

Awareness and action on underused land in the Czech Republic: barriers, solutions, and examples

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Introduction.

The issue of under-used and under-productive urban land (brownfields) is a key element in the urban and land economy agenda—especially in post-Communist cities, where they form such a large portion of the urban landscape. Yet within the new EU member states, though the issues of effective and sustainable urban land management are often proclaimed, they are not always understood, infrequently acted upon, and less often achieved. A variety of barriers are responsible for this situation, ranging from lacks in understandings, policies, legal frameworks, administrative capacities (especially the absence of vertical and horizontal integration), and the prioritisation and support of these areas in the accession process. This paper discusses these barriers in the Czech case, and presents some solutions and examples. The issue is important; while Western European countries have a longstanding and newly reinvigorated tradition of attention to land use issues, by not tackling their land use and brownfields issues now the new member states risk building substantial inefficiencies into their urban fabrics, thus hampering their competitiveness in the long term.

A forgotten priority in accession

In the years leading up to EU accession, the priorities of the applicant countries were geared in large part to matters related to the accession protocol and achieving membership. This was reinforced by substantial EU technical assistance, which focused on these priorities. Yet, despite the broad structural changes resulting from political transition and the opening of economies to international and post-industrial trends, there was little attention paid to the spatial implications of these transformations—on the part of the countries or in patterns of EU assistance. The subsidiarity principle deemed land use an issue of national responsibility, thus missing the possibility for transferring know-how and best practices in these areas. For example, we note the following.

- The CABERNET and other similar projects have not yet had much impact on the formulation of policies in the CEE region
 - The INTERREG programs had difficulties in supporting accession countries in a timely way, and there were insufficient funds remaining in the relevant programs after accession. For example, the INTERREG IIC CADSES programme ran out of money after the third call, and just before CEE countries got organized enough to submit any regionally based or initiated projects.
 - Participation in the ESPON research programme has only now opened to the new member states; the research objectives of these are not well suited to the relevant economic and land use policies; and the new states do not have much opportunity to shape the immediate direction or timetable of this programme already underway.
 - The current round of structural funding, objectives 1 and 2, have devoted only 10% of their funding to topics directly or indirectly related to urban measures (Third report on economic and social cohesion, page xxxii).
- PHARE finance was not ordinarily directed at land use issues, and when this did address the issue of brownfields, it took the form of investment incentives or employment creation, which channelled assistance into institutional frameworks lacking the skills or motivation to redress the urban land issues involved in these sites.
 - The URBAN program was not available to CEE countries
 - The 5th Framework program action, Cities of Tomorrow, did not address CEE brownfields or land use problems, and participation of these countries was fairly limited, while urban issues were largely removed in the 6th Framework.

A renaissance of the urban agenda in the EU—will it be reflected in structural funding?

Due, in part, to a pragmatic realization of the economic importance of large urban areas and their contribution to EU goals of sustainability and competitiveness (Lisbon and Gottenburg), there has been a recent renaissance of EU interest in the urban agenda. Thus, the general lack of comprehensive analytical data (see EESC, Opinion on European Metropolitan Areas, July 2004) prompted an EU-wide need for reinstating the urban agenda back into the 7th Framework research program. DGE activities have also stressed a comprehensive urban agenda, somewhat indirectly, through an emphasis on sustainable urban transport plans and urban environmental management (Towards a Thematic Strategy on Urban Environment), while DGR has stressed the urban agenda in the Third Report on Economic and Social Development. But the extent to which this renewal of an urban agenda will be reflected in the new organization of structural funding will depend on two things.

The first factor will be the extent that the urban agenda is represented in the actual priorities of the three objectives (Convergence, Regional Competitiveness and Employment, European Territorial Cooperation) to be approved by the commission later this year, and how seriously the URBAN programs were integrated into this new wave of structural funding. Thus far, Objective 1 priorities were not very strong on the urban agenda, and focused on industrial brownfield remediation in isolation from broader urban issues. The second factor is the actual uptake of whatever priorities are set. The extent of an urban agenda in the programming and priorities for 2007-13 is a matter left to individual new member states, whose understanding of the urban agenda is not always as comprehensive as would be desired. Central European countries have little experience thus far with the URBAN type of programming and accounting, and much of their experience is with single issue projects. For this reason, the national programming authorities in these countries would benefit from guidance materials and, perhaps, some type of small scale twinning program that would assist them in incorporating the urban issue into structural fund expenditure planning and budgeting.

