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Urban densification in local spatial development plans: a case study of Wrocław city centre between 2010 and 2024

Abstract

The background of the research conducted for this article is the increasing activity of real estate developers in the centres of Polish cities in recent years. Wrocław was chosen as one of the fastest-developing cities in Poland. The aim of the study was to identify the approach of planning authorities to urban densification in the provisions of local spatial development plans adopted between 2010 and 2024. The research included an analysis of 95 local spatial development plans with regard to the urban density indicators contained in them.

Based on an analysis of planning activity in the city centre of Wrocław between 2010 and 2024, the extent to which the process of urban densification is planned and controlled – on the basis of binding local spatial development plans – was determined. The study revealed that local plans are used both to establish a framework for the densification of the built environment and to prevent undesirable densification. Urban densification strategies present in the planning documents were identified. As a result of the analysis, an original classification of local plans into four categories was proposed, each reflecting a different approach to the densification process.

Key words: urban planning, spatial planning, Wrocław, densification

Introduction

The starting point for this research is the intensified activity in recent years of developers delivering residential projects within already urbanised areas, especially in Poland's largest cities (Samorek, Cichocki 2023). New investments are frequently located in areas with an already defined urban fabric (e.g. within prefabricated-panel housing estates or as frontage completion) or on post-industrial land. They are often criticised for the low quality of both the buildings and their surroundings, for high population densities, and for the deterioration of living conditions in densified estates. The colloquial term *patodeweloperka*¹ – a pejorative neologism targeting poor-quality housing – has entered common

Polish usage as a pointed expression of this critique. The prevalence of negative opinions about residential schemes in Polish cities raises the question of the extent to which densification is a planned process rather than a spontaneous one. At the same time, the public debate includes both arguments in favour of densification as a path to more sustainable development and objections to densification as a driver of declining urban quality and overburdened infrastructure (Arnberger 2012; Berghauser Pont et al. 2021).

Another salient thread in the discussion concerns the impact of densification on the urban microclimate and the formation of urban heat islands. Research has shown that urbanisation raises air temperatures locally, and that mean temperatures change more rapidly in areas undergoing urbanisation than elsewhere within the same city (Rozbicki et al. 2020). This stems from increasing hard surfaces at the expense of permeable and vegetated ones (Rinner, Hussain 2011). Under certain conditions, however, densification can produce “cool islands” and cool street canyons through increased shading (Vuckovic et al. 2019). These examples underscore that urban densification and the various ways it is pursued cannot be judged unambiguously as neg-

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¹ This term has, for instance, appeared in the titles of books by Łukasz Drozda (*Dziury w ziemi. Patodeweloperka w Polsce*. Czarne, 2023) and Bartosz Józefiak (*Patodeweloperka. To nie jest kraj do mieszkania*. Znak Literanova, 2024).

ative or positive; its effects on urban quality are context-dependent.

During the study period – prior to the introduction of general plans into Poland’s spatial planning system – the key local instrument shaping spatial policy was the Local Spatial Development Plan (LSDP) (Nowakowski 2013). Unlike the municipality’s higher-level *Study of Conditions and Directions of Spatial Development*, LSDPs are local legal acts and provide the binding basis for development on the land they cover. By law, LSDPs must specify rules for shaping development, including the maximum building coverage ratio permitted on each site and the maximum building height. Consequently, the content of LSDPs effectively decides whether densification is possible in urbanised areas and sets its bounds. Current regulations also allow development on land not covered by an LSDP. Even so, plans adopted for inner-city areas are a suitable source material for examining how local authorities approach densifying the urban fabric and how they regulate that process.

Description of own research

Aim and scope of the study

The purpose of the study is to establish how LSDPs shape the development of inner-city areas with respect to densification by new residential buildings. The intermediate aims are: to compare the maximum density indicators permitted in LSDPs with the pre-plan state on the same land and to identify and categorise different densification strategies encoded in the plans.

The temporal scope is 2010–2024. The start date corresponds to a significant amendment to the *Study of Conditions and Directions of Spatial Development of Wrocław* (Uchwała Rady Miejskiej Wrocławia 2010) originally adopted in 1998. The end date is 2024, when preparations were underway to implement an amendment to the Spatial Planning and Development Act introducing the general plan² which has to replace the *Study of Conditions...* The territorial scope is Wrocław’s city centre, delineated in the graphic annex to the 2018 version of the *Study of Conditions...* (Uchwała Rady Miejskiej Wrocławia 2018). The subject scope covers analysis of the textual and graphic parts of LSDPs adopted in the period. The research corpus comprises 95 LSDPs.

