

## REDISCOVERING LARGE SCALE HOUSING ESTATES IN POST SOCIALIST CITIES

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**Abstract.** Large scale housing estates, once a dream of every family, now are facing serious physical and social decline. However comparison of the post war housing has showed that despite low physical quality neighbourhoods in the east-central Europe were much less deteriorated, then their western counterparts. On the other hand nowadays post socialist cities are experiencing loss of population, sprawl and shifts in the housing market. That changes position of the estates, which is rapidly decreasing. As soon as the housing shortage is eliminated, apartments in the estates go to the bottom of the market, segregation, urban problems and decline is triggered. To prevent the threat to happen it is necessary to start rehabilitation programs in early enough stage. However it is essential that regeneration policies are included in broader city plans and strategies, as that brings long lasting results, and is beneficial for the neighbourhood and for the city itself. The paper researches tools how to prevent large scale neighbourhood decline in post socialist cities, learning from western European regeneration policies.

**Keywords:** large scale housing estates; regeneration; post-socialist city; sustainable developments; renewal; neighbourhood decline.

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### Introduction

Large scale housing estates are typical neighbourhoods reminding us about fast post WWII developments. Once a dream of every family, now many of these areas, especially in Western Europe are facing serious physical and social decline (RESTATE 2009). This paper explores origins of the problems in the modernist neighbourhoods and their opportunities for the sustainable development in the future.

Already in the early 1970s clean and open modern city has started to be criticized for the lack of human scale, public and private space separation, monotony and mono functionality. Urban theorist Jane Jacobs criticizes the regularity of buildings for keeping out diversity of population and business. While in the seventies most western European countries have already started renewal programs for declined estates, massive construction of uniform blocks in the former Soviet Union, continued up until 1990s. However comparison of the post war housing in Western Europe and post-socialist cities has showed that despite low physical quality neighbourhoods in the east-central Europe

were much less deteriorated, then their western counterparts. On the other hand nowadays post socialist cities are experiencing loss of population, sprawl and shifts in the housing market. That changes the position of the estates, which is rapidly decreasing. Therefore estates do not have problem yet, but it may be hypothesized that there is a threat of decline: as soon as the housing shortage is eliminated, apartments in the estates go to the bottom of the market, segregation and urban problems can be triggered (Dekker *et al.* 2005). Preventing the threat to happen it is necessary to start rehabilitation programs in early enough stage. However it is essential that regeneration policies are included in broader city plans and strategies, as that bring long lasting results, and is beneficial for the neighbourhood and for the city scale. Therefore, nowadays housing estates are discovered once again. In the new millennium sustainable urban development is becoming a fashionable topic and if the positive aspects of post war housing could be preserved Europe would gain a lot to reach her very ambitious sustainability goals (Tosics 2005).

The main objective of this paper is to research tools how to prevent large scale neighbourhood decline in post socialist cities, learning from western European regeneration policies. Before defining that it is researched what were the reasons of prefab estates decline in western cities, and how possible that the same will happen in post socialist cities. What are the challenges that sprawling post socialist cities are facing nowadays? How to use advantages of the post war housing balancing the city structure? The main findings in reviewed literature and case studies propose guidelines for large scale neighbourhood regeneration.

### Roots of post-war housing

Origins of the large scale housing estates lie in the poor housing conditions experienced by working class in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when industrialization and urbanization caused big housing shortage. Construction of large prefab estates had reached its peak after the Second World War, when countries had to rebuild their destroyed economies and devastated housing stock. By that time architects and planners of CIAM outlined the new modern city encouraging healthy living and equality for people. They promoted separation of different land uses: residential, employment and transport, with quality of large open green spaces and accessibility by public transport. Modern industrial methods of mass production were used to provide large groups of society with social housing (Fig. 1). The new estates were perceived as a sign of modern, better times (Hall *et al.* 2005). The new neighbourhoods designed according to modernist ideas and filled with huge housing blocks were usually built outside the traditional urban area, far from the old city centres. They were intentionally separated from the other urban activities and had to act as residential areas for emerging middle class society. Construction of the estates culminated during the 1960s and the 1970s,



Fig. 1. Prefab panel house in Žirmūnai microdistrict, in Vilnius, Lithuania

when European countries adopted so called high-rise policy. Today in Western Europe a total of around 6 million people live in approximately 1.8 million flats in the large scale housing estates (Knorr-Siedow 1997). However, soon western countries realized the failures of the policy. Criticism and unpopularity led to decline of the estates in many western cities.

