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URBAN LUDIC SPACES – AN ATTEMPT AT TYPOLOGIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an attempt to arrange urban ludic spaces into a typology. The author begins by proposing a definition of urban ludic spaces and goes on to discuss the assumptions involved in, and problems associated with the construction of a typology. The main body of the paper presents the typology of urban ludic spaces that the author developed after she had sorted and classified urban ludic spaces examined as part of the research carried out over the years 2001-2006. The examples around which the typology was developed were derived from direct ethnologic field research, carried out mainly in Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn – medium-sized towns located in the border region of Poland and the Czech Republic, with populations of 36 and 27 thousand, respectively, and also in other Polish and foreign towns of various size and with various cultural affiliations. The paper also looks at the increase in the number and importance of spaces designed for playing various games, fun activities, sports, and for pursuing tourist activities intended for non-urban environments. The author concludes that her attempt to typologize urban ludic spaces demonstrates the feasibility of constructing a typology of urban ludic spaces, and also provides useful information on contemporary cultural trends and transformations affecting urbanized societies.

Over the past few years, I have become particularly involved in the study of urban ludic spaces. Unfortunately, as there is not sufficient space in this article, I cannot discuss all the conclusions drawn from the systematic research that I have carried out over several years, mainly in Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn – medium-sized towns located in the border region of Poland and the Czech Republic, with populations of 36 and 27 thousand, respectively. Therefore, in my discourse below I have restricted myself to discussing one of the key issues identified in my research project, i.e., *typologization of urban ludic spaces*.

In my initial discussion, I will offer my own definition of urban ludic spaces. Next, I will describe the assumptions underlying my research

and its objectives as well as problems accompanying the construction of a typology. This will be followed by an account of how the construction of a typology developed in my research. In the main section of this paper I will present a proposal of how the sheer number and variety of urban ludic spaces can be fitted within a typological framework which, due to the space limitations of this paper, will take the form of a list of established categories, supplemented with brief explanations.

The statement that each instance of play takes place in a space can be regarded as sheer platitude that can be arrived at without engaging in scholarly inquiry. Not only does ethnographic data but also common sense inference confirm that forms of play evolve as man's environment under-

goes changes. While certain ludic activities require space as a very important element, in other forms of ludic activity space plays a negligible role. Obviously, we could content ourselves with the conclusion that play space, in each individual case, constitutes an environment that creates the desired atmosphere, a setting, or a symbolic representation of actual places. However, such interpretation is not likely to significantly contribute to our better understanding of the special nature of the space in which a game or play activity is conducted. Upon deeper reflection, it becomes apparent that the spatial aspect of ludic activities *is* important and that it merits further attention.

At the outset, for linguistic and methodological reasons, we need to adopt a particular interpretation of the concept of ludic spaces. It would be an oversimplification to use this term to designate those areas of space that have been deliberately adapted to serve, or designed to serve, as places where people can implement socially acceptable patterns of play behaviour. It seems to be more appropriate to understand the ludic space concept more broadly as referring to places where people engage in play activities, thus implementing culturally conditioned play behaviours. At this point it is advisable to make a distinction between the phrases “engage in play” and “can engage in play”. The inadequacy of the latter is highlighted by everyday experience. It is very often the case that people will not play, or if they do, they have hardly any fun playing, in ludic spaces that have been deliberately designed for play; by contrast, they enjoy themselves and derive satisfaction from play pursued in places that have not been adapted for play or where play activities are expressly forbidden. Taking account of the ethnologic perspective of the interpretation of the issue under consideration, I assume that ludic spaces are a broad and diverse category of broadly understood areas of space in which people engage in play, thus implementing culturally conditioned modes of ludic behaviour. Many games, play activities, pastimes or sports cannot be played or pursued unless the participants choose, create, arrange, imagine or enter a particular space that is suitably adapted and prepared.