Methods

The study analyses the graphic and textual provisions of LSDPs adopted in 2010–2024 with regard to density indicators. The quantitative analysis compares the maximum floor area ratio (FAR) specified in each plan with the pre-plan FAR on the same land. In addition to the LSDPs themselves, the data source was Wrocław’s Spatial Information System

portal, which publishes annually updated orthophoto maps. Historical satellite imagery was used to determine land use prior to plan adoption.

The research was extended to include a qualitative analysis of Wrocław City Council resolutions initiating the preparation of LSDPs (especially their explanatory memoranda) and selected Council session minutes where these legal acts were discussed. The aim of the qualitative analysis is to identify the motivations for covering specific areas with LSDPs.

Degree of coverage of the study area by LSDPs

The study covers Wrocław’s city-centre area in borders defined in the *Study of Conditions...* For analytical clarity, it was divided according to the *Study’s* system of urban units. Areas designated in the land-use drawing as industrial, service, green, or restricted were excluded. Adjacent urban units with similar morphology were combined, yielding eight research sectors: S1 – Stare Miasto; S2 – Śródmieście Nadodrzańskie and Plac Grunwaldzki; S3 – Przedmieście Świdnickie and Oławskie; S4 – Kępa Mieszczańska; S5 – Kleczków; S6 – Huby; S7 – Przedmieście Południowe and Grabiszyn; S8 – Szczepin and Popowice.

By the end of 2024, LSDPs covered 52.7% of the city-centre area; in 2010–2024, newly adopted LSDPs covered 848.05 ha, or 26.7% of the centre. Coverage was highest in S4 – Kępa Mieszczańska (100.0%), S1 – Stare Miasto (99.0%) and S5 – Kleczków (72.7%). These sectors also saw the largest shares of land covered by plans adopted in the study period – 51.5% (S4), 43.7% (S1) and 31.3% (S3) – indicating strong local-authority interest in regulating development on these areas.

Selection of indicators for measuring density in LSDPs

Urban density can be captured by many indicators, most of which fall into two groups: those based on population and those based on the physical parameters of development (Dovey, Pafka 2014). Density can also be measured at various scales – from the building and plot through ensembles and districts to the citywide scale (Angel et al. 2021). Commonly used metrics include population density (Cheng 2009), building coverage ratio (BCR), average weighted number of storeys, floor area ratio (FAR) (Bradecki 2021), and residential density (Wyżykowski 1973; Michalski 2010). Given the nature and scope of LSDPs, this study relies on physical-parameter indicators.

Under the current Spatial Planning and Development Act (Ustawa o planowaniu i zagospodarowaniu przestrzennym 2003), LSDPs must, among other things, define maximum above-ground FAR and the maximum share of site area that may be occupied by buildings (BCR). The analysis did not rely solely on the values specified in the textual part of the plans but confronted them with the actual development capacity arising from building lines in the graphic part and from existing buildings. FAR was estimated from the maximum permissible building footprint and height. Average

² In October 2024, Wrocław City Council adopted five resolutions to commence the preparation of Local Spatial Development Plans (LSDPs) which, taken together, cover the entire area of the city not yet covered by plans. The purpose was to forestall the need to issue decisions on development conditions (WZ) during the transitional period while work on the general plan was under way.

storey height was assumed at 2.9 m for residential and 3.4 m for service buildings.

Analysis of changes in urban density indicators in Local Spatial Development Plans

Across all sectors, the adopted LSDPs enabled an increase in both BCR and FAR relative to the pre-plan condition.

In most sectors, the average BCR permitted by the plans ranged from 25% to 40%, with a mean of 29.4% across all sectors (Fig. 1). This represents an average increase of 12.9 percentage points over the existing BCR (16.5%). The highest BCRs were permitted in the most central sectors – S1 – Stare Miasto; S2 – Śródmieście Nadodrzańskie and Plac Grunwaldzki; S3 – Przedmieście Świdnickie and Oławskie – which share a pre-20th-century morphological type dominated by compact perimeter blocks of multi-family housing and services.

LSDPs also enabled higher FARs. Prior to plan adoption, the mean FAR on the study areas was 0.60, while average maximum FARs permitted across sectors ranged from 1.02 to 2.35, with a cross-sector mean of 1.84. The sectors dominating in terms of FAR are those surrounding the historic core: S2 – Śródmieście Nadodrzańskie and Plac Grunwaldzki; S3 – Przedmieście Świdnickie and Oławskie; S7 – Przedmieście Południowe and Grabiszyn.

