

NAHRO IN

A Panelist's Experience—May 2008

BY HELEN SAUSE

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE is NAHRO's research and development arm. In this role it associates with many other organizations, including INTA, The International Urban Development Association, located in The Hague, Netherlands. INTA provides direct assessment of major urban and regional development issues through case study analysis, technical on-site visits and presentations across the globe. Part of the INTA Peer-to-Peer services provides INTA members with vision and practical proposals on complex urban development issues. Professionals who participate in such panels learn as well as share.

This was the case when INTA and the Polish Ministry for Infrastructure invited a NAHRO International member who was familiar with high-rise buildings and the citizens' role in local development proposals to join an INTA panel in the City of Gdansk, Poland. Although there were other qualified Committee members, I was fortunate enough to be chosen to represent NAHRO and the U.S. on the team going to Poland.

The economy in the U.S. is extremely uncertain—one day there are positive headlines, the next day gloom and doom have returned. In addi-

tion to the mortgage meltdown, the price of oil has seriously impacted all facets of development. With the uncertainty of the development field in the U.S., significant development activities are now engaged in Asian or European cities.

The Journal of Housing and Community Development's article titled "NAHRO in China: A Delegate's Journal" (March/April 2006) discussed the phenomenal trajectory of development in the Asian countries. In European cities it is a different story. The increasing health of their economy and the pressing need to address the issue of efficient urban development is just now affecting the Eastern European cities. Growing populations are forcing these cities to reconsider their urban models and their capability to deal with the market pressures.

I was privileged to participate in the Gdansk, Poland panel convened to consider the development forces for the city. Gdansk is a beautiful city on the Baltic Sea, and known as where the Solidarity Movement that revolutionized that part of the world started. This is a city where numerous proposals are on the table to build high-rise development.

The Gdansk leadership sought guidance from



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INTA. The city has a very forward thinking planning staff and wisely is working to get ahead of development pressures affecting their City. The INTA Panel was made up of experts from the Netherlands, U.S., Austria, the U.K., Israel and France. Our task was to provide guidance on the City's challenges, such as "should the city spread out, consuming still more and more land, or should it grow higher and risk obscuring the historic townscape of the City—which approach is more environmentally friendly and more likely to win social acceptance?" and "what is the role of the public in considering these dilemmas?" These issues, among others, were the priorities expressed by Pawel Adamowicz, Mayor of Gdansk.

Gdansk has painstakingly and beautifully rebuilt its "old town" reflective of the 19th cen-

tury over the last 60 years (the city was 90% destroyed by bombs during World War II). The famous shipyards adjacent to the old town have clearly declined and provide a likely development site. Gdansk is the gateway to two other cities—Sopot and Gdynia—in what they call the Tri-City area connected by a long street. Gdynia is already developing very high condominiums that are sited to take advantage of the sea and mountain views,

but are not particularly advantageous to either Gdynia or the region.

The approach for the INTA study provided us with a thorough exploration of physical Gdansk and its adjacent cities, interviews of nearly 100 people from all aspects of the community and local leadership, in addition to our prior preparations reading the planning staff's analysis of the City and applying our own expertise to the

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information we were gathering. One particularly illuminating briefing was by the City Planning's legal counsel. She indicated that there are few regulatory controls available to local governments. The Polish Central Government does not provide cities with an overall regulatory framework to control development nor the ability to require developers to pay for the impacts of their projects, such as infrastructure support. There is a system for public participation, but it usually comes into play after all the decisions are already made, leaving many in the community frustrated. This background information was then used by the Panel to draft a report addressing the issues based on the information we had gathered and our own expertise.

A two-day seminar was held and was attended by representatives from cities all over Poland and the Secretary of the Ministry Of Infrastructure. The seminar consisted of presentations of various cities and how they address high-rise development and areas that have been redeveloped after its historic use is no longer viable. The Panel also presented the draft report and the rationale for its findings. There was good discussion and many thoughtful comments were made. It was heartening that the Secretary of the Ministry participated and acknowledged the need for better local regulatory tools. We all realize that the decision of high-rise developments will be made in developers' and financiers' boardrooms, but the local government must have the regulatory powers to direct how these proposals affect their communities. There is a common interest that must be met—developers need to have an economically successful development, but the community must have the new

development that will occupy their environment for years and be an enhancement to their city aesthetically, socially and economically.

Following the seminar, the Panel's report was completed. Our recommendations were carefully couched in recognition of our brief analysis of the community versus the knowledge the local people have, therefore we could not opine on specific locations of high-rise

development, but instead provided a framework for choosing locations, some more in-depth ways to engage the community at the beginning stages of development proposals, and clear comments on the need for the central government to empower local communities to effectively address the new challenge presented by the high-rise development proposals.

This experience fostered awareness of the communities in Eastern Europe where development is needed and reinforced the need for the great sensitivity that must accompany such significant development. Local residents will live with the use and impacts of the location and the design of the building for many years, whereas developers complete their project and go on to other communities. Therefore the teamwork of citizens, city staff and developers are needed, each bringing their own values to consider the proposals. High-rise buildings and dense development can be a huge asset to a community, but must be carefully managed. The local city officials need the regulatory tools to ensure that the local priorities can be achieved. These are applicable principles in Poland and all countries.

In Retrospect

The contrasts between the Polish vision and outlook on development are strikingly different from the U.S. Everyone views things through different lenses shaped by history. Poland has been a hero in guarding Europe over the centuries, and today's European cultures would be much different if the Polish had not been fierce fighters in protecting their country, which has no natural barriers and

has been a constant target for raiders. However, their recent past colors today's thinking.

In this recent past, the country entirely disappeared for more than 120 years as neighboring countries divvied it up; the name "Poland" was forbidden to be spoken or shown on maps. After World War I the country again came into existence—with the Polish somehow having had kept their identity, culture and religion—and

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resumed a place in the world. Then came World War II, in which the country was bombed by both the Germans and the Allied forces, which destroyed over 90% of the country. This was followed by the repressive, brutal regimes of the Germans and Russians. The Poles are now entering the world's modern technology and economy full force after only a few years of independence. Until recently, there had been few outside developers coming in to build modern high-rise buildings in the cities. Now these developers are coming in a flood—and the communities are ill equipped to deal with the consequences.

In contrast, the U.S. has dealt with developers almost since the country's inception, and our cities have developed a regulatory framework to deal with them. These frameworks have been tested in court and empower and provide U.S. cities with tools to ensure that development proposals are responsive to the community's needs. Since the 1970s our governments have also been much more responsive to real citizen participation.

In my presentation I included some ideas on how citizens can be involved in responding to development proposals. In response, the Vice-Mayor of Gdansk showed films of citizens being clubbed and beaten, explaining that this was what citizen participation looked like to them. When the Minister indicated awareness that cities needed more regulatory protections to govern development in their communities, he mentioned other priorities that the government has had to deal with, including all kinds of land issues and ownerships that have had to take precedent.

The perceptions and realities are sharply different between our two countries. It brings out the reality of a much older country, which has suffered tremendously* in trying to deal with modern pressures and economics, as well as focuses an appreciation of the freedoms we have in the U.S. and our available tools to control the development process. ■

*see *Poland* by James Michener

2007 HOPE VI Grant Award for The Old Wilmington Road Neighborhood Project



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