### Criticism and decline of estates in the western world

Series of factors accelerated physical, economic and social decline of large scale housing estates. Idealistic and modern lifestyle, which had to be advantage of the neighbourhoods, in reality, became feature that was mostly criticized and reasons why estates lost their popularity. Lack of human scale, monotonous appearance and lack of identity led to the doubts if that is the right way to develop cities. Traditional urban activities, such as: street life, mix of facilities and spontaneous interactions, were lost because of separation of functions and mono functionality. Jane Jacobs criticized high rise policies for creating isolated and unnatural urban spaces (Jacobs 1992). Furthermore houses were poor quality as a result of fast cheap constructions. Big amount of common spaces, such as corridors, staircases or lobbies, caused high maintenance costs. Generally these places stayed badly maintained. All in all apartments in the estates did not attract so expected middle class, as they always chose for the other type of accommodation.

Very shortly after being build, estates lost their popularity. Part of the apartments stayed vacant and that caused drop of rental prices. By the end of the 1970s often only poor or ethnic minority tenants were willing to live in large scale housing estates (Knorr-Siedow 1997). Social segregation increased in such dwellings. It was followed by increased unemployment rates and higher criminal activity. All that accelerated neighbourhood decline. Bad image, or stigma, was both a result and a cause for decay (Wassenberg 2004).

All these factors led to a shift of the housing policies in the western European and American cities. For already few decades, up until now, large scale housing estates are areas of constant rehabilitation: in the beginning there was a period of technical renewal, later followed by participatory approach, and recently a phase of integrated transformation strategies is adopted.

While in western cities construction of large scale housing was admitted as a failure policy, in socialist countries it lasted much longer and in much bigger scales. However post-socialist cities did not experience such neighbourhood decline.

### Socialist cities and living in a microdistrict

City planning in the former Soviet Union was an important tool constructing socialist ideology. Massive construction of the uniform apartment blocks continued up until the 1990s, the collapse of socialism.

After the WWII, industrialization and urbanization led to urban overcrowding and total housing crisis. In the 1960s development focus was shifted towards housing construction. Nikita Khrushchev promised a house for every family. To reach the goal, fast and cheap ways to design and construct had to be found out. Rational city model, following guidelines outlined in CIAM was prepared. So called microdistrict in 1958 become officially approved unit of soviet city organization. Historical city centres were surrounded by group of microdistricts forming large residential city districts (Fig. 2). They were constructed in large open areas on the edges of the cities, where stereotyped layout could be used over and over again (Osborn 1966). Until the 1990s, between the River Elbe and Vladivostok there were 53 million flats located in the housing estates, in which 170 million people lived. 34 million of them are in central and eastern Europe (Knorr-Siedow 1997).

Large scale housing estates in socialist cities looked as grey and monotonous as their counterparts in Western Europe. However residents in the east and in the west were very different. All the population in the Soviet Union was middle, working class. Everyone was equally educated, with similar income, lifestyle and equal opportunities. Furthermore, there was no housing market, and no choices for other type of accommodation. Living in an apartment in a prefab panel house was just a norm. Large scale housing estates were never considered as bad or unattractive. Thus, the level of social integration was, and still is, high (Knorr-Siedow 1997). Very homogeneous communist society was a reason why the estates in the USSR did not decline

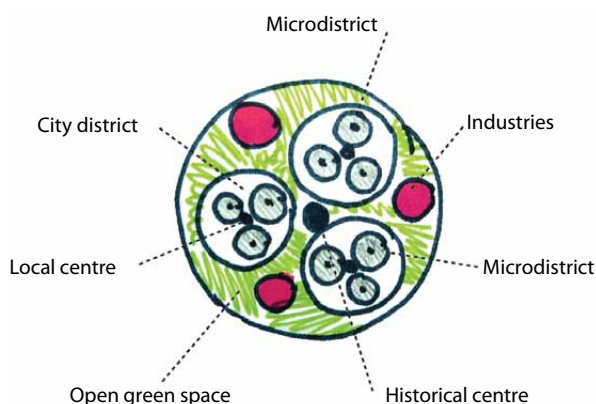


Fig. 2. Scheme of the modern soviet city: microdistricts and large residential city districts surround historical city centre

as they did in western European or American cities. However with the collapse of the Soviet Union and rise of market economy the role of large housing estates is also changing.

