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Discovering the City of Lodz (Poland). Spatial Experiences and Perceptions of Exchange Students

Paulina TOBIASZ-LIS *¹

* Corresponding author

¹ University of Lodz, Faculty of Geographical Sciences, Department of Regional and Social Geography, Lodz, POLAND

✉ paulina.tobiasz@geo.uni.lodz.pl  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2739-1406>

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reveal the process of adapting to a new environment and developing perceptions of the city of Lodz, Poland by its temporary users – exchange students, studying at the local university. The data analysed and interpreted here was collected during lectures and workshops on Mental Maps and Images in Geography conducted at the Faculty of Geographical Sciences, the University of Lodz, between 2021 and 2022, using sketch maps, photographic essays and digital story maps prepared by course participants. The study tests those tools' usefulness in recognising the relationship between a person and the surrounding space. Results framed by the concept of three-folded spatiality show that during 3-4 months of their stay in Lodz, along everyday direct spatial experiences as well as indirect interactions with the city, when learning about it in the classroom, reading or talking to people, exchange students gain a wide understanding of Lodz, and the initial sense of alienation gives way to emotional reactions and place attachment. The research presented in this paper is framed by the cultural approach in urban geography making the concept of imagined and lived spaces central and in a wider perspective, using constructionist methodology in social sciences. It aims to follow patterns of transforming the new, undiscovered space into a set of individually experienced and defined places filled with the emotions of exchange students, evolving their new local identities and place attachment. The study can impact future local planning to maximise the exchange students' satisfaction as agents of urban improvement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human geography is constantly evolving, adapting to new research challenges, as well as to global changes in terms of space, society, and economy. Due to its internal theoretical and methodological diversity, it applies various methods and scientific practices describing societies in relation to space. Hence, underlining the urban *social* geography indicates the perspective of research problems from the point of view of human needs and values (cf. Knox and Pinch, 2010). As such, it pays attention to social activities, spatial experiences, behaviours, and images.

Research on spatial perceptions, conducted by geographers, have quite a long tradition, since 1947 when J. K. Wright advocated *Geosophy* to expand the interests of human geography towards research on spatial images collected in the memory of humans and resulting from their direct and indirect spatial experiences (Wright, 1947). Almost in parallel, the psychologist E. C. Tolman (1948) formulated a definition of *cognitive mapping* in relation to how and what people think about space and what it means for their everyday spatial behaviour (Milgram and Jodelet, 1970; Downs and Stea, 1973, 1977; Gould and White, 1974; Devlin, 1976). However, in-depth,

interdisciplinary research on spatial perceptions started in social sciences only in the 1960s, along with concepts emphasising that the world is socially constructed (Berger and Luckman, 2010 [1966]; Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991, [1974]). Further development in the 1980s and 1990s was a response to the cultural turn regarding individuals and their relationship with the environment as the central in terms of interpreting spatial processes and patterns (see further: Banini and Ilovan, 2021). Both under constructionist and interpretivist methodologies, explicit about being subjective and value-based, the concept of *space* was redefined, enriched with a social and cultural dimension, paying more attention to individual perspectives influencing spatial knowledge. Space becomes a place and, following Y.-F. Tuan (1979, p. 387), “place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning”. The concept of *place* has been evolving within human geography as the substrate of human existence, also referring to time, as the fourth dimension of reality and social life (Lynch, 1972; Soja, 1999; Tobiasz-Lis, 2019).

E. W. Soja (1999) updated Lefebvre’s concept of the three-folded spatiality, distinguishing three dimensions of urban spaces: *Firstspace*, *Secondspace* and *Thirdspace* (Fig. 1).

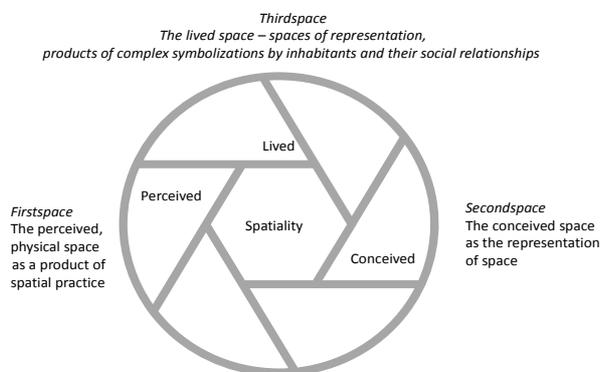


Fig. 1. Trialectics of spatiality
(source: Soja, 1999, pp. 265-267).

Firstspace – the perceived space is the physical urban environment, the “real” world, which can be mapped and measured. It is described as the spatial result of planning practice, decisions and socio-economic change over time imprinted in the urban landscape.

Secondspace – the imagined space is more subjective than the *Firstspace*. It is socially constructed and collected in the minds of users.

Thirdspace – the lived space is a part of the concept of “everyday life” and considers the ways that people live in and experience the city; it is both real and imagined. This idea provides epistemological and methodological frames for many disciplines involved in

spatial research (i.e., human geography, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, or environmental psychology (Swenson, 2012; Chittenden, 2015; Li and Zhou, 2018) and whenever the cultural approach is undertaken, the notion of imagined and lived spaces remains central.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the process of adapting to a new environment and developing perceptions of the city of Lodz, Poland by its temporary users – exchange students, studying at the local university. This article applies in practice E. W. Soja’s trialectics of spatiality, revealing images and interpretations of the city of Lodz by local university’s exchange students. Applying various representations of city’s space such as sketch maps, photographic essays, and digital story maps opens the discussion about possibilities and limitations of methods used to study peoples’ spatial experiences and perceptions as well as about the multi-modal research in general. As it was a part of the course offered for exchange students focused on active learning, it can also provide a voice in the debate on geography in higher education.

