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Things and space in old age and an ageing society

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Abstract

Poland belongs to the group of countries in which the ageing process of the population has taken on a very violent dimension. Demographic forecasts indicate that the population of Poland in the middle of the 21st century will be one of the oldest in the group of European Union countries. The ageing of the population is a challenge, not only for the seniors themselves, but also for the whole society. Minimizing the negative effects of the ageing process requires undertaking actions in various areas of social policy in order to prepare for an increase in the number of elderly people with a simultaneous decrease in the number of people at pre-age and working age. The aim of the article is to present the impact and significance of objects and space in which seniors function on the life of older people. The ageing process of the population forces the adoption of measures aimed at adapting the private and public environment to the needs of seniors, in particular people with reduced ability to self-care and self-care. The article uses data from the GUS, NFZ, EC, MRPiPS and the results of the author's own research.

Introduction

A human needs various objects to survive and develop at every stage of his life. It is similar with the third and fourth stage² of a person's life. At this stage the needs in

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2 Until recently there were three main stages of life distinguished: childhood and early adulthood, adulthood and old age. It is currently considered whether to introduce the fourth category: longevity, for people over 90/100 years of age. The introduction of a

terms of objects change from large and expensive (a car, a television, a house with a garden) to little and uncomplicated ones (such as a cane or a diaper). At other times, these are the things necessary for creating and functioning of a large amount of factors of production, e.g. hospitals, public transport, etc. The things might become causative agents in the educational process (Makowska, 2018), but they also may be relevant in the process of preparation for old age. It is worth initiating a reflection on whether we are able to age well³ and eliminate negative aspects of ageing on individual and social level, without having regard to the environment we are associated with and things that accompany us in everyday life.

The main goal of the paper is to present what influence and importance the things and space have on the life of older people. Ageing population requires to take measures that eliminate to the greatest extent the negative effects of this process, i.a. social exclusion and marginalization, loss of ability to lead an independent existence, etc. In the case of older people, the exclusion might occur due to the loss of ability to use and operate common, standardized objects (Krajewski, 2008). The main area of interest in the paper revolves around issues connected with securing the needs of older people who have limited ability to live independently on a daily basis. The examples of good practice regarding the adjustment of private space (apartments, nursing homes) and public space (blocks of flats, districts, cities) to the needs of ageing society were presented. Also, the data used in the study come from Central Statistical Office (GUS), National Health Fund (NFZ), European Commission, The Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs (MRPiPS) and the results of author's own studies.

The old age is coming

Polish society is ageing. Since the beginning of the 1940s we have observed very low birth rates at the level of 1.3 – 1.4 children per woman of child-bearing age (GUS, 2018). We live longer. In 1970 life expectancy for a woman amounted to 73.3 years, and in 2017 it increased to 81.1 years. A similar increase is noted for men. In 1970 it was 66.6 years, and in 2017 – 74 years (GUS, 2017). Also, strong permanent external migration trends continue. Since Polish membership in the EU, it is estimated that 2.4 million people have left the country (GUS, 2018).

These figures clearly show that we live longer, which is very good news. However, birth rates have been declining for years (fertility below the replacement rate 2.15), and we face the problem of international migrations, mainly people of working age. At the end of the second decade of the 21st century older people (65 or over) constituted about 17% of the population, by 2070 their share will have risen, according to

new category is conditional on a constant increase of the number of people at the age of over 90 years.

3 While maintaining an individual's well-being, excluding factors which cause pathological ageing, i.e. pre-mature ageing.

demographic projections, to over 33% and will be higher than the expected average for the present 27 EU countries⁴, which is to be at 29% (EC, 2018).

Space for older people

While reflecting on the importance of space in older people's life, there are three kinds of space to be distinguished, depending on the scale:

- micro – house, apartment, room;
- meso – block of flats, district;
- macro – city, region.

Moreover, the requirements in terms of space in which an older person lives are connected with the stage of the ageing process, and diseases which influence the ability to live independently. The following can be distinguished here:

- completely independent people;
- independent people in need for mobile care;
- people in need for permanent stationery care (at home and/or care institutions);
- dependent people requiring specialized care (Care-Therapeutic Institute, inpatient hospices, nursing homes).

The degree of a senior's independence changes throughout the ageing process – in every case. Almost every older person (apart from sudden crises resulting in death, e.g. heart attack, car accident) requires help and support on a daily basis at a certain stage of their life. The period is sometimes short, and in other cases (e.g. Alzheimer's disease) next steps take place successively and senior's independence decreases with every week/month/year.

Living conditions of older people (n=150) who showed different degrees of independence and lived in buildings of different standards⁵ were the subject of the research conducted in Warsaw in 2017. Respondents determined the categories of barriers in the apartments they occupied and in the nearest surroundings.

4 The prediction was developed for all EU countries, without taking into account a possible exit of Great Britain from European Union

5 The full version of this report is published on the website of Pro-active Initiatives Foundation Go Silver (Fundacja Aktywnych Inicjatyw Rozwoju Go Silver), <http://www.gosilver.org.pl/raport-GS-seniorzy.pdf>

Tab. 1. Main structural barriers in apartments, buildings and surroundings in the opinion of seniors.