### Post socialist cities moving away from sustainability

With end of the USSR, its population gained opportunity to enjoy comfort of consumption. After 50 years spent in modest and standardized society, people used the opportunity to change uncomfortable small apartment in a microdistrict into a private house with garden. Having a car became a norm and a necessity. Number of cars increased and use of public transport declined. Eastern European urban areas experienced loss of population, as there was sudden expansion to suburbs. While Europe is looking towards sustainable development for future, sprawling cities in post socialist countries appear to be moving opposite direction – away from sustainability (Tosics 2004).

These processes changed appearance of the housing estates. In soviet era, residential district's feature was expansive park areas, which now are informally converted into parking lots. (Fig. 3) Furthermore during the privatization process majority of the housing stock in the apartment buildings was sold. Privatization brought not clear responsibilities who should maintain common property in the apartment block, or public space around. Big amount of the owners makes management of renovation a difficult task. The result is not maintained, old and outdated houses with uncertain future for renovation. Difficulties of solving problems in the neighbourhoods, as well as opportunities for better housing, encourage a sizable portion of population to solve this situation by moving out to better-off neighbourhoods, especially to those in suburbia (Stanilov 2007).



Fig. 3. Car parking in the public space in Justiniškės microdistrict, Vilnius, Lithuania

Despite the lack of attractiveness apartments in socialist estates play important role in the local housing stock. According to statistical overview in 2005 the share of pre-fab dwellings within the total housing stock was 14.3% in the EU-15 countries, while it was 34.1% in the ten new Member States, former socialist countries (Tosics 2005). However with lack of investment, delayed renovation and aging buildings, position of housing estates in the housing market is decreasing rapidly.

### Large scale housing – threat of decline

Many post socialist countries are experiencing huge emigration, shrinking population and construction of a new housing. All these factors are influencing housing market and housing shortage is decreasing. Outdated socialist estates are becoming a less favourable form of accommodation. Citizens choose private houses in suburbs, apartments in reviving old city centres or houses in newly developed areas.

There is a big threat that large scale housing estates in post socialist cities will experience the same decline that have happen in estates in western European cities. If housing shortage is eliminated, people choose other forms of housing, apartments in the estates go to the bottom of the housing market, and the property prices drop. Consequently houses in the estates attract only those residents who cannot afford to live elsewhere. Such social composition of inhabitants creates social segregation. Poorer quality of life, high unemployment and low income residents influence reputation of the neighbourhood. Bad image just worsens the problems. Spirals of decline, such as physical – outdated buildings, social – problematic residents, and financial – expensive maintenance and complicated renovation, intensify each other, thus deepening the process of decay (Wassenberg 2004).

To conclude the magnitude of problems on a housing estate depends mostly on the relative position of the estate in the local housing hierarchy (Tosics 2005). At the moment housing estates in east-central European countries are not in a critical situation yet. However to prevent decay, it is necessary to define a goal of renewal: to keep houses in the estates attractive, comfortable, affordable and desirable form of accommodation even if the housing shortage is eliminated.

### Learning from regeneration practices in western cities

To avoid the future decline of the prefab housing estates in post socialist cities it is necessary to start rehabilitation programs in early enough stage, as then

it proves to be more effective. As the renovation in Western Europe has already begun few decades earlier, there are plenty of well known examples and strategies how to regenerate modernist housing. Such countries like Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany had huge problematic housing estates, have tried various strategies and carried out far-reaching improvement projects (Knorr-Siedow 1997). Learning from these cases is essential for east-central European cities.

