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THE UNITED STATES AND POLAND: A WORLD'S DIFFERENCE

STANY ZJEDNOCZONE I POLSKA: RÓŻNE ŚWIATY

Abstract

The concept of urban living has changed over the course of time. By comparing the United States and Poland, one can study the different aspects of each city's urban characteristics and conclude on what works and what does not. The core or heart of a city must be consistent, persevering, and always strive to be the foundation of the urban area. Modernization must not distract or hinder the inhabitant from truly knowing how its environment lives and breathes.

Keywords: public space, physical infrastructure, modernization, governmental policy, Times Square, Krakow's city center

Streszczenie

Koncepcje miast i warunki życia zmieniały się na przestrzeni wieków. Porównując miasta w Stanach Zjednoczonych i Polsce, prześledzić można ich cechy charakterystyczne i pokazać, co w nich działa dobrze, a co źle. Jądro (serce) miasta musi być logiczne, trwałe i zawsze dokładające starań, aby być dla miasta fundamentem. Modernizacja zaś nie może odciągać czy powstrzymywać mieszkańców od doświadczania tego, jak ich miasto żyje i oddycha.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń publiczna, fizyczna infrastruktura, modernizacja, polityka władz, Times Square, centrum Krakowa

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Growing up in Morgantown, West Virginia, a state that possesses more trees than buildings may suggest that my opinion on urban housing means nothing. However, the town lies within 5 hours driving distance of some of the largest metropolitan areas in the country such as Washington D.C., Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and New York City. I have been to all these cities numerous times over twenty-two years, seen many different varieties of urban space, and have witnessed the dynamic growth and decline of each city over two decades. Compared to twenty-two years, I have only had the privilege of living in Krakow for two months. This is a very important thing to remember as my experience on housing in American urban areas far outweighs my experience here in Poland. However, I will compare and contrast the two diverse strategies towards urban development, try to discover the pros and cons of each, and show how the two can work together to provide its inhabitants a concept and plan for a better urban future.

First one may ask, Are Urban America and Urban Poland really that different? The answer to the question is yes, and I believe one reason is due to the drastically different methods of governmental policies the United States and Poland enforce. Both countries' governments will always affect the patterns of urban cores, and similarities exist in the contemporary patterns and problems of city areas between the United States and Poland; however, they contrast in their problematic ways of distribution. America governmental policies have damaged the quality of living in central cities in part to the establishment of low-income housing that at one time was integral to national urban planning and policy. Though this policy may seem like a logical economic solution, it magnifies the problems that American cities have with the type of population that occupy these facilities. In America, I personally have witnessed many high concentrations of poverty. Most large cities in the United States have now obtained the responsibility of taking care of the nation's poor. Unfortunately this puts a negative view on downtown living to some and in their eyes, forcing them to live outside of the city, away from the danger and crime of those that are poverty stricken. This could explain why at this point in history, larger American cities are struggling more from the economic crisis. If a large city does not contain economically stable living, then there is no money to keep that downtown area or city centre going. From the time I have been in Kraków, including an eight day trip to most of Poland's largest metropolitan areas, it seems that each city's centre possesses thriving economic activity. Perhaps this exhibits that urban housing in Kraków and other Polish cities aid in the economic growth, displaying why they have not suffered as much as those cities in America.

Along with the notion of government, perhaps we should compare the distance of government to the actual physicality of the city between the United States and Poland. This is important to look at considering the governments decisions guide the future of the city and how it is developed. If you look at many historical Polish cities and towns, the town hall is centrally located at the heart of the city in the center of the market square, hinting that the government was part of the town, always interacting with the people. In America, many citizens do not even know where their city's town hall lies. Therefore, this points to the notion that without a central point in a city where population and economic growth can flow out of, a lack of cohesiveness within that city exists. Inhabitants do not interact with one another, and more importantly they do not know the future of their own home, and in some cases do not ever care. A good urban community will teach the ones living within it to care, nurture, and always support its future.

Another key reason that has most definitely caused differences between the two countries is modernization. What makes urban living so great? It should not only be the close-knit interaction with the city, but also its inhabitants. America's new forms of modern developments within the city have hindered what an urban space for living should truly be. Take for example New York City. What exactly is NYC's city centre? Some may presume it to be Times Square. However, compared to Poland's centre's it contrasts tremendously. The modernization of architecture into things such as billboards, signs, and even vehicular traffic causes the space to act as a hindrance between what the home and its dweller should experience. In fact, modernization in New York has caused its citizens to live outside the city. Therefore that relationship with the city and knowing how it breaths each and every day does not exist now and never will with so many. Yes it is a great tourist attraction, but it lacks that sense of character that so many areas in Poland withhold.

Another dynamic difference between Poland and America is the physical infrastructure of the city such as networks of transportation. From all the cities I have visited, Kraków most definitely sets the bar high for public transit. Though they do not possess an underground system like New York City, the efficiency of the bus and tram lines are quite extraordinary. From the cities I have visited in the states, New York City and Washington D.C. are the only two that truly rival Kraków. Providing efficient public transportation will always remain vital to the success of the urban living of any city. Without it, not only does interaction between citizens cease to exist, but also the interaction between the dweller and its environment. Public transportation encourages walking within the city, which allows the inhabitant to know its surroundings much more than if he were to drive his car to a public garage and walk across the street to wherever he needs to go. America needs to grab hold of the vision European cities obtain when it comes to this matter, and not only in bigger cities, but in smaller ones as well.

As I have stated before, the United States could learn a lot from Poland, however there are a couple things Polish cities could learn from America as well. The first example is landscape. When it comes to urban living, a clean and inviting green landscape must be kept up weekly. American cities seem to take better care of this far more than Kraków. The second factor is the general cleanliness and aesthetic appeal of apartment buildings surrounding the heart of the city. Krakow's non-historic buildings do not possess the same quality of up keep and appeal that America's do. This is a major factor in America when it comes to the quality of urban life since hardly any historical aspect exists. Perhaps Polish cities should put their time and effort into the up keep of its historical properties instead of its "newer" buildings; America does not have this unique opportunity.

Poland and the United States both possess dynamically different views on urban housing/living. Due to modernization, America has lost the right perspective on what urban living should really strive to be. Though many American cities come across much more modern, flashy, and to some more appealing, they truly lack that core urban area that drives a city for generations past and generations to come. Many of its cities possess thriving areas for one decade, and then newer area is built somewhere else, leaving a once popular area to suffer and eventually become a lifeless void in the city. With the establishment of a square in the heart of the urban city where everything flows hence forth, Poland has made sure that its cities contain consistency that its citizens can always find comfort in for years past and years to come - perhaps the most important aspect to the success of an urban development.