A separate analysis focused on areas designated in LSDPs for multi-family residential use (MW) and mixed residential-service use (MW-U, U-MW). In these areas, maximum permitted BCRs across sectors ranged from circa 30% to circa 70%, with a mean of 41.3% across all sectors (Fig. 2). This implies an average increase of 17.0 percentage points compared to the existing BCR (24.3%). Average permitted

FARs for these uses ranged from 2.02 to 4.08 across sectors, with a mean of 2.90 (versus a baseline of 1.13). Based on the average BCR and FAR figures, the mean permitted height of multi-family residential development in Wrocław's city centre can be estimated at 7.02 storeys. These data indicate a clear planning intention to increase development density in the city centre.

Comparing indicators by sector reveals differing densification strategies. The highest permitted residential FARs occur in the morphologically contrasting S7 – Przedmieście Południowe and Grabiszyn (4.08) and S1 – Stare Miasto (3.80). Despite similar FARs, the permitted residential BCRs differ markedly – 70.4% in S1 versus 42.5% in S7. In the historic core, the preference is thus for a higher BCR combined with limits on building height. In the ring around the centre – especially on post-industrial land where entirely new residential ensembles can emerge – taller buildings are allowed while retaining a relatively larger share of undeveloped land, notably green areas.

Four approaches to densification in Local Spatial Development Plans

The findings support a classification of LSDPs according to their approach to densifying development. Four plan types – conserving, infilling, incorporating and transforming – were identified.

Conserving plans either prohibit or strictly limit new development within the plan area. Their aim is to protect the existing urban composition, scale and density. Examples include plans for 1970s estates along Śliczna and Gwiaździsta streets. These were justified by the need to counter uncontrolled infill – often in response to rising numbers of development conditions applications under heightened investment

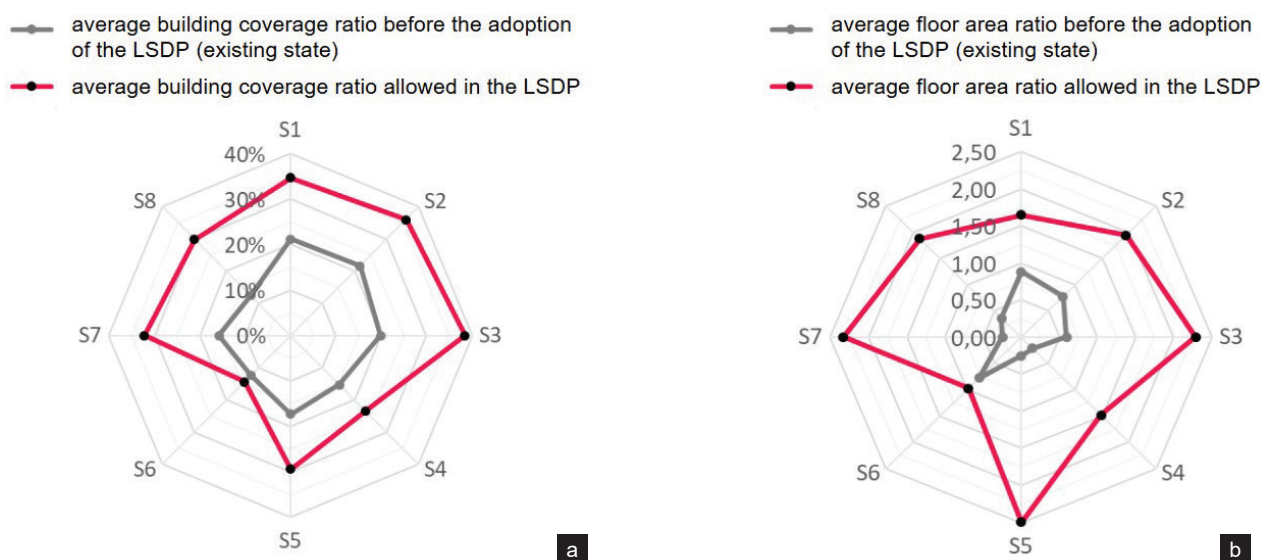


Fig. 1. Radar charts showing the average building coverage ratio (a) and floor area ratio (b) in a given area prior to the adoption of LSDP, and the average maximum parameters permitted in local plans adopted between 2010 and 2024 for the individual research sectors (elaborated by M. Pilny)

II. 1. Wykresy radarowe przedstawiające średni wskaźnik powierzchni zabudowy (a) i intensywności zabudowy (b) na danym terenie przed przyjęciem MPZP i średnie maksymalne parametry dopuszczone w planach miejscowych przyjętych w latach 2010–2024 dla poszczególnych sektorów badawczych (oprac. M. Pilny)