Barriers to treatment of brownfields within an overall urban agenda

Overview. By their nature, issues of urban land management rest on a range of institutional competencies and disciplinary expertise: economic, social, environmental, and real estate. Thus, there are disconnects between these, which work against the very perception of the issue as an issues, as well as its prioritisation, not to mention the more mundane barriers (such as inadequate legal frameworks, databases, fiscal tools, know-how, etc.) The fragmentation of various stakeholders, some of whom do not realize they are stakeholder in the brownfields issue, also works against the emergence of a pressure group that can demand national- or regional-level treatment of these issues. Difficulties in quantifying the importance of the issue also makes it harder to get the attention of decision makers. And, without involvement at the governmental level, there is a lack of programmes, a lack of focus and a wastage of resources in existing initiatives, and a failure to channel structural funding into these issues. Some more specific examples of difficulties in the Czech Republic are the following.

The disappearance of informed professional treatment of spatial issues. In the desire to distance themselves from the centralized planning of the socialist regime, after the political transition in CEE countries, spatial research organizations were dismantled or privatised, making them less available to the governmental sector. Similarly, the regional level of governance was stripped away in 1989, and only gradually restored in 2001. Thus, in the Czech Republic, in 1991 over 6,000 local authorities were empowered to make land use decisions independent of broader implications other than preserving state level infrastructure and conservation areas. Thus, a gap of dozen years has developed in knowledge and implementation related to regional administration. A similar situation prevailed in Slovakia. At the same time as the vertical link to the past was severed, the lateral links between CEE countries and to best practices in regional-level land use management were absent. Regional and local bureaucrats and experts seldom had foreign language skills, and there was little organizing and information sharing among the various CEE or other EU countries facing similar problems.

During this period decade, spatial and land-use research in the CEE countries was also very weak or nonexistent. In the Czech Republic, a research programme for spatial and regional issues was re-established only in 2004 at the Ministry of Regional Development. The research from sources such as the Czech Grant Agency was not adequately directed to these issues, or well coordinated and controlled in terms of quality and dissemination. A first research title on brownfields was established only in 1999, supported by a grant from the Ministry of Education. The mention of brownfields in the EU policy position has only very gradually boosted the standing of the topic among the new member countries, in terms of prioritisation, the allocation of government responsibilities, and ongoing finance from national budgets, and there is a long way to go yet.

Politicisation of the civil service. Spatial and urban issues require a setting allowing stable technical knowledge, administration, and lateral cooperation. Yet, despite EU and local attempts to depoliticise the civil service, each election or change of Minister sweeps through the Ministry, often at the expense of institutional continuity and expertise. Deputy Ministers and Directors change at the national level, while department heads change in regional and local administrations. To take one example with most relevance for spatial planning in the Czech Republic, and specifically for the issue of brownfields, the Ministry of Regional Development has seen 4 Ministers appointed since 2000. The gradual work of establishing a post of responsibility for brownfields in early 2003 was swept away in Fall 2004 with the appointment of a new Minister, Deputy Minister, and set of Directors.

Lag in cross-professional synthesis. Before policy-makers, administrators, planners, consultants, and academics can begin to address brownfields in their full context of urban land use and economics, the perspectives and knowledge of various disciplines and stakeholders must be integrated. Integration is also a large challenge in EU countries, but in the new member states the task is more demanding as the even the elements of knowledge to be integrated are not available. If these countries are not to fall behind, and be placed at a substantial disadvantage in their ability to create vital urban settings, assistance is needed to accelerate the dual simultaneous task of knowledge creation and knowledge synthesis.

Outdated models of professional training. Most of the professional training institutions in Central European countries have a heritage of disciplinary isolation in certain key areas of relevance to the brownfield problematic. The kind of planning skills necessary are taught in faculties of architecture and faculties of economics and in faculties of geography, with inadequate crossover between them.

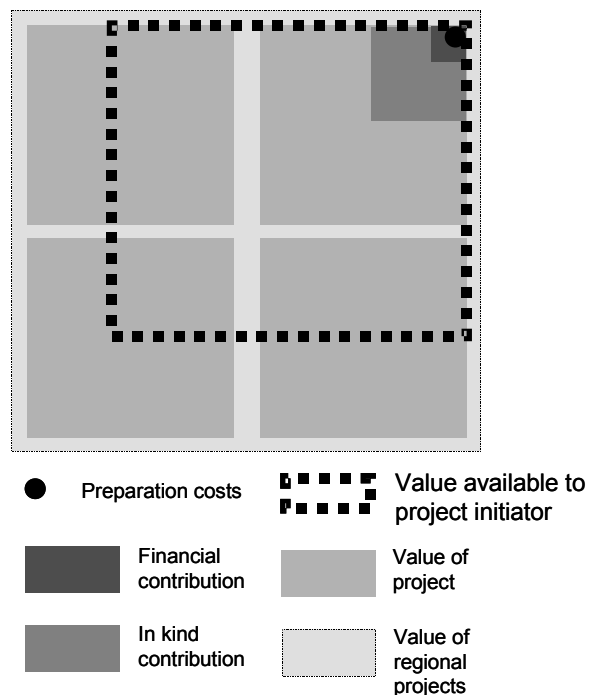
Towards CEE regional solutions for overcoming these barriers

Much of what needs to be done to overcome these and other barriers lies in in-country efforts, and has been described elsewhere (Jackson & Garb 2002, 2003, 2004; Garb & Jackson 2005) on a Ministry-by Ministry, and institution-by-institution basis. Therefore the focus in this paper will be on the specifically CEE regional efforts that could be made, and the EU role in these.