Involving Higher Education (HE) students in social science research focused on revealing and depicting their mobilities, spatial experiences, perceptions and preferences is not new and rapidly develops (cf. Holdsworth, 2006; Smith, 2009; Holton and Riley, 2013). The vivid literature undertakes the processes of studentification (Hubbard, 2008; Munro et al., 2009; Munro and Livingston, 2011) as well as the investments undertaken by both the public and private sector to [re]shape and commodify students’ experiences (Chatterton, 2010). In this respect, some scholars employed the “student city” label (see van den Berg and Russo, 2004; Sokolowicz, 2018; Zasina, 2020). Although the attention focused on the impact that students have on academic centres is growing, there is a gap in research on the process of developing the “sense of place” along with students’ stay on the university campuses. With this regard, exchange students are an exceptionally interesting group of temporary city users. New and unfamiliar spaces challenge them to “make sense” of what they are experiencing (Simm and Marvell, 2015).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The case study

The city of Lodz considered in this paper as the *firstspace* is the perceived, material urban space that affects students’ experiences. It was chosen as a case study on purpose since when set against other large cities in Poland, Lodz appears to be very specific. It emerged because of the vibrant industrialisation processes taking place in the 19th century to become the biggest textile industry hub in the Central-Eastern

Europe. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have been established here only after 1945 due to the socialist modernisation programme of the city (Liszewski, 2009; Zysiak, 2016). After the transition of Poland from a socialist to a capitalist economy in 1990s, Lodz suffered abrupt deindustrialisation. The city was labelled as the regional loser of the transformation process and lagging other big Polish cities for the next two decades (Suliborski and Wójcik, 2015). Only until recently the consequent, planned and well-coordinated, long-term changes started in Lodz, resulting in the city's economic and spatial development. Local authorities consistently frame its new identity based on creative industries and culture, strongly referring to its historical 19th century heritage. The growth of HEI in Lodz was accelerated in the 1990s and 2000s and today, with a total population of approx. 680,000 people, Lodz is one of the most important academic centres in Poland. The city hosts 19 HEIs and over 72,000 students each year, including about 5,000 foreign students. During the last few years, the number of foreign students (including exchange students) has grown rapidly at the University of Lodz. In 2019, it hosted 2,750 foreign students from 260 partner universities in 95 countries. Thus, Lodz became the third most popular city in Poland among foreign students, after Cracow and Warsaw (Statistics Poland, 2021).

2.2. Context-setting and sampling

The study presented in this paper was framed by the Mental Maps and Images in Geography course programme, aimed at Erasmus+ students and conducted at the Faculty of Geographical Sciences, the University of Lodz, in the winter and summer semester. Along the courses held in 2021 and 2022, 22 undergraduate exchange students of human geography, spatial planning, or land management, coming from Turkey (7), Portugal (3), Spain (3), Romania (2), Germany (2), Kazakhstan (2), Sweden (1), France (1) and Russia (1) were familiarised with academic literature and a set of three practical activities that focused on their everyday geographies and perceptions of Lodz consequently.

Studying disciplines within geographical sciences, participants already had a general knowledge of theoretical background and methods concerning contemporary cities. The course began in the second part of every semester, so students were already slightly oriented in the geography of Lodz. Activities implemented during classes lasting two months aimed at active learning from experience and sharing rather than passively receiving information about the processes of spatial cognition and constructing spatial images. Applying purposeful sampling is often used with constructivist and interpretivist methodologies, and indeed in this study the main research question was: "How do exchange students adapt to the new space

and how do they interpret places discovered along their short stay in the city"? However, being a part of the course on "Mental Maps and Images in Geography", the present study also aimed at developing student-centred teaching that promoted active and in-depth learning.

It may be considered as a limitation of the presented research to follow spatial perceptions of a non-representative and small sample of international students (less than 1% of all studying at the University of Lodz). However, in literature we find references to similar research conducted among students of geography or related disciplines, where authors argue that they are more sensitive to spatial issues and more careful and critical observers than their colleagues from other faculties (Mordwa, 2009; Simm and Marvell, 2015). The average stay of exchange students in Lodz is relatively short and usually not longer than five months. This encourages intensive exposures to the city and induces a greater sense of adventure and discovery, as students open themselves up to the new urban experience (Savin-Baden, 2008; Lemmons et al., 2014; Van Melik and Ernste, 2019). Last, but not least, a small number of participants helped build closer relationships between the students and the teacher, leading to more authentic discussions and more accurate, yet qualitative data.

2.3. Data collection

Exchange students participating in the course on Mental Maps and Images in Geography were asked to present their perceptions of the city resulting from everyday spatial experiences by: 1) drawing a sketch map of the city including the most important places they remember from their everyday spatial practices; 2) preparing a photographic essay or 3) a digital story map summarising their stay in the city (Fig. 2).

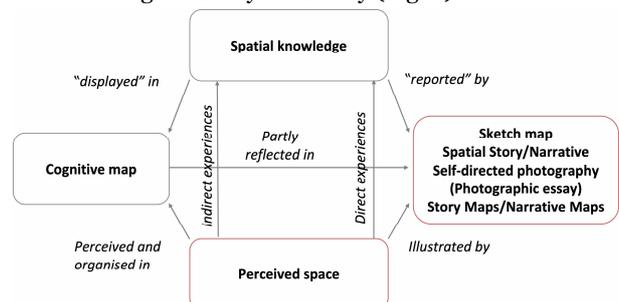


Fig. 2. From perceived space (Firstspace) to students' representations of Lodz (Secondspace) (source: own research based on: Soja, 1999; Wang and Worboys, 2017).

All these methods enable collecting individual images that illustrate the relationship between a person and the surrounding space, a representation of individual or collective cognitive maps which, during a complex process of perception, are shaped in our consciousness (Downs and Stea, 1973, 1977; Saarinen, 1973, 1984; Hayden, 1995). Considering E. Soja's

trialectics of spatiality theory, they are examples of the *Secondspace* (Soja, 1999).

