

Gralewska Anna

Neighbourhood as a fluid socio-spatial structure. A study of urban neighbourliness in Gdansk, Poland

Key words: social and economic geography, urban neighbourhoods, neighbourliness, socio-spatial dynamics, residential neighbourhoods, GIS-based delimitation

This dissertation examines the character and transformation of contemporary urban neighbourhoods in Poland, drawing on a combination of literature review and empirical research. The study focuses on the identification and interpretation of selected processes shaping neighbourhood relations in large cities, with particular attention to their social and spatial dimensions, based on an in-depth empirical case study of the city of Gdansk. The temporal scope of the research covers the contemporary period, with empirical data and analyses conducted primarily in the years 2020–2025, complemented by selected retrospective perspectives.

The research employs a range of methodological approaches, including original analytical frameworks and methods of data presentation, in order to capture the complexity and diversity of Polish urban neighbourhoods. The main hypothesis states that urban neighbourhoods are dynamic structures, sensitive to macro-social processes, whose character is shaped by the configuration of spatial features of housing estates as well as by institutional and grassroots activities.

The empirical part of the research is based on an original delimitation of residential neighbourhoods using GIS tools and their subsequent typology developed through cluster analysis. The study further includes the identification and geolocation of selected manifestations of local activity, allowing for an assessment of the intensity and spatial distribution of ‘neighbourliness’ in relation to different styles of dwelling. Quantitative analyses are complemented by an examination of correlations between correlations between the socio-spatial characteristics of residential neighbourhoods and an index of ‘neighbourliness’. In order to contextualise and deepen the quantitative findings, qualitative methods were also applied, including case studies, participant observation and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

The correlation analyses revealed that the level of neighbourliness varies according to the configuration of spatial features, such as functional diversity, population density and building intensity. The results revealed clear differences in the intensity of cooperative and solidarity-based neighbourhood relations across the types of dwelling styles identified through cluster analysis. The highest values of the index of ‘neighbourliness’ were observed in estates characterised by complex functional structures and relatively intensive use of space, whereas lower levels were associated with more homogeneous or functionally specialised types of residential neighbourhoods.

The analyses also confirmed the significant role of both institutional and bottom-up initiatives, including the importance of local leaders, in shaping solidarity-based neighbourhood relations. These findings suggest a form of locally embedded, yet macro-socially conditioned endogeneity. The synthetic interpretation of the findings enabled the conceptualisation of the evolution of urban neighbourhoods in terms of differentiated life cycles and developmental “biorhythms”, pointing to their fluid and context-dependent character. Ultimately, the results support the main hypothesis that the development of contemporary urban neighbourhoods results from the dynamic interplay between macro-social processes, the socio-spatial configuration of functionally defined residential areas, and institutional as well as grassroots activities.

The dissertation aims to describe and explain the observed phenomena while situating them within broader debates in urban studies. In doing so, it contributes to research on urban neighbourhoods in Poland and provides a basis for further comparative studies.