One can begin research into ludic spaces by, for example, considering the specific character of types of such spaces that are very “distant” from one another – ranging from space imagined for playing a game, a board for a board game, virtual

space in a computer game, a stage, to a golf course. However, if we approach the problem of ludic spaces “as such” at this particular stage of exploring the issue, we will find our approach too abstract. On the other hand, if we restrict our research area to urban contexts, we will be in a far better position to carry out our analysis correctly and develop insightful conclusions. Although they change over time and space, places used for play constitute a permanent feature of the structure of urban environments. That is why I have made an assumption that urban ludic spaces can be considered a separate research category whose distinctness results, to a large extent, from the very fact of being situated within the city. It is urbanisation that has always been taken to determine the specific character of urban ludic spaces. Therefore, within the framework that I have established I consider the general category of places dedicated to play to be a set within which I have isolated a special subset – the category of urban ludic spaces.

Once we have developed a definition of urban ludic spaces, we can go on to begin discussing the question of how to represent them within a typology. Categorizing space is a ubiquitous phenomenon because “categories enable us both to organize and manage the world, and to create, mark and accommodate” space [2].

After I had collected, during my research, numerous different examples of urban ludic spaces, it occurred to me that it was advisable to further subdivide and classify these spaces according to certain characteristics and properties. In other words, I had to make allowance for typologization practically from the very beginning of my research. In practical terms, it was necessary to use a topology as I simply was not sure about what criteria to utilise in organizing the field material whose amount steadily grew as I was collecting my research data, over the years 2001-2006 in the divided town of Cieszyn and in other towns of various size – both at home and abroad.

It must be remembered that a typology is usually a “nominal [i.e. formal, existing in name only] composite measure”. A typology aims at “the classification (...) of observations based on the values of two or more variables” [1]. Its objective is to systematize phenomena that are the subject of a science, to provide an idiographic description of the set of objects being considered, and to develop a conceptual apparatus for a selected area of a particular science. In my case, the objective that lay

behind the classification of particular urban ludic spaces was to allocate to each documented example its “own” space in the research report. My aim was to carry out the classification as if it were “a creative act that brings new insights into understanding the problem being studied” [4]. “Every typology, every act of adopting the name of a type is of conventional nature and is not always precise, no general agreement can be expected regarding such a multifaceted phenomenon as (...)” the question of urban ludic spaces [5]. A typology of urban ludic spaces can contain a number of various categories, depending on which aspect of a phenomenon is being considered.

While developing the typology of urban ludic spaces that is presented below, I first undertook the task of arranging examples of such spaces according to pairs of opposing characteristics. To start with, I divided urban ludic spaces into *open and closed spaces*, according to where they are situated within the urban space, and into *formal and informal spaces* – according to their permanent or temporary, one-off nature.

The next step I took to confront the diversity of urban ludic spaces was to arrange them according to selected properties. Using information gathered from informants, I attempted to look at the issue through the prism of pairs of opposing adjectives. For instance, while analysing most illustrative patterns of ludic behaviour, typical of medium-sized towns, mentioned by the informants in the context of their flats, homes or gardens, I was actually looking into private play spaces, despite the fact that they were situated within the city. Another category that emerged from the informants’ statements and my own observations was that of public play activities pursued both in central areas of, and on the outskirts of Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn. On the other hand, my efforts to identify *visible and hidden spaces* dedicated to play did not succeed entirely because I did not have full access to the various hard-to-find places where certain groups of residents deliberately meet to pursue ludic activities. The presentation of the diversity of ludic practices and associated spatial contexts, against the background of differences between individual groups of residents of the two Cieszyns in terms of age, social status, cultural and ethnic affiliation proved that it was appropriate to introduce another division of urban ludic spaces – i.e. those accessible to all, as opposed to *exclusive spaces* where access is granted if certain requirements are satisfied. After

I had assessed the extent of the residents’ familiarity with ludic attractions developed for them by the municipal authorities as well as the extent to which the residents actually visit these places, I was able to distinguish a number of examples of institutional urban ludic spaces, and a few examples of non-institutional ludic spaces that are created when the residents simply need them, appropriating for their own use selected places in the city according to their ideas and current needs [3].