Apartments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tight rooms • no central heating • no shower base / too high • no bathroom • high thresholds • no grips in bathrooms
Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no elevator • no banisters • no vehicle • inconvenient passageways
Surroundings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uneven sidewalks • no elements of small architecture • little greenery • no facilities for the disabled

Source: (Cieśla & Iwański, 2017)

In the case of apartments the main problem was the square footage. The issue was reported mostly by people living in the outbuildings, the standard of which differs significantly from the one adopted in multifamily housing today. Another problem is the lack of central heating system which results in a necessity to use solid fuel stoves or quite expensive and ineffective electrical panels. Next group of barriers considered bathrooms (in extreme cases the lack of bathrooms) where respondents indicated that it is equipped with a bath when they need a shower. In terms of a building, respondents pointed out the lack of an elevator and no bannisters in the corridors. Inappropriate small infrastructure and no green areas (which are displaced in large cities with parking lots and new houses) were also described as problematic.

Apartment

On an individual level, ageing process affects the requirements that seniors' apartments shall meet. Agnieszka and Jan Cieśla (2018) point the following conditionings:

- as a result of children's independence and possible cases of widowhood, a sudden decline in demand for living space occurs;
- with time, deteriorating health makes it even more acute to function without ergonomic spatial solutions, and with architectural barriers;
- decrease of mobility occurs together with increase in the demand for services (e.g. healthcare services) and a necessity to search for social interaction outside the home, very often inhabited alone;

– capability to maintain the household decreases due to a more modest income after stopping or limiting professional activities, whereas poor physical condition might hinder past involvement in household chores (Cieśla & Cieśla, 2018, p. 44);

The scope of changes connected with the adjustment of an apartment to the senior's needs depends mostly on a degree of independence, economic potential for the household, architectural barriers and the needs a senior shows. The awareness of what changes might be made, and how they might be implemented (e.g. endowment from State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PFRON) is also significant. Older people get attached to the things they have collected throughout their life, and thus it is sometimes difficult to dispose of them. Even if the things might pose a potential risk for their health. Edbom-Kolarz and Marcinkowski (2011, p. 315) point out the external causes of seniors' falls resulting in severe injuries. They advise to remove the rugs from passageways, unnecessary furniture, accessories, and thresholds, and ensuring the proper lightning in the rooms, as well as safety in the bathroom through replacing a bath with a shower base and mounting essential grip handles and supports.

In terms of things influencing everyday life of seniors who require assistance, we might distinguish two categories. The first category of things is meant for seniors, the other - for their caregivers, family as well as professional ones. An apartment equipped with appliances which facilitate the care might be of significant importance for life comfort, but also for ergonomics and the safety of the caregiver at work. The attention should primarily be drawn to the bathroom, where, apart from replacing the bath with a shower unit, other facilities should be provided, e.g. a special toilet seat which facilitates to defecate unaided. With patients in more severe conditions, other facilities should be considered, e.g. a toilet or bath chair. When we are dealing with an immobilized person, it is important that we buy a special bed, anti-bedsore mattress and a set of accessories necessary for the care of a person with minimal autonomy.

While conducting the research in nursing environment of older people, the Author frequently found himself in a situation where seniors were aware of the fact that their apartment needs adjusting, but found it difficult to accept the "hospital nature" some items of equipment facilitating care presented (Iwański, 2016)⁶. The situation occurred mostly in the households where one of the spouses cared for the other. Sometimes, seniors' children try, unsuccessfully, to convince their parents to make necessary changes in the apartment. This context indicates that the changes, although necessary, must be accepted by the seniors themselves. In 2016 Warsaw opened the first Exemplary Senior Apartment where a number of the latest solutions in the field of gerontotech-

6 The Author of the article was conducting a research in 2018 and 2019 in terms of implementation of a new benefit for caregivers caring for Alzheimer's patients on a sample of 471 caregivers, which was introduced by Szczecin City Municipality under the name 'Bon Alzheimer 75' (Bon opiekuńczy Alzheimer 75). More information on the benefit can be found on Szczecin Benefit Centre (Szczecińskie Centrum Świadczeń). http://swiadczenia.szczecin.pl/index.php?r=bon_opiekunczy_al75

nology⁷. A space of 50 square meters was designed to enable an older person to live independently, even in the case of mobility constraints, etc. A total financial cost of adjusting the space and its equipment (i.a. a washing bowl with a washing and drying function, a shower seat, mechanisms lowering wall cupboards, etc.) was over 213 000 PLN (Cieśla & Cieśla, 2018, p. 55).