**Three periods of renewal.** According to Ivan Tosics (2005), in the western European countries three periods of renewal policies can be distinguished:

1. *Technical renewal during the 1980s.* Shortly after the largest estates were finished became clear that composition of residents is not as expected and that renovation works have to be started aiming to change image of the neighbourhoods. All the interventions during the 1980s were purely of a technical nature: improving management, adding more entrances to the buildings, splitting long corridors, demolishing some parking buildings, or adding more public facilities, playgrounds, etc. However results turned out disappointing as costly physical improvements brought in most cases only temporary relief. Became clear, that to achieve long lasting changes, it is necessary to address socio-economic and cultural problems (Tosics 2005).
2. *Participatory approach. Social aspect of regeneration.* In the 1990s more complex approach was developed, focusing on involvement of different agencies and local stakeholders. Physical improvements and diversifying program in the areas were achieved by self organization of the community. Next to physical improvements there was a special emphasis on initiatives to increase safety in the neighbourhood, training plans to raise employment, improvement of schooling infrastructure. Social, economic and cultural programs ensured social integration of the residents. Such targeted interventions and working with the people brought better results: social composition of the resident got better and most of the estates became stable and normal part of the local housing market.
3. *Policies of complex interventions and demolition.* In the beginning of the new century was recognized that most deprived estates, with high social problems need more drastic interventions. Downsizing of the buildings became a fashionable approach. Social composition of the population was changed by partial demolition

of low rent apartments. Empty land was used to construct better quality houses aiming to attract higher or middle income families (Tosics 2005). It also brought possibilities to develop offices or other type of program within the district.

**Applicability in post socialist cities.** From this short overview can be seen that during the last 30 years large estates in western cities were “laboratories” of renewal policies. Although in east-central Europe situation is different we can already draw some conclusions considering regeneration practices. Firstly, technical renewal could be a good starting point of housing estates renovation in post-socialist cities, as it is necessary to ensure that areas technologically fit for future and are economically sustainable. Secondly, demolition is a drastic approach as it destroys social structure, forcing for locals to move out. Furthermore, considering the present economic position and housing situation of the post socialist cities, the complete demolition of large housing estates is not a feasible option (Tosics 2004). Lastly, involvement of the residents ensures better results. All in all combination of three different policies is necessary. In many east-central Europe countries renovation of post war housing is starting and we can already note some similarities with in regeneration process in the west.

### Integral regeneration strategies

Currently major east-central European countries are adopting programs to improve physical conditions of the socialist housing stock. The focus is mainly on energy saving. Programs to modernize existing socialist housing stock are very similar to the technical renewal policies that western cities implemented in 1980s. However, it has proved that it is not enough to refurbish houses if the goal is to improve environment of the neighbourhood. Therefore, in post-socialist cities, next to planned renovation of buildings, more integral regeneration strategies should be prepared, highlighting integration of the neighbourhoods in the city structure, diversifying choices for housing typologies (Figs. 6–8), creating quality of public spaces and developing mix of functions and program (Figs. 4, 5). Such strategies would be beneficial for future of the neighbourhoods and also for sprawling post socialist cities. Transformation of the existing urban areas will shift development of post-socialist cities more sustainable way.

**Advantages of the neighbourhoods.** Challenge for sprawling post socialist cities is to offer alternative for suburban housing, solve traffic congestions, promote public transport, and balance the housing market.

Many of these factors can be achieved by rediscovering socialist housing estates. Transformation of the estates would prevent neighbourhood decline and would stabilise structure of the cities. Post war housing has many positive aspects that can be reused. Compared to other housing forms there are important advantages: density, public transport, accessibility, social services, environmental friendly heating, a lot of green public space, as well as room for developments and improvements. “*The European idea of sustainable settlements prefers compact urban forms, which can be achieved with the large housing estates, than with the suburban sprawl of the out-movers*” (Tosics 2005).

There are several approaches how to use advantages of the neighbourhoods and incorporate them in renewal programs, where most of them are dealing with city scale issues. Below mentioned strategies are selected from policies implemented in western European estates and can be applied in many post socialist cases.

**Polycentric development.** It is necessary to transform neighbourhoods as entire districts and incorporate them in city visions and strategies. Socialist estates are located in city peripheries and now it causes congestion problems as residents commute to the centres, where most jobs, commercial and cultural facilities are located. If the cities are developed polycentric way, peripheral neighbourhoods are becoming the new sub centres. Developing of new uses in the sub centres, and integrating them with existing urban fabric, gives new quality for the neighbourhoods and reduces car movement to the centres. In socialist cities polycentric development is a feasible approach, as they were already planned like that. Thus there is a structure that can be reused.