Another measure that proved helpful in the construction of my typology was to assign individual examples of urban ludic spaces to specific sections of my research report. My intention behind such groupings of apparently very different places associated with ludic activity was to highlight their common characteristics. When grouped together and included in a particular section of the report, these various ludic places lent themselves to further categorization.

First of all, while I was considering the issue of ludic spaces without referring to any particular town, I isolated a group of ludic spaces that come into existence based on the *existing form of the city*. These numerous spaces are established through the influence of universal cultural mechanisms; they come into existence, as it were, spontaneously, taking advantage of spaces that are available on hand. Within the category of established urban ludic spaces based on the existing form of urbanized areas, I have subdivided a category of places which I have termed *post-industrial ludic spaces*. Their chief characteristic consists in being established in those sections of urban space that used to be occupied by industrial development. The assignment of ludic and recreational functions to post-industrial urban spaces can take various forms; post-industrial urban spaces are taking on these new roles mainly in large cities, as part of transformations, typical of contemporary times, resulting from technological and civilization progress. When continuing work on sorting and organizing the examples of urban ludic spaces I had gathered I made a special effort to isolate and study another category that can be most aptly described as places that are created spontaneously or deliberately as an incidental product of the urban lifestyle. Factors such as the rhythm and lifestyle in towns nowadays and in the past, differences between town dwellers in terms of social and cultural background as well as careers and jobs, greater technological and financial potential than in the countryside, susceptibility

to crisscrossing foreign cultural influences, patterns of play behaviour and models of play spaces – contribute to cities being, as it were, hotbeds of ludic attractions, with both residents and tourists expecting these attractions to be constantly enhanced. The demand and preference, voiced by modern societies, and especially urban communities, for the provision of ways, and, what is also important to note, appropriate places, to fill their leisure time is displayed not so much by initiatives undertaken by individual people and informal groups of residents to independently adapt urban space to ludic uses, as in well-thought-out projects, overseen by municipal authorities, intended to provide the residents with ludic infrastructure satisfying their expectations. Even early urban civilizations were able to appreciate the benefits arising from carefully integrating and utilizing economic mechanisms, public order and potential to mould the ludic tastes of residents having more and more leisure time, with organized mass amusements or diversions. Nowadays, such purposeful municipal initiatives have become more spectacular and have grown in size.

At present, municipal authorities organize large-scale media-based entertainment events that utilize the latest technologies and are also advertised as tourist products; they are very inventive in exploiting natural features and architectural assets in the city for ludic purposes. What is more, municipal authorities often engage in expensive projects, creating a kind of “artificial environment”, thus enabling residents to pursue mountain sports or seaside leisure activities in the city centre, without having to travel to remote tourist resorts or rely on traditional tourist services. Given the number and types of the examples I have gathered, in this section of the discussion of urban ludic spaces I have decided to accord separate treatment to the encroachment and appropriation of non-urbanized areas in order to enable the implementation of contemporary leisure behaviour patterns. The natural environment i.e. mostly the countryside, is being increasingly developed and adapted to satisfy the ludic needs of urban dwellers, who regularly get away from cities, if even for a weekend. Preference is given to those ludic behaviours and spaces that promise to satisfy urban dwellers’ yearning of experiencing adventures in both natural and safe environments. Non-urbanized areas as well as urban outskirts and tourist resorts and spas serve as suitable examples of locations based on which we

can investigate the process of the creation and continual improvement of ludic spaces intended for pursuing sports and tourist activities. Since the 1990s, peripheral areas of Polish towns have become fertile ground for spectacular state-of-the-art leisure complexes. Modern urban dwellers, who are deeply convinced that the active and healthy life-style has beneficial effects, are seeking more and more intense experiences as well thrill and excitement. They are keen to experience the taste of flight, they want to try sailing or climbing in both the ordinary and unorthodox way. That is why urban dwellers are being drawn mainly to those sports and leisure activities that require physical effort and have been brought from various exotic parts of the world. Avid interest in the pursuit of various sports and tourist activities is a significant factor contributing to the strengthening of the cultural and economic position commanded by towns and cities offering such leisure opportunities; furthermore, these places have thus become a key element of contemporary leisure industry.

