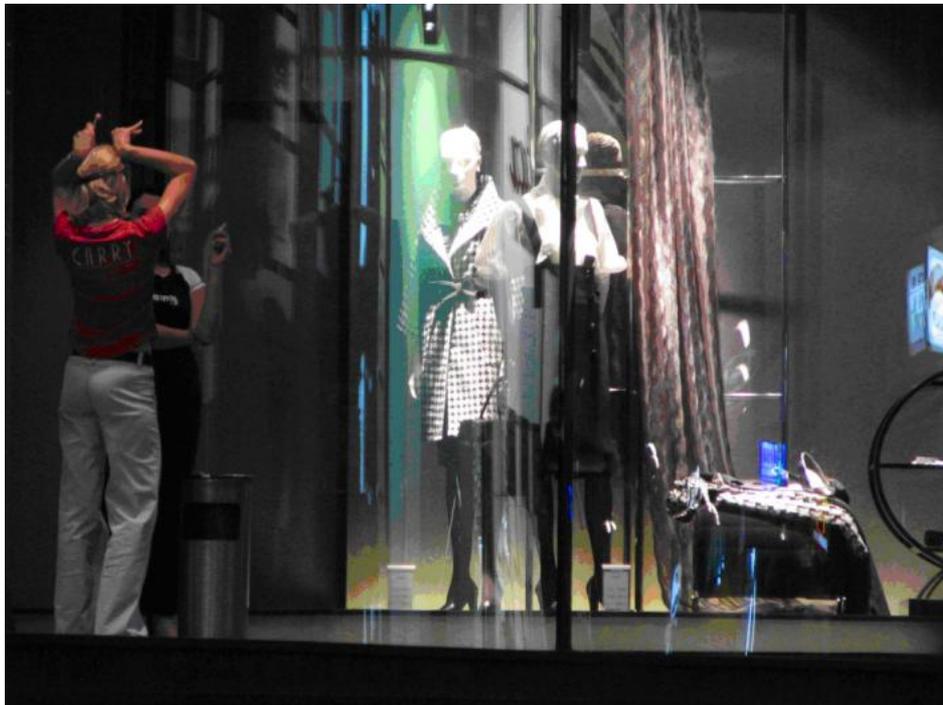


Figure 6. A cigarette break



Figure 7. Leather goods



Figure 8. "Retro," in the Old Brewery



Figure 9. "Diamond," domestic goods



Figure 10. Museified house behind glass

Thirdly, the renewal of the old housing infrastructure has been so far superficial. In most cases, landlords have renovated only the façades of the buildings, while the interior spaces have remained dilapidated. As a consequence, Półwiejska Street is still the site of major spatial, functional, and social discontinuities: between the Old Brewery and the little shops, between the interior and the exterior, between multinational and local commerce, between the old and the young, between the rich and the poor, and between the dominant and the marginalized (Ley 2004; Castells 2001). The street has become a containing space for contradictory aesthetics: the poor, sketchy landscape of the local population, and in contrast, the new luxury world of the shopping mall. Finally, and connected to the previous point, the socio-spatial changes have not caused the preservation, empowerment, or revival of the local community. The consequences of the spatial transformation for the local community seem to be rather the opposite. The poor people who have inhabited the inner city district for many years are now multidimensionally excluded from their living space. Hence, the urban change on Półwiejska Street is often described and experienced by the poor urban dwellers there as gentrification.

### **Is Półwiejska Street gentrified?**

The concept of gentrification introduces the second discourse on urban change involved in discussing urban renewal – the discourse of exclusion. This refers to processes in which poor working class communities are pushed away from the inner city by the middle classes, as a consequence of the renovation of the historical centre. Contrary to the discourse of revival found in writings on revitalization, authors who analyse the process of gentrification focus mostly on the negative consequences of urban renewal for local populations (Atkinson 2002; Blomley 2002). Critical leftwing thinkers usually understand urban renewal as one of the processes of public space privatization. Gentrification in this sense – together with the commodification, aesthetization, and militarization of the city – is seen as the destruction of urban public space (Zukin 1995; Sassen 2000; Harvey 1973; Jałowiecki 1988). In the first phase, as a consequence of the rising prices of services and the