**Transport strategies.** Microdistricts were planned on major city arteries, and large scale housing estates have extensive road and public transport network. Using advantages of these networks is essential. Slow traffic connections between the neighbourhoods should be improved, as major arteries act as barriers. Successful regeneration examples focussing on transport can be found in western European cities. In Dublin, in Ballymun housing estate transformation of highway leading from the city centre to the neighbourhood into a main street was focal point of regeneration. Street became heart of the renewed town. It got all the same type of facilities that can be found in a main street in any town.

**Adding program strategies.** Main feature of the large housing estates is mono functionality. Purely residential districts need diversity of program. Adapting neighbourhood to new lifestyles by adding new uses and activities is essential (Knorr-Siedow 1997). Successful

example of diversifying program is Bijlmermeer estate in Amsterdam, where main street was transformed into shopping and offices area (Fig. 5), ground floors of the apartment blocks were converted into public and commercial facilities (Fig. 4). Furthermore city scale facilities were introduced in the vicinity of the neighbourhood, such as football stadium, cinema and theatre centre, shopping street and world class office district. That gave new meaning for the city periphery and improved quality of the neighbourhood itself.

**Diversifying living typologies.** Currently in post socialist cities the better-off society chooses bigger and more comfortable houses than apartments in the large estates. Therefore providing alternative housing typologies within the neighbourhood would attract higher income residents, single or very small households.

Social mix would be generated. There are many creative renewal examples in former East Germany, towns like Leinefelde – Worbis, where houses were transformed by creating private entrances on the ground floors, merging few apartments, creating duplexes, or working-living studios. In the estates Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam (Figs. 6–8) and Ballymun in Dublin adding low rise housing was important part of regeneration strategies. However it was achieved after partial blocks demolition. In post socialist cities, where pulling down buildings is not feasible, new typologies can be developed in the edges of neighbourhoods, along main streets, or in the areas with lower densities.

**Place making.** Extensive public space is a main characteristic of modernistic estates. However, now green areas are usually, outdated, monotonous and



Fig. 4. Bijlmermeer estate in Amsterdam

Note: new public functions, like day-care centres, bicycle repair shops, kiosks, are introduced at the ground floors of the old apartment blocks



Fig. 5. Bijlmermeer estate in Amsterdam

Note: highway profile street after rehabilitation converted into an urban street with new office building, dwelling blocks and commercial functions, wide bicycle and pedestrian paths



Fig. 6. Bijlmermeer estate in Amsterdam

Note: new housing typologies (single family houses and row houses) during the rehabilitation were build next to old apartment block



Fig. 7. Bijlmermeer estate in Amsterdam

Note: ground floors converted into apartments with private entrances, studio apartments with two floors, public or commercial facilities

packed with cars. But there is a lot of space for improvement. Process of creating squares, plazas, streets, parks is called *place making*. It could play important role in modernist neighbourhood's regeneration, as it will improve the quality of life and the life chances of urban dwellers (Kempen, Dekker, Hall, Tosics 2005). Existing communities should be involved in the process of creating public spaces as local residents know best what they lack and need: neighbourhoods with majority of young families, or districts with dominating retired people need different types of public space. Ethnic composition of the residents is equally important while designing public green as people with different cultural backgrounds have different patterns of using public space. Furthermore it is essential to create diversity of public spaces: open modernist green lawns should contrast with new intimate plazas, streets and gardens (Fig. 6). Development of small infill sites into small scale commercial areas or incorporating family housing helps to create urban district atmosphere with narrow streets and cosy squares. New public and cultural facilities or even commercial functions could be combined with public space projects, cultural activities and sport. Such initiatives could be achieved by public-private partnerships.

All in all adding the before mentioned strategies in comprehensive regeneration programs, involving citizens and learning from western policies will give evident results.



Fig. 8. Bijlmermeer estate in Amsterdam

Note: after partial demolition of most declined blocks new housing typologies are introduced in the neighborhood. Original housing typology (apartments in a block) and new typology (apartments in the row houses) create diversity and stimulate social mix

## Conclusions

Large scale housing estates were developed during urbanization period after the Second World War. In western European countries modernistic neighbourhoods did not gain popularity and soon after being constructed had a lot of social problems. Massive prefab housing policy was admitted as a failure and in the 1980s western European countries started renewal programs.

