

Dr Joanna Giecewicz  
Poland  
Adjunct professor of design  
Warsaw Technical University  
Department of Architecture

## SOCIAL MYOPIA

Basic numbers are needed for an understanding of Poland's position in the European context:

- Population 38,6 mln
- Median household - 3,1 persons
- Unemployment rate 19%
- Housing stock - 11,5 mln housing units
- ca 50% old pre-wars housing units
- In post-war period – 3,3 mln units realized in prefabricated technology
- 315 hsg units/1000 inhabitants in cities
- 0,9 housing unit/household
- 1,5 mln new housing units are needed
- 1,9 hsg unit/1000 inh. are constructed in last years
- 8.0 hsg units/1000inh. should be constructed to solve the crisis
- (300 000 units/year are needed to solve the crisis, 70 000 units/year are constructed, ca 8% of that can be called social)
- ratio - owned/rented housing is close to 50/50%

The first point to clarify is the meaning in polish context of the word “social” as related to housing. In Poland three words can be translated into this term: community housing – stock owned or build by local authorities for household in special need, modest standards, regulated rent; “social” housing can be understood as very low standard for households in urgent need of relocation, eviction etc.; second meaning of “social” relates to good standards rental housing for households within an income range slightly above average, having no other apartment, with special credit conditions. So-called cooperative system has been part of polish housing policy in between the two world wars, became a name only for some type of housing under communist government and is almost inexistent now.

The legacy from half a century of communism, which despite its name never solved commune problems is an important amount of low standards, prefabricated multifamily housing blocks of poor technical quality, severe lack of services, utilities and infrastructure, and totally neglected stock of prewar housing in need of quick renovation. In the city of Warsaw in the 70-ies up to 80% of new housing has been prefabricated. The cost of refurbishing is so high, that only thermal insulation has been improved on a large basis. The first lesson that can be learned from that, is a kind of modern ecological approach to the problem: always keep the maximum diversity in housing types, policies and technologies. The drama of polish cities has been well felt in high school students writings on the subject: the future of my city. A student in the very internationally

oriented city of Poznan wrote: in the future the mayor of my city will be black and the population mostly from Vietnam. This shows the prospective view if only market forces will be acting in this particular domain. No country solved housing problems without some kind of government intervention, credit policies, tax politics and so on. This is to say that social housing or social approach to housing problem is a basic need in post communist countries. After half a century of "social housing" only, a rational addition of really social politics as a regulating factor to the market forces is badly needed. Transition from state directed, rigid, non-human housing politics toward pure market freedom is socially devastating. It is sad to say that polish prewar social housing policies and at that time avant-garde planning or architectural experiments have been forgotten. With the political changes at the end of XX century the cure for over-regulation was to abandon regulation. Need to forget about such thing as "social housing". The social price we are paying now is already quite high. There is a need to curb down the overt abuses in the period of sudden and rapid growth. After the communist experience the best way to do it is to encourage citizen's movement for more stringent and extensive, self-made, self-accepted regulation. The important part of that way is to recognize the necessity of public intervention in the housing policies. In other words to acknowledge the cost of social housing in the interest of the society. If not, the market interests are governing the governors. The business ability to be effective, can also prove to be the ability to separate acting from responsibility and accountability. For the first time in recent history, polish cities are experiencing "normal development", by that I mean urbanization that has been the case at the end of XIX century in western Europe. This rapid urbanization and suburban growth is an accelerated public learning through events, with all the social costs of such a process. The very existence of social housing stock would be stabilizing factor in the whole transition process and later on, in the housing market stability. Long term Austrian or better to say Viennese experience, is the best proof of that thesis. Since housing is the area of critical concern for the society as a whole, lack of responsiveness to those citizen's needs, could be defined as social myopia.