We have argued for making EU assistance relevant for urban issues, and especially for supporting the kind of synthetic projects and expertise needed for brownfield redevelopment in a broader economic and urban context. It is our further argument that the greatest gains can be made for assistance that is **regional** in scale and focus. This would enable the adaptation of general best practices to the CEE specific circumstances, and the training of CEE professionals by other CEE professionals, who can move much faster, and catch local nuances of the issues much better, by virtue of common experiences. It would also allow the lateral sharing of accumulated CEE-specific knowledge and experience—a resource that is often wasted when the lessons of relevant projects in one CEE country are not known even in other places in that country, much less in other countries. It is most rewarding to hear a Romanian administrator say that they have gained most from the contact with a Slovak twinning partner.

In other words, what we are calling for is for EU programme calls to enable a regionally-accented know-how transfer project. This would make available international best practices, but in a context that would allow regional networking, the formulations of policies that are likely to be effective region-wide, and to examine the experiences already existing the other countries in the region (tools and institutional capacities, kinds of training). Figure 1, below, illustrates the potential multiplier effect of a regional basis for programs on urban land reuse.

Figure 1. Multiplier effect of a regional approach to brownfield capacity-building



The following section presents examples of existing brownfields research programmes in the Czech Republic—what has and has not been accomplished through them. Before examining these, it is worth noting that these projects underscore the striking current lack of an overall regional approach described above, and deficits in “brownfields leadership” we have addressed elsewhere (Jackson & Garb). Thus, despite the fact that spatial research in the Slovak Republic is at least on par with the Czech situation, if not better, and that there is almost no language barrier between the two countries, similar projects were not instituted, nor was there much transfer from these projects to the Slovak Republic. One recent exception, described below, is the LEPOB project, which was initiated outside the Slovak Republic but includes a specifically regional approach.

Examples of Czech brownfield research projects

The first project specifically devoted to brownfields appeared in a grant awarded by the Ministry of Education to the Ostrava VŠB University. Since then, several other grants by the Czech Grants Agency were also directed to brownfield-related issues. These were important in raising the awareness of and interest in these subjects, and prompted other Ministries to issue broader brownfields-related calls on tools and policies. Most projects, however, remained, fairly academic in orientation and reach, and the absence of links to public administration and stakeholders continues to limit their policy or implementation impact. The following are examples of projects that were designed to have some impact on public administration and practice.

Brownfields for public administration - MMR 41/04, (www.brownfieldsinfo.cz). This project, which will run from September 2004 till December 2006, was designed to build up a broad understanding of brownfields issues, using a set of demonstration projects in the Central Bohemia region, and to serve as a hub for brownfields research and implementation in the Czech Republic more generally. The project is part of a new programme by the Czech Ministry of Regional Development that includes three additional, smaller, brownfields projects. While this Ministry has not directly received EU Technical Assistance (TA) funds for spatial or brownfields work, it has received TA funds to serve as the key implementation agency for EU Structural Funding, and this expertise has assisted greatly in defining and administering their new brownfields programs begun in 2004. The project has five partners—2 commercial consulting companies, the Czech Technical University, a major city (Brno), and a local NGO (IURS) specializing in brownfields. The project will be active on local/regional (in the sense of a district), national, and international spheres. Thus, it will provide direct project advice and compile inventories and analyses at the local and regional levels. It will assist in identifying changes needed in the national legal framework, and coordinate brownfields research nation-wide. And in 2006 it will prepare a proposal for an international cooperative project on brownfields. Jointly, the partners will deliver the following:

- A dedicated website for the publication of all project outputs and related links
- A methodology for community-level recording and analysis of brownfields, drawing on the methodology developed for project inventory by the National Brownfields Strategy (described below).
- Community training in brownfield audits
- Assistance in brownfield analysis and strategy development, and in economic assessment, for selected communities
- A methodology enabling regions to assess its brownfield situation and relate it to the regional strategic objectives
- Seminars for local policy-makers
- A seminar on international best practices
- Provide a meeting forum for other national brownfield research

National Brownfields Strategy – MFCZ PHARE project, (www.regenerace.org).