The first task was driven by the idea of mental mapping, pioneered by K. Lynch in 1960, who linked individual images of the city to “the ease with which their parts can be recognised and organised into a coherent pattern” (Lynch, 1960, p. 2). This is most often accomplished with hand-drawn sketches, which anyone can make without special equipment, prior cartographic knowledge, or drawing talent. Given these assumptions, researchers attempt to interpret “spatial memory” that is which urban elements are “memorable” (Hospers, 2010, p. 2077). Students were asked to draw a map of Lodz as if they were to quickly describe the city to their friends at their home university, including all the key elements that help them navigate daily life. Without a reference system or base map, these drawings were cartographically distorted, but their broader purpose was to explore the spatial experiences and perceptions that students had about the city. They represented alternative forms of individual spatial narratives and, as such, the mental map exercise was the primary research tool in the study. As K. Lynch suggested in his pioneering work, these representations in the form of sketch maps were analysed in terms of three interrelated components: identity, structure, and meaning (Lynch, 1960, p. 8).

The second and the third tasks required students to prepare either an individual photographic essay or a digital story map in Google Earth application, describing in visual and narrative form their individual experiences in the city of Lodz. Students were asked to present about a dozen of places, revealing their impressions about the city (i.e., the first place remembered in Lodz, the symbolic place, the place that tells the story of the city, the place where they feel like home, the magic place, the beautiful place, the ugly place, the surprising place, my favourite place). These categories were not defined purposefully in order to invite students to share their reflections and to define their spatial dimensions reflected in urban space, they discovered.

Recent literature has highlighted the effectiveness of using photography as an additional educational tool in geography to support processes of students’ observation and investigation (Latham and McCormack, 2007; Sanders, 2007; Hall, 2009). Both methods aimed at students’ active engagement by stimulating their attention, inspiring them to learn more about the city, illustrating their individual stories and as a trigger for discussion during classes, promoting a reflexive approach through the ability to review photographs (Sztompka, 2005). Similarly to sketch maps, photographic research methods also have some constraints as photographs are partial, personal, and biased (Sidaway, 2002; Hall, 2009). Considered as social constructs or spatial representations, they do not show “the truth”, but reflections that students have

about the city they observe (Hope, 2009), and as G. Rose (2007, p. 152) underlines: “showing not what was, but how things were seen”.

The empirical material in the form of sketch maps and photo essays was analysed in accordance with the qualitative research methodology both as a set of visual materials and as students’ open statements referring to their opening to unfamiliar places in the city of Lodz. It was summarised during a short focus group interview conducted during the last classes, aimed at revealing individual perspectives, framing territorial identities and place attachment (Lewicka, 2012; Banini and Ilovan, 2021; Periz and Carr, 2021).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Drawing the city

When asked to draw the city, students began the process by identifying places important for their everyday urban experiences, which could be referred to as nodes in K. Lynch’s classification of mental maps’ structure and landmarks, helping with orientation in city space. These were: dormitories in the university campus, the Faculty of Geographical Sciences (both included in all sketches) and one of the biggest junctions in Lodz, where some significant buildings are located (e.g., the Faculty of Law in the shape of a paragraph and the Church of St. Theresa and St. John Bosko with a characteristic dome) (Fig. 5). As a second step, a few roads were included focusing on paths along which the students were usually moving. Characteristic spatial qualities with clear and well-known origins and destinations or the concentration of special use or activities along some streets, like Piotrkowska Street (identified as a city centre), Narutowicza Street or Pomorska Street (where most university facilities are located), have given prominence in the minds of students as users and observers of the city. In all 22 analysed sketch maps of Lodz, students included about 20 elements such as: 1) most frequently used roads (Piotrkowska, Narutowicza and Pomorska), 2) Lodz Fabryczna railway station and characteristic buildings in its surroundings, such as: the orthodox church of St. Nicolas, the former power plant turned into the cultural centre which became the example of urban renewal processes and the opera, 3) public (university) facilities (e.g., Faculty of Geographical Sciences, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Philology, dormitories), 4) shopping malls (e.g., Manufaktura¹ and Galeria Lodzka), 5) churches and parks. They used labels in the form of names or

¹ Manufaktura is one of the major tourist assets of Lodz and the example of a successful revitalisation process of turning the former textile industry complex into a commercial centre of the city. Opened in May 2006, with a total area of the 27 hectares, it consists of a shopping mall, hotel, the cinema, the museum, restaurants, bars, dance school, bowling club and other commercial services. It also includes the largest public square in Lodz which became a venue for many cultural and sports events.

descriptions including evaluation of presented elements (e.g., nice church). Students drew their sketches on an A4 blank sheet of paper, and this proved sufficient. However, it should be stressed that all drawings represent only a small fragment of the city, most often reflecting the *spatial horizon* of their daily spatial

activity. In some sketches question marks “?” were used to underline illegible, still not identified parts of Lodz reflecting the specific *terra incognitae* of the city being only explored and discovered by exchange students as newcomers (Fig. 3).