Block of flats

A quality and comfort older people's life is also influenced by the building they live in. In Poland multi-family houses prevails and nearly 80% of seniors live in such buildings. Almost a half (45%) occupies the apartments above the ground floor where there is no elevator (Iwański et. al., 2018, p.168). These are the barriers which have a great influence on the life of older people. Seniors living on the upper floors of the buildings with no elevators might become so called 'the prisoners of the fourth floor'. The problem concerns people who have a difficulty to move on the stairs, and a barrier of several floors forces them to limit their living space to their own apartment. An installation of an elevator is an expenditure of several hundred thousand PLN, which in most cases exceeds financial capacity of housing communities or associations. In 2018 the Council of Ministers adopted a resolution on establishing Accessibility Plus Programme which aimed at creating the mechanisms to finance investments on removing architectural barriers in residential and public buildings, including elevators. In the near future there will be more stair lifts or ramps for wheelchairs. The support for such initiatives can be found in the idea of creating housing estates which are sustainable, take account of inclusiveness and accessibility, safety and the standard corresponding to modern housing culture (Rataj & Suszyńska, 2017).

Some older people live in the buildings where the initial design stage (the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) did not provide for washing facilities. The problem occurs relatively often in the case of outbuildings in big cities. The lack of toilet constitutes a certain discomfort for young people, whereas for seniors who deal with numerous difficulties in terms of mobility going down to the landing to use a toilet might be challenging and increase the risk of falling. The problem is particularly oppressive at night and in winter when it is cold in the staircase.

Public space

Current building standards stipulate that every newly constructed public utility facility must be adapted to meet the needs of people with disabilities, which is also beneficial for older people. Principles of Universal Design, widely promoted in the EU and by Polish authorities on different levels, specify that the space should be created in such a way as not to exclude any groups of people with any constraints (the disabled,

⁷ The project website: <http://mimowieku.pl/>

older people, etc.). Although the buildings themselves are crucial, the space around, passageways, and leisure and relaxation facilities are of significant importance, too. Even a best-designed building needs to be reachable.

When designing public space, certain investments should be taken into account, e.g. accordingly adjusted public transport, platforms by the entrances, benches for resting, public toilets, etc. There might also be a problem with traffic lights. They are often programmed incorrectly, and the time for people to cross the street at a green light is too short.

In a vast majority of Polish cities the proportion of older people will continue to increase in local populations. It is important to adjust the space in such a manner as to ensure that moving around the city is comfortable, and, most importantly, safe for seniors.

Design standards in creating space for older people depend on the area they live in: natural, rural, suburban, pre-urban, urban and metropolitan. According to Zasina and Wróblewski's research, the inhabitants from the first three areas need approximately 6 to 15 minutes to get to the means of public communication, between 8 and 20 minutes to reach the grocery store on foot, and as many as 27 up to 42 minutes to get to a health care center. In the case of pre-urban, urban and metropolitan inhabitants, reaching a public communication stop takes from 1 to 4 minutes, a grocery store from 1 to 3 minutes, and a doctor from 4 to 11 minutes (Zasina & Wróblewski 2016).

As one can notice the old age has many faces in geographical terms which will particularly influence two spheres in the coming decades. The first one is depopulation of rural areas where young people's migration will result in a town mostly inhabited by old people. Such a trend may trigger gradual disappearance of public utility facilities, such as shops, GP practices, etc., and this in turn will have a direct impact on and will contribute to a decrease in quality and comfort of life. The other category includes suburban areas which are being developed at a very fast pace recently. In such areas residential housing prevails and all services are provided in cities. They have leisure-sleeping predestination without securing, vital in the old age, public services, such as health care centers, pharmacies, social welfare centers (entitled to provide community care services).

Conclusions

Ageing population creates numerous challenges to certain communities, forcing them to adjust the space to seniors' needs. It is also important that the access to the things of crucial importance in increasing the quality and comfort of life in the old age, especially very old (85 years and over), increases. The aforementioned things are, for instance, hearing aids, accessories facilitating everyday care and hygiene, geronto-

technology objects, etc. Thinking about the future should involve the needs of older people, who will soon constitute around one third of the population.

As the number of people in their productive age will continue to decrease, the care potential of the family will also reduce. Older people at risk of reliance on care will have to adjust their space in a way as to remain in the current environment as long as possible. If the pace at which new care facilities (nursing homes, therapeutic and nursing institutions, sheltered housing, etc.) are created is remained, there will not be enough places for people in need for support and help in everyday life. It is therefore essential to design the space in a manner that enables an older person to live comfortably and safely in their own environment.

Although solutions in terms of gerontechnology are adopted rather slowly in public space, the symbiosis of older people and the things dedicated to them seem inevitable (Zapędowska- Kling, 2015). In order to minimize the negative consequences of ageing population, it is vital to take necessary measures to raise public awareness in terms of the need for private and public space to be adjusted.

The process of preparation for the old age, individually and socially, inclines to take action in gerontechnology development and making direct users and observers familiar. As natural as seeing child seats at the restaurant is today, it soon will no longer be surprising to also see special cutlery, tableware for people with reduced capacities; and the steps will not only be accompanied by vehicle ramps and grip handles and supports, but also a stairlift. The old age is coming and things might help us to adjust.

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