This is one of the more notable projects in a cluster of other PHARE projects related to property or brownfields for which the Czech investment promotion agency, CzechInvest, was the recipient. Much of this activity accompanied a sense that CzechInvest was to become a central hub for brownfield activity in the Czech Republic. This particular report was the culmination a 13 month project designed to do the following:

- Provide guidelines on the preparation of a national brownfields strategy
- Indicate the institutional requirements for proper treatment of brownfields
- Provide a methodology for a brownfields inventory and database
- Identify 5 potential demonstration projects selected from the 2 regions suffering most severely from unemployment

The report is excellent, and could readily be replicated in other countries, modelled on this report and drawing on the experience of the local consultants who participated in its creation. On important “side-product” of this report were the larger implication of the full brownfield count and analyses it contained for a sample region. The report’s findings contradicted some of the initial assumptions regarding the nature and scope of brownfield problems (that they had a predominantly industrial origin, for example), while an extrapolation of this sample yielded an estimate of about 10,000 brownfield sites (+/- 2500) totalling 0.5% of the country’s surface area—or nearly the size of Prague.

There is an interesting tension in the report, in that it’s findings clarify the limitations of the role of its beneficiary, CzechInvest—a Ministry of Industry agency charged with marketing large sites that will retain their industrial uses—as the central brownfield agency in the Czech Republic. Thus, the report shows that brownfields in the Czech Republic are not primarily industrial in origin, and that the majority of brownfield sites are small, and badly located in terms of their development potential. In fact, the importance of the regional and local level, which emerges

in this report, indicates that what is needed is not a single Ministry or institution, but a body that coordinates various levels of administration, guided by a stakeholder advisory board, and answerable directly to the government. Thus, the report shows the importance of regional (in the sense of a district) inventories and profiles, of the coordination of brownfields strategies with regional development strategies; and the importance of local authorities as the ultimate “owners” of brownfield problems, who, through their planning powers, are also potentially the promoters and regulators of these sites, if they have the education to be able to assist in solutions, rather than hinder them. The rehabilitation of most brownfields depends on their ultimate absorption in local and regional real estate economies, and thus on a series of regional and local level competencies and engagement that are not in the hands of a single agency such as CzechInvest, which is only part of a larger coordinated solution.

Project of the Ministry of Environment, VaV-SM/2/68/04 “Possibilities and types of brownfields rejuvenation while optimizing their environmental and urban impact” This project was commissioned by the Czech Ministry of Environment and commenced in the autumn of 2004. It is concerned primarily with the kind of brownfield that falls under the Ministry’s purview, namely sites that have little or no commercial value yet have substantial environmental and/or spatial impacts. The project is aimed at boosting the Ministry’s understanding of and tools for dealing with these sites, with local and regional level demonstration projects that will be usable by the public administrations at these levels. Specifically, the project will do the following.

- Study the international approaches and tools to such brownfields, and evaluate their suitability for inclusion in the policies and processes controlled by the Ministry of Environment.
- Assess selected brownfields, and prepare selection criteria for their optimal reuse
- Document several cases of actual rehabilitation
- Evaluate the development and strategic plans of several selected communities in order to assess their current brownfield-relevant policies, and how to enhance their capacities to reuse and absorb brownfields.
- Evaluate the current competencies of various Czech ministries regarding brownfield rejuvenation

The formats and products of this project are designed so as to be usable by local and regional administration as well as the Ministry itself.

LEPOB—Lifelong Education on Brownfields—a project funded by the Czech Leonardo da Vinci programme agency; www.fast.vsb.cz/lepob. This project is unique in being aimed at a specifically regional level, and at training the professionals who are in the position to most immediately and directly employ brownfield knowledge. Composed of 8 partners from 4 countries in Central Europe and one outside expert partner, it is the first example of regional cooperation on providing training on a spatial issue, one which has been marked by a deficit in know-how across a wide range of stakeholders. It is designed to address this deficit through disseminating relevant European expertise in a form that allows its rapid uptake by the relevant professionals, and provide them with a shared forum for exploring and solving the brownfields problems specific to Central Europe. The project commenced in October 2004, and will run till March 2006, with the first products available in the autumn of 2005. The project language and set of generic products will be in English, but language-specific products in Czech, Polish, and Slovak will be spun off of these. **The LEPOB project is currently seeking potential partners from the Baltic and Balkan regions for joint work on replicating the project there.**

The dissemination model for this project is particularly broad and interesting. It will deliver a package of cross-disciplinary brownfields expertise as part of professional continuing education programs to professionals of various kinds working as consultants, civil servants, local government administrators, regulators and policy-makers. Thus, it will provide an immediate infusion of shared understanding at precisely the levels best situated to employ it in their daily work, as they encounter the brownfield issue from the various angles of approach associated with their positions. Project partners will locally adapt LEPOB materials through additional locally-funded project proposals, ideally co-financed by structural funding (for educational and knowledge transfer priorities). Additional products and potential spin-offs will include university level courses derived from a LEPOB basis, the training of local trainers, and a regional web site where course materials, handbooks, and local language versions will be available for download.

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