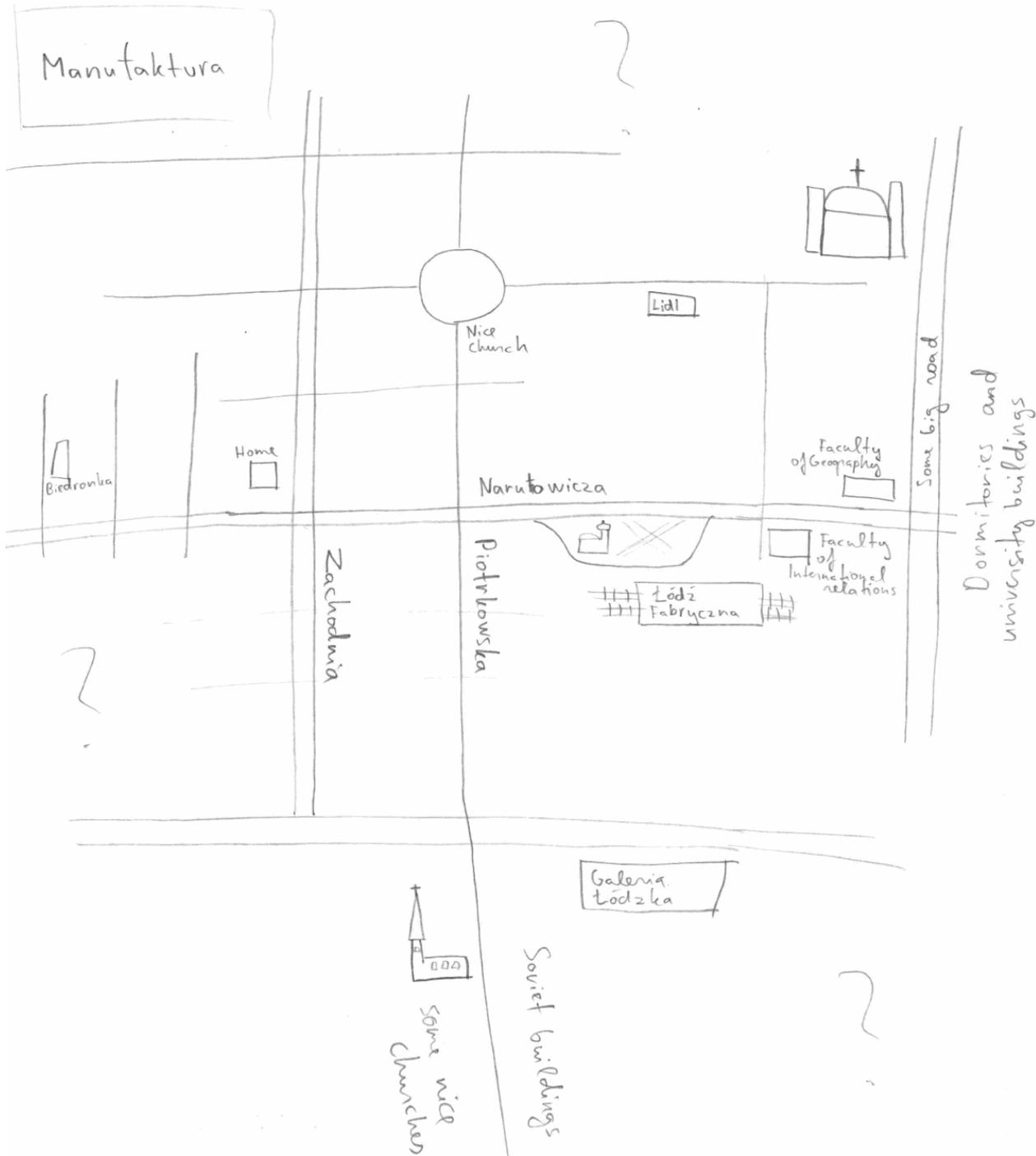


Fig. 3. Legible and illegible elements of Lodz urban structure reflected in the sketch map (source: sketch map by FO5).

The scale of the elements drawn by the students in their hand-drawn sketches can also be interpreted in terms of their significance in individual perspectives. Places, described as important to students for various reasons, were often scaled up, while

elements perceived as less important were smaller or less frequently included in their images. Different line thickness was also used for the same purpose, depending on the rank of the paths being mapped and their type (e.g., roads, tram rails) (Fig. 4). B. I. Sletto

(2009) described similar patterns underlining in his study that participants over-scaled those places with which they had positive memories. There was nobody to include a map key, which might be interpreted by the

fact that all elements represented in sketches were described by textual labels or by using clear and explicit visual symbols (Fig. 4).