My analysis of examples of urban ludic spaces documented during the studies carried out in Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn has shown that town size determines the type of ludic spaces and, more importantly, the rate of changes. It was after I had discerned this seemingly obvious relationship that I decided to create another separate category for my typology to which I refer by the working, descriptive name of *ludic spaces typical of medium-sized towns*. The reason I made a comparison between elements, mainly formal ones, constituting the ludic infrastructure of Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn, and their big-city and small-town equivalents was that I wanted to distinguish a set of typical, distinctive play spaces found in medium-sized towns. Having found that leisure spaces in small towns are relatively unchangeable when compared with their big city counterparts, which are liable to evolve, I decided to determine the rate of change occurring in urban ludic spaces found in medium-sized towns. While I was making my observations in both Cieszyns, I took particular care to record the process of how urban ludic space models, shaped by influences exerted by large cities, were taking root in medium-sized towns. On the other hand, using selected examples of places to play for children I described the coming into being of new play spaces, disappearance of traditional ones as well as the constant persistent existence of some other play spaces which have come to

constitute further three categories of urban ludic spaces included in my typology.

What led me to distinguish another, very interesting category of urban ludic spaces, was the realization of the specific – dual and borderline – character of Cieszyn and Czech Cieszyn, which until 1920 constituted a single urban entity. Having considered and compared numerous, amply documented examples of ludic spaces, established mainly in border areas – as in the two Cieszyns and other cross-border towns¹, I decided to distinguish another category which I have termed *trans-border ludic spaces*. The creation of trans-border ludic spaces, both for practical and symbolic reasons, has a special meaning to it, and is only possible within divided towns. These are the spaces that are created on purpose as places for use by, and common good of, mixed, multicultural communities in divided towns. I was eager to identify the process leading to the creation of these shared spaces, which, apart from providing opportunities for play and entertainment, are intended to bring closer together close neighbours who have often been strangers to each other. The same Europeans that only several dozen years ago, without too much thought, drew bizarre borders across their continent, are now taking measures to provide special protection and support to divided cities, which are creating various types of trans-border ludic spaces, intended to assist in healing the wounds in neighbour relationships, and combining urbanised areas that were once arbitrarily divided, into functional and cultural entities.

The last step involved in the construction of the typology of urban ludic spaces based on examples collected mainly in the two Cieszyns, inhabited by Poles, Czechs and minority communities, entailed the identification *ethnic/national urban ludic spaces* which serve particular groups of this culturally varied urban population and which overlap, or correspond to, each other.

In summary, it needs to be pointed out that my attempt to examine the issue of urban ludic spaces from a number of viewpoints has shown that it is both reasonable and possible to depict their variety within a typology. On a more general note, to quote Mariusz Zemło, the examination of spaces

intended to provide ludic pleasures “as well as explication of their organisation could well be (...) the right way to describe and understand society” [6]. Although no analysis of urban ludic spaces can explain all aspects of the transformations affecting urban society today, it still shows that despite the cultural specificity of each type of ludic space, we *do* see a certain “continuity of changes”, in which “global and local transformations permeate and emphasize each other” [2].

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¹ Examples of European cross-border towns include Strasburg-Kehl on the French-German frontier, Komárno-Komárom shared by Slovakia and Hungary, and Polish-German Zgorzelec-Görlitz; in Europe, there are about thirty cross-border towns.