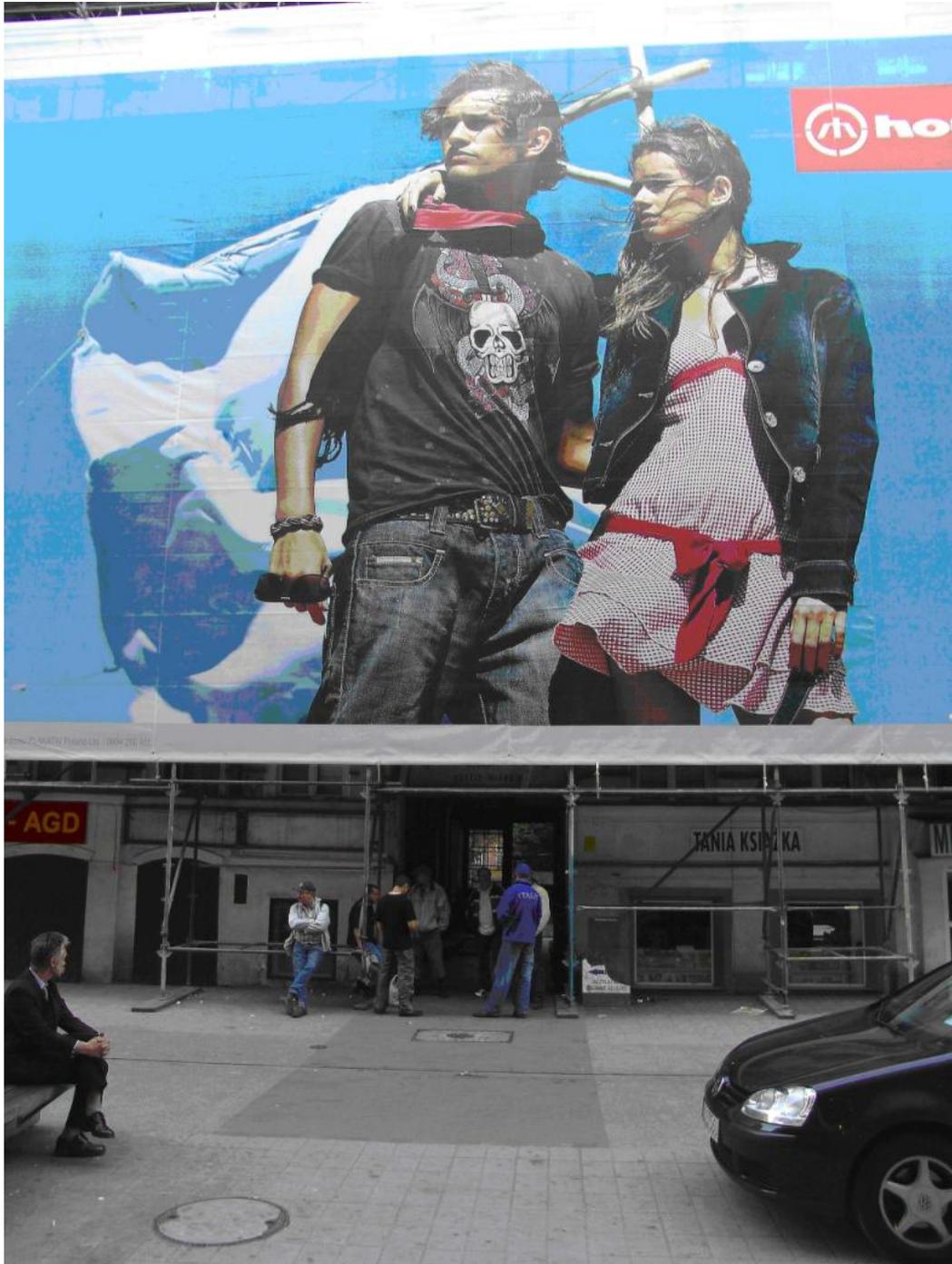


Figure 11. Whose is Półwiejska Street?

procession of new lifestyles in the renovated districts, poor populations are pushed away from the public spaces to their homes. In the second phase, they cannot afford the rising rents, forcing them to leave their homes and move from the city centre. In a practical sense, this mode of urban renewal, which has become common in American cities, is understood here as an application of the “user pays” philosophy to urban space and public services, and as a practice of appropriation of the city by business and middle classes.