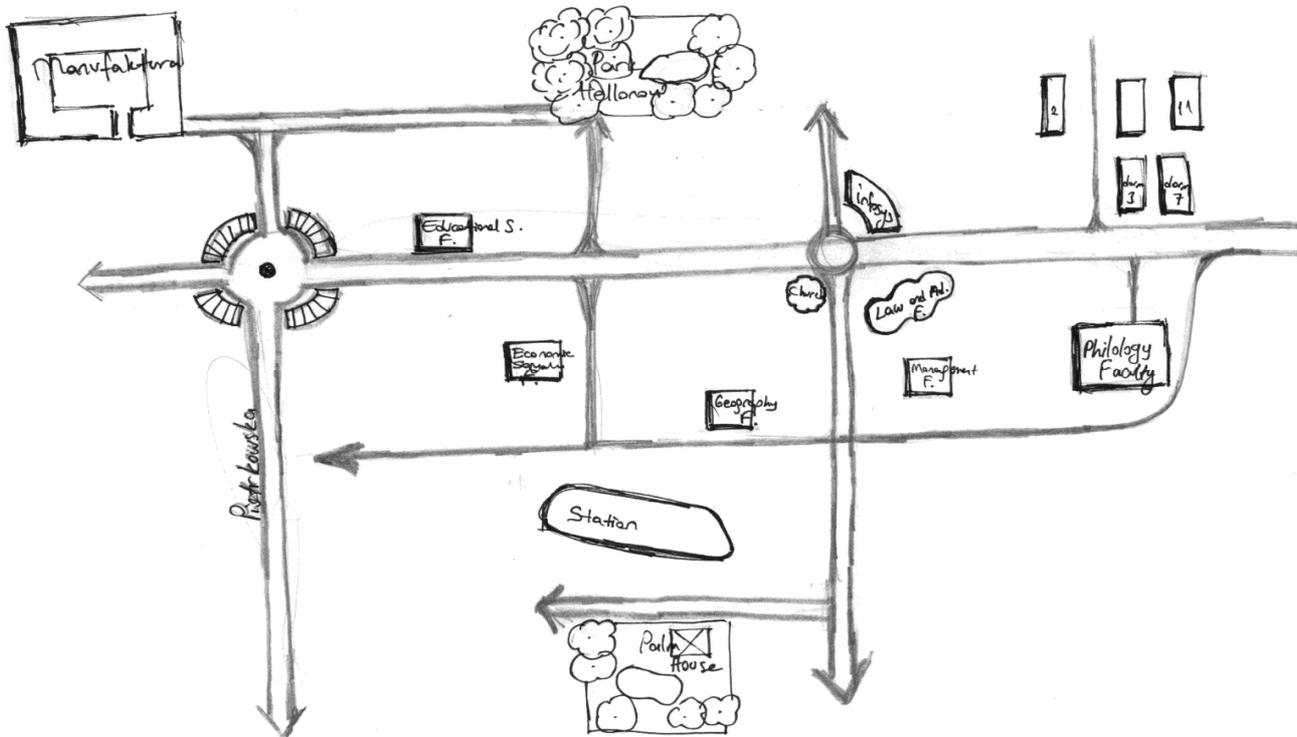


Fig. 4. Between Manufaktura and university's dormitories, Park Helenow and Park Źródliska – the spatial horizon of everyday urban experiences of exchange students reflected in the sketch map (source: sketch map by F09).

Hand-drawn sketch maps of Lodz, prepared by students without reference points or a base map, reflect a cartographically unprecise and fragmented urban space. However, their main advantage is that they illustrate information resulting from students' successive spatial experiences. Observing the sequence of elements drawn by study participants confirm the three-stage model of learning a new environment by R. G. Golledge (1978). First, individuals learn locations (such as landmarks or nodes), then the links (or routes) between locations, and finally the areas around them. In that sense spatial perceptions are processual, so rather than comparing sketches with standard, printed or online maps and interpreting disparities as "distortions" of perceived space they should be considered as representations that are socially constructed and framed in a specific context, where the choice of a given scale of places or non-Euclidean distance suggest their meaning to individuals (Kitchin and Freundschuh, 2000; Kitchin and Dodge, 2007).

3.2. Interpreting the city in photographic essays and digital story maps

Apart from *drawing* certain places in their sketch maps, students focused on most of them also in

photographic essays and digital story maps reflecting their impressions about Lodz and these parts of the city that became most significant in their individual perspective.

An important value of both tools was the narrative accompanying the images, which enabled students to recognise the multidimensional character of the urban area and to reflect on the physical and social world around them. No matter what was chosen – the photographic essay or a digital story map, completing the task stimulated students' attention during their everyday spatial practices, enabled to recognise and illustrate problems that so far they studied in theory (e.g., urban morphology, urban economy, urban restructuring, social life), and to register the city in a certain moment of time of a day and season. It also appeared an inspiring trigger for discussion when students presented their works and shared individual ideas. Photographs included in photo essays and digital story maps comply with all five functionalities of photography in social studies (Sztompka, 2005). Narratives included in photographic essays and digital story maps were subjected to qualitative textual analysis leading to interpretation of their deeper meaning and the context in which they emerged. In the Table 1, the most common statements describing places discovered,

experienced, and evaluated by students in the city of Lodz are presented indicating their features, associations, and contexts.

Table 1. Re-defining the urban space of Lodz through exchange students' narratives.

Category of place	Messages from student's narratives	Places in Lodz
First place remembered	Railway station, bus station; view from the window; meeting first needs; the sense of loss; strange feeling; feeling of reaching a special city	Lodz Fabryczna railway station; bus station; Manufaktura
Place – the symbol of the city	Best known and most visited places; used on souvenirs, postcards; the heart of the city	Piotrkowska Street; 19 th century factories and palaces (e.g., Manufaktura, Poznanski's Palace, Scheibler's Palace)
Place telling the story of the city	Artefacts of the past (old buildings, monuments, museums); public spaces where people meet to share their everyday stories	Piotrkowska Street; 19 th century factories and palaces
Surprising place	Provides a special experience, encourages to discover more places like this	Pasaz Rozy, Off Piotrkowska
Beautiful place	Natural, silent, inspiring, relaxing; places to hide from the city	Lagiewniki Forest, Park Zrodziska, Park Matejki
Ugly place	Shabby, abandoned, depressing, destroying good impressions of the city	The district of Stare Baluty, streets of the inner city
Magic place	Unique, surprising, breathtaking, fascinating	Piotrkowska Street, green areas especially during the snowy winter

Source: own research based on photographic essays and digital story maps.

Revealing their first impressions about the city of Lodz, in their photographic essays or digital story maps, students stressed three main aspects: 1) green spaces – “there is a park in each corner”; 2) transportation – “well organised public transport”; 3) grid street plan – “the way streets are connected in the city centre helps in orientation and wayfinding”. Narratives revealed a few specific landmarks that helped students find their way. Sometimes these were

one of the first places to remember and remained important throughout their whole stay in the city – as “anchors” of their everyday spatial activities. Below, the church of St. Theresa and St. John Bosko, presented in one of the digital story maps as a symbolic place in the city and the first place to remember, was juxtaposed with a sketch map including this element as well (Fig. 5).