Meanwhile former East Bloc countries construction of large scale estates continued up until collapse of socialism. However neighbourhoods in post socialist cities did not experience decline, and even opposite, were quite popular. Nevertheless, after collapse of the USSR, role of large estates is rapidly decreasing and socialist estates are facing threat of decline. As soon as housing shortage is eliminated, estates go to the bottom of the housing market, property prices drop, and lowest income, usually problematic families move in. That may cause bad reputation and deterioration of the estates. To avoid the threat it is necessary to start rehabilitation plans. Regeneration and improvements are necessary to lift the housing estate within the local housing hierarchy and to achieve long lasting solutions (Hall, Murie, Knorr-Siedow 2005).

In many western European cities renovation has already begun few decades earlier and there are plenty of well known examples how to regenerate modernist housing. Learning from these cases is essential. Three periods of regeneration policies can be distinguished: technical renewal during the 1980s; followed by participatory approach; and recently a phase of integrated transformation strategies is adopted. In post-socialist cities combination of three different policies is necessary.

Furthermore regeneration programs should be included in city visions and development plans. Integrating microdistricts in the new city structure would be beneficial for both scales: neighbourhood and city. Transformation will prevent neighbourhood decline, and development of existing urban areas would balance sprawling post socialist cities. To achieve that, it is important to reuse advantages of post war housing. There are several approaches to do that: focusing on polycentric development, improving connectivity on higher and local levels, adding program and diverse housing typologies, improving public spaces and place making. Involvement of citizens in all the processes is essential.

A challenge for European planners and policy makers in the context of regeneration is to admit qualities of post WWII housing and incorporate them into city development visions. If the still available positive aspects of the socialist housing estates could be preserved, that will have a huge effect on sustainable urban living not only in the east central European countries, but with an effect on whole Europe (Tosics 2005).

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9 dešimtmečio. Šiame straipsnyje apžvelgiama renovacijos patirtis Vakarų Europos miestuose bei urbanistikos pamokos, kurias galėtų perimti postsocialistiniai miestai bei senstantys ir prarandantys populiarumą masinės statybos rajonai.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** masinės statybos gyvenamieji rajonai; mikrorajonas; restruktūrizacija; renovacija; postsocialistinis miestas; tvari plėtra; kvartalų degradacija; būstas.

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## MASINĖS STATYBOS GYVENAMŪJŲ RAJONŲ ATEITIS POSTSOCIALISTINIUIOSE MIESTUOSE

### J. Muliulytė

**Santrauka.** Masinės statybos gyvenamųjų kompleksų tipologija nepasiteisino. Vakarų Europoje tokie kvartalai prarado poliarumą ir yra probleminės miesto vietos. Buvusiose Rytų bloko šalyse industrinės statybos rajonai yra mažiau degradavę ir išlieka gana populiarūs. Tačiau situacija keičiasi. Postsocialistiniai miestai išgyvena didelius urbanistinius pokyčius: gyventojų skaičius mažėja, miestiečiai keliasi į priemiesčius, išaugo automobilių naudojimas. Šie procesai daro įtaką mikrorajonų veidui bei jų padėčiai būsto rinkoje. Kvartalams gresia tokia pati degradacija, kokia įvyko Vakarų Europos miestuose: išnykus būstų trūkumui, butų kainos masinės statybos rajonuose krenta; čia įsikelia vargingiausi gyventojų sluoksniai; atsiranda socialinė atskirtis bei iš to kylančios problemos, tokios kaip nedarbas, nusikalstamumas, blogas rajono įvaizdis, kuris dar labiau blogina situaciją. Problemų dydis masinės statybos kompleksuose tiesiogiai priklauso nuo jų padėties būsto rinkoje (Tosics 2005). Kad išvengtume nuosmukio, yra labai svarbu pradėti taikyti išties kvartalų restruktūrizacijos strategijas ir išlaikyti kompleksus patrauklia gyvenamąja vieta net ir nesant būstų trūkumui. Tai būtų naudinga ir rajonui, ir visam miestui. Restruktūrizacijos strategijų galima pasimokyti iš Vakarų praktikos, kur jos pradėtos taikyti jau nuo XX a.