In many aspects the socio-spatial transformation of Półwiejska Street fits into the above-mentioned analysis of urban renewal. Furthermore, urban change in Poznań might seem to be one of the leading examples of so-called big-investment driven processes of gentrification. It was in fact the construction of the shopping and cultural centre which stimulated the further spatial changes. Both rents and the price of services in the area are significantly higher than five years ago, and the street is populated by more powerful consumers. There is also, however, a major problem with describing this socio-spatial transformation as gentrification: the middle classes are not interested in living in Półwiejska Street. Why? There are at least four points which call into doubt the description of the process as gentrification.

First of all, urban trends in Poland are fifty years behind the trends which brought the drive for the inner city to America in the 1980s. The spatial mentality of postcommunist societies seems to be similar to the postwar mentality in America. After many years of the domination of multifamily housing units, Poles do not aspire to move into old historic tenement houses in the centre, but rather to live in detached houses with gardens on the outskirts of a big city (Andrusz, Harloe, and Szelenyi 1996; Lorens 2005; Parysek 2005). Second, there is no cultural consumption ethos among the Polish middle classes. The city centre with its clubs, bars, galleries, and theatres attracts mostly single and retired people who want to have fun in public spaces. Polish society is still family- and house-oriented. Third, the drive for the inner city usually manifests most strongly in culturally rich metropolitan areas inhabited by multinational corporate personnel, but Poznań not only does not have corporate headquarters, but also has the poorest cultural infrastructure and nightlife of the larger Polish cities (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2007; Podemski and Ziółkowski 2004; Ziółkowski 2001). Fourth, Półwiejska



Figure 12. “Erotic dreams”

Street itself is not a place which is likely to attract the middle classes. Rather, it is a provincial street surrounded by ordinary and unimpressive nineteenth-century architecture, which through a historical paradox has recently become one of the most important spaces in the city. Although it is very attractive to consumers and tourists, it is not likely to seduce potential middle-class inhabitants.

### **The local paradox: evictions without gentrification**

Despite the unwillingness of the middle classes to move to Półwiejska Street, the old inhabitants express strong fear of eviction. Rents are constantly rising; the structure of local commerce has changed. This commerce is addressed to young yuppie consumers, while most inhabitants are old and poor. The research conducted shows that the

majority of them already have problems in affording rent, or expect to face this difficulty in the near future. In personal statements they express feelings of exclusion and marginalization. The street is no longer theirs. The everyday world in which they used to live is rapidly disappearing. Public space has been increasingly colonized by young visitors who have brought a different rhythm and ambience to the place.

The conflict being fought between Półwiejska's inhabitants and consumers over the symbolic appropriation of space is not the most important one. Far more crucial are the growing conflicts between the inhabitants and the owners. The landlords are simply not interested in leasing the flats to them any more. Although the middle classes are not eager to move to Półwiejska Street, the landlords, seduced by promises of future gains, would like to get rid of the troublesome old tenants. They usually hope to sell the parcels for a high profit, or convert them into offices or hotels. Although such imaginations about the future development of the street might often sound unrealistic, the landlords are ready to take the risk of not having tenants or buyers for the flats. In the worst case, they could rent the apartments temporarily to students, which would generate higher income and eliminate potential problems with evictions in the future.

## **Conclusions**

The socio-spatial transformations of Półwiejska Street differ significantly from the processes described by the revitalization and gentrification theorists. Although the spatial changes fit both of the concepts, their current social implications and future directions are left unclear. The discourses of revitalization and gentrification cannot allow complete interpretation of the concrete processes of urban change; however, they are very important in shaping the political drives of social change. These concepts, which are rooted in various socio-cultural demands shaped in an era of postindustrial confusion and uncertainty about urban management, are important not only for the multidimensional analysis of urban life, but also in shaping the actions of practitioners in space. They are significant also as a part of today's urban imagery, referring as they do to our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality, and to the interpretative grids with which we think about places, spaces, and the communities we live in.

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