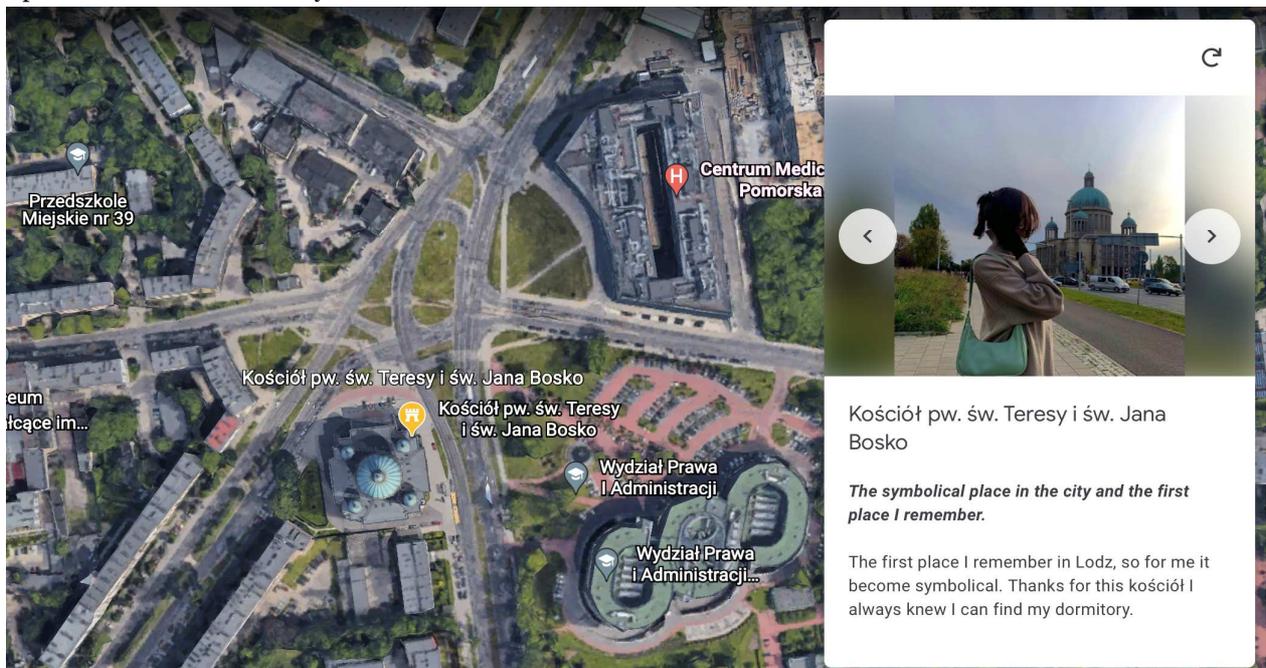


Fig. 5. Symbolical place in the city and the first place to remember (source: digital story map by F11).

As underlined by most students, thanks to its expressive architectural form with the big dome, it was

an important landmark on their way between university dormitories and places of spending their free time

located in the centre – Piotrkowska Street and Manufaktura.

As far as symbols are concerned, the city of Lodz is known for Piotrkowska Street and, more recently, for Manufaktura – one of the 19th century textile factories, the most famous example of the urban renewal process that began in the 1990s. This is confirmed by all previous research on city perceptions conducted using traditional social research methods such as surveys, interviews, and sketch map analysis (Mordwa, 2003; Jakóbczyk-Gryszkiewicz, 2007; Tobiasz-Lis, 2012). In the 17 photo essays presented by the students, Piotrkowska Street or Manufaktura were designated as symbols of Lodz or places telling the history of the city.

They were also subjects of the remaining 5 essays and presented as “beautiful places”, “surprising places”, “most favourite places” or “magic places” (Fig.

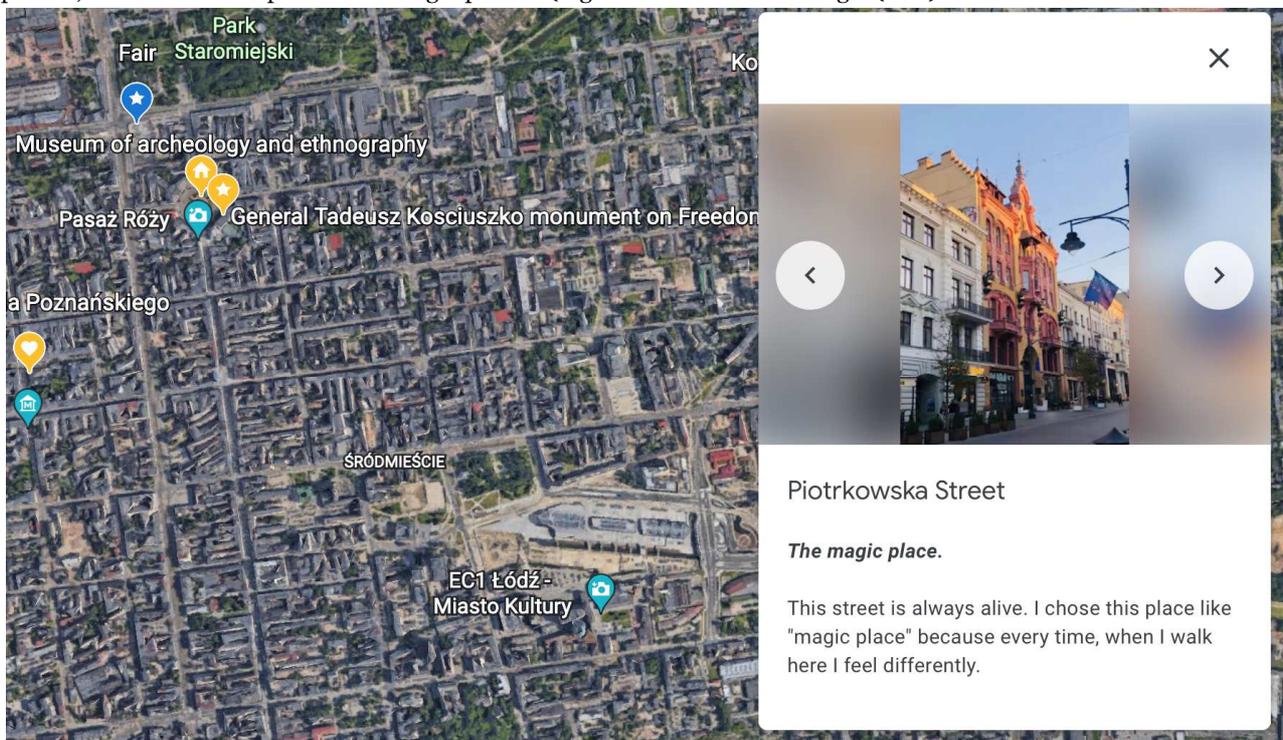


Fig. 6. Piotrkowska Street as a magic place in Lodz (source: digital story map by F03).

Both photographic essays and digital story maps presented by exchange students reveal the city of Lodz from an individual perspective, however many common thoughts arise due to the character of the group of study participants. The same place may evoke different, individually-driven responses due to students' origin, cultural background, past experiences, individual interests, personality, motivation, etc., but certain aspects of imagery will be held in common due to the situation in which group members found themselves – studying abroad, far from home, adapting to the new environment and meeting new people.

The analysis of students' narratives included in photographic essays and digital story maps, reflected

6): “The Piotrkowska street is the heart of the city, one of the symbolic places, and therefore my favourite place in the town. (...) I like to walk around, hang out and breathe and eat something when I need to go out or during the weekend” (M16).

“Piotrkowska Street is one of the places where we spend most of our time. A bright and long street. While walking, you can see shops, restaurants, bars, hotels, street art on both sides of the street. It can also be called a meeting point. Also, sometimes there are festivals on this street. It is one of the must-see places when you come to Lodz and one of my favourites, great places to socialise” (M07).

“I would choose the old textile fabrics from Scheibler's and Poznanski families. These fabrics can tell the history of the city and we can see how the time has passed because now they are used for completely different things” (F08).

also how initially disconnected ideas about the urban structure presented and described when drawing sketch maps, begin to cohere in their minds. Perceptions are “constructed” in the sense that individuals invent structures or models that enable them to understand and cope with reality (Moore, 1976). The new and unfamiliar urban space requires students to create their own relationship within it and challenges them to “make sense” of what they experience (Savin-Baden, 2008). Along with their stay in the city, spatial awareness was growing and from the perspective of visitors, who are “out-of-place” in terms of both the environment and the local population, evolved to the perspective of temporary citizens. A feeling of “self” and

being a part of the city became a recurring motif in students' narratives accompanying photographs in their essays and digital story maps. There was also a growing understanding of history and, more noticeably, of multiple layers of representation, symbolism imprinted in the urban fabric, local culture, and social life. When performing the tasks within the course in Mental Maps and Images in Geography, it was possible to study three distinct sorts of spatial knowledge (Appleyard, 1973): 1) operational knowledge, including remembering of these urban features that help in everyday spatial practices – well represented by sketch maps; 2) responsive knowledge, the result of individuals responding to striking features in urban space; 3) inferential knowledge coming about from individuals' ability to extrapolate between past and current experiences – both represented in photographic essays and digital story maps.

3.3. Studentscape – the lived space of students

E. W. Soja's (1999) *thirdspace* presented below is the result of the mapping activity performed with students during a focus group discussion that took

place during our last classes. The map underlines these parts of Lodz which are experienced most intensively by exchange students and well reflect in their representations – no matter whether they draw their mental map of the city or use cameras along their everyday spatial practices collecting images for their photographic essay or digital story map. Exchange students, through their spatial activities, just like other groups of city users, play an important role in the city space. They cross this space, perceive, experience, compare and evaluate places in order to develop cognitive knowledge and organise themselves within it.

Students' spatial activities are usually concentrated in specific areas of cities. More precisely, they were evidenced to take place in city centres (Chatterton, 1999; Murzyn-Kupisz and Szmytkowska, 2015), in a close distance to university facilities, or in the neighbourhoods inhabited by students (Chatterton, 2010). In Lodz, the spatial distribution of both university facilities (the Rectorate, the Faculty of Geographical Sciences, the University library, University sports facilities) and accommodation facilities significantly influenced the shape of the route and the purpose of students' everyday mobility (Fig. 7).

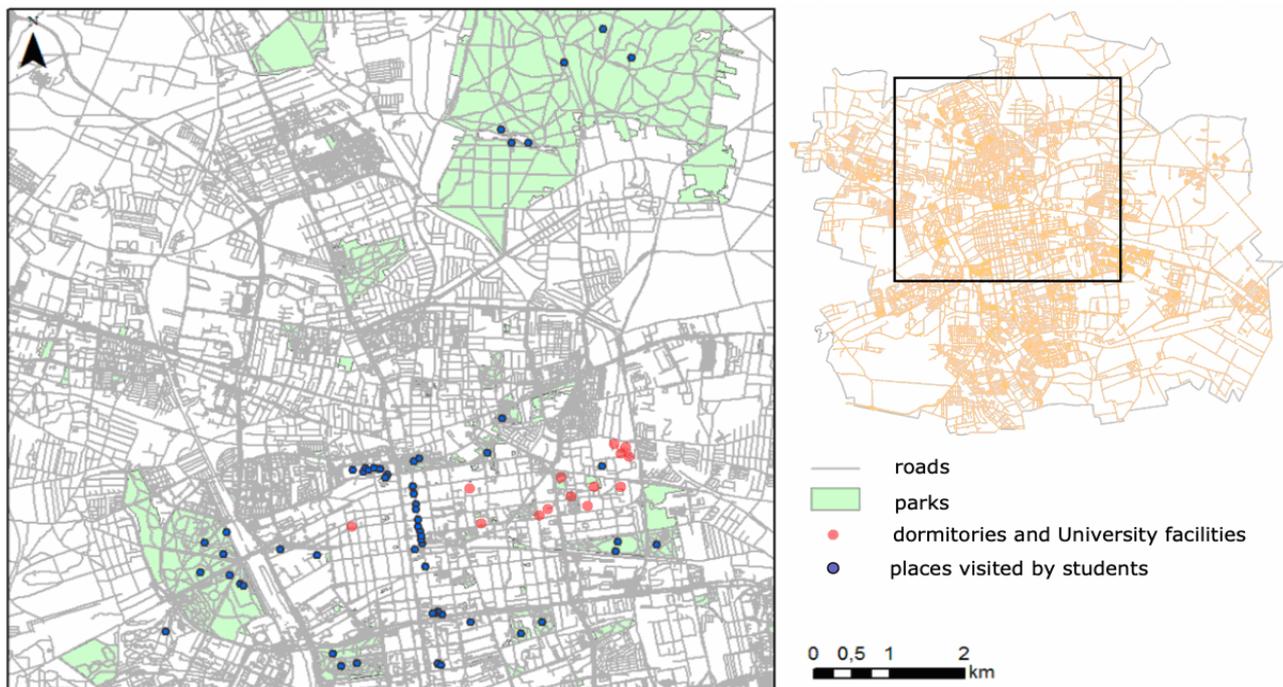


Fig. 7. Mapping students' everyday spatial activity (source: own research based on individual interviews).

Two main axes of daily routes followed by exchange students were Narutowicza Street, where the Rectorate and the Faculty of Geographical Sciences are located, and Pomorska Street. Both places are the easiest way linking University dormitories and the city centre identified by students with Piotrkowska Street and Manufaktura being in a walking distance from each other. These two places were known to students even before their arrival due to indirect experiences – either

by talking to their friends who studied in Lodz earlier or by learning about the city when they were planning their stay. Most often students spent their free time with friends in the city centre. However, they also stressed that they liked to “run away” from the city and then they visited green areas either on the edge of the city or parks as many of them could be found around the city centre. These places remind students of the family home, which is often situated in a smaller town

or in a rural area. There they find peace, quietness, fresh air, and the opportunity to spend time actively.

In a discussion conducted during the last classes on Mental Maps and Images in Geography, students underlined that people need urban experience referring to cities and city places in general as a dynamic, multidimensional landscape that displays a range of identities that may vary over time, space, and individual perspective. It is composed of physical, social, and cultural aspects, interrelated by meanings, symbolism, and a sense of belonging (Sampson and Goodrich, 2009). They admitted that their perception of the city of Lodz was changing over time. Discovering the unknown, verifying indirect experiences about the city they had before their arrival and comparing Lodz to familiar urban areas, they were coming from, evolved into a feeling of being a part of it and longing for Lodz after returning home. The presented perceptions show Lodz as an interesting city, pointing to a few significant places marked with a special meaning for exchange students, being newcomers who learn and discover the area. This research confirms that the framework of the three-folded spatiality helps students learn about urban geography and can be widely used in urban geography fieldwork as claimed by R. Bustin (2011).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The presented research, framed by the theory of the three-folded spatiality and conducted using a qualitative methodology, allows to reveal perceptions and meanings given to Lodz (Poland) by exchange students as newcomers and temporary users of the city. Their unique perspective makes it possible to discuss the process of learning and adapting to a new environment by acquiring three sorts of complementary spatial knowledge: operational knowledge, responsive knowledge, and inferential knowledge. The analysis of the *Secondspace* of Lodz based on sketch maps, photographic essays and digital story maps presenting the city by exchange students confirms that spatial perceptions comprise the identification of specific elements of geographic environment, determining spatial relations between recognised elements and their final valuing (i.e., addressing individual meanings and feelings towards perceived spaces while they become “places” as interpreted by the cultural approach in social sciences).

The use of visual methods, with the main advantages of flexibility and opportunities for individual interpretations of space while drawing or photographing, difficult to achieve when conducting standard social surveys, not only brought interesting results in the form of new knowledge about images of the city among newcomers but also a very positive educational effect. Photographs included in photo essays and digital story maps comply with all the five

functionalities of photography in social studies: 1) stimulating attention in daily spatial activity, which results in the purposeful selection of photographed objects, spaces, events, contexts, recording experiences and impressions; 2) heuristic inspiration, encouraging to ask questions and to interpret the city from a broader perspective; 3) documentation of objects, spaces, events observed in a specific temporal and spatial context; 4) material for focus group discussion or a photo interview; 5) illustration of ideas, processes and patterns of the widely understood social reality, which helps in its visual presentation. Also, the use of sketch drawing (always preceded by an in-depth interview) and the narrative perspective that accompanies photo essays and digital story maps enable us to uncover meaningful individual understandings and explore how people construct their individual relationships with the world.

Despite the subjective character of individual experiences and assessments, as well as the flexibility of the methods used, most of the images presented in this study can be read as illustrative of typical impressions shared by all research participants. We gain information about the quality of the space in the daily lives of exchange students, places that are important both from the perspective of individual and group experiences. The juxtaposition of *Secondspace* and *Thirdspace* showed that no matter what tools we used to reach exchange students’ cognitive knowledge and mental maps, they were based on the everyday experience of perceived space (*Firstspace*). Students’ spatial experiences change in time from “action-in-space” and “perception-of-space” reflected in their sketch maps to “conceptions-about space” reflected in narratives accompanying photographic essays or digital story maps. As such, the space is “alive”, experienced and structured in human minds, in line with the assumptions of social constructivism.

This paper also seeks to contribute to discursive works on the process of studentification and *studentscapes*, stressing that it is important to discuss social representations in the process of experiencing and interpreting students’ urban life. This perspective should be addressed in the processes of local planning and shaping the image of the city, especially as an academic centre. In the case of Lodz, because of the massive population decline since the 1990s, students are an important target group for whom the city creates an offer trying to keep them in the city after graduation. As this paper shows, investments undertaken by local authorities and the University create clearly visible and willingly visited students’ spots framed by: 1) attractive public spaces that often result from urban regeneration processes, 2) the strategy to concentrate university facilities on a campus located a short distance from the city centre, and 3) good internal public transport links within the city.

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