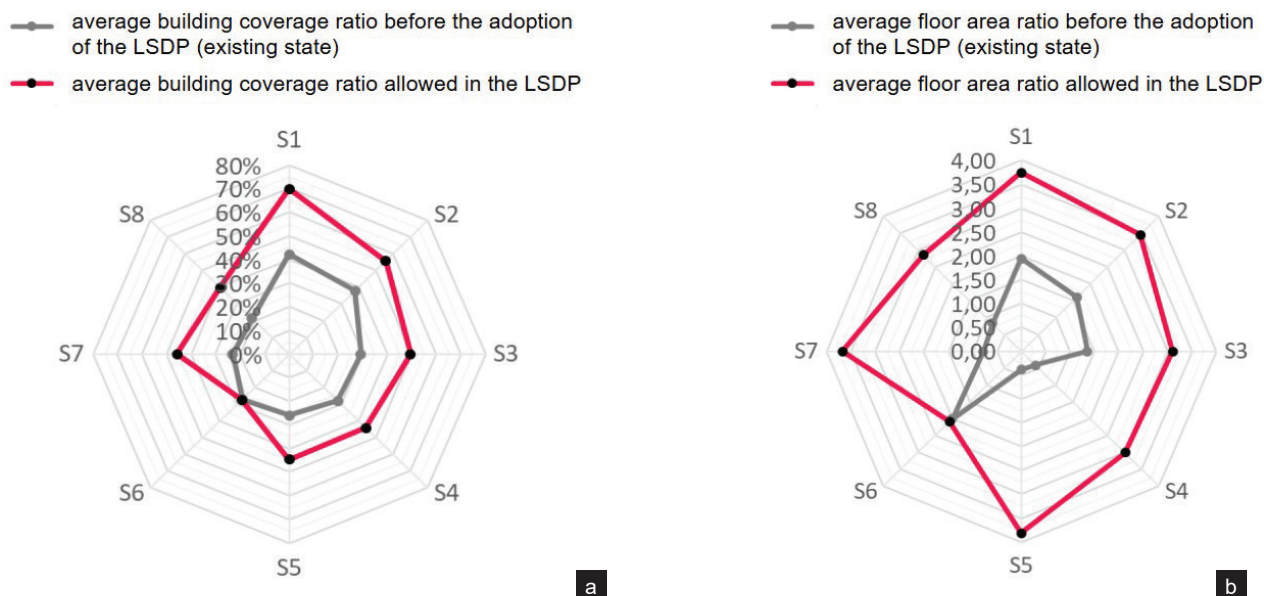


Fig. 2. Radar charts showing the average building coverage ratio (a) and floor area ratio (b) in a given area prior to the adoption of LSDP, as well as the average maximum parameters permitted in local plans adopted between 2010 and 2024 for areas designated for multi-family residential and mixed residential-service functions (elaborated by M. Pilny)

II. 2. Wykresy radarowe przedstawiające średni wskaźnik powierzchni zabudowy (a) i intensywności zabudowy (b) na danym terenie przed przyjęciem MPZP i średnie maksymalne parametry dopuszczone w planach miejscowych przyjętych w latach 2010–2024 dla obszarów przeznaczonych pod funkcję mieszkaniową wielorodzinną i mieszkaniowo-usługową (oprac. M. Pilny)

pressure. A hallmark of conserving plans is that permitted density indicators are maintained at or close to existing levels.

Infilling plans set conditions for filling gaps within an already clearly defined urban structure that nonetheless requires completion. They typically enable a moderate increase in FAR relative to existing conditions, and the permitted parameters mirror those of the surrounding buildings.

Incorporating plans change the function of the plan area and are often linked to the conversion of sites losing their previous purpose. Densification is usually achieved by transforming industrial or low-intensity service land into high-intensity residential or mixed residential-service land. The essence of these plans is to incorporate formerly separate or mono-functional areas – such as post-industrial or railway sites – into the city's multifunctional core. They are characterised by significant increases in both BCR and FAR relative to the pre-plan state and by the introduction of an entirely new urban fabric based on a new urban composition.

To complete the typology, a fourth type – transforming plans – is included, even though none were identified in the analysed set; they were present in older plans. These concern already built-up residential or mixed residential-service areas, yet contain provisions aimed at reorganising the urban composition by replacing existing structures with new development or by adding to them in ways that substantially alter the spatial layout. Transforming plans may increase, decrease or maintain density indicators at levels similar to the current condition.

Of the 95 LSDPs analysed, 38.9% were infilling plans, 31.6% incorporating plans, and 18.9% conserving plans (Fig. 3). By land area covered, incorporating plans accounted for 44.9%, infilling plans for 24.6%, and conserving plans for 20.2% (Fig. 3).

The distributions and locations shown in Figure 3 indicate several clear tendencies in Wrocław's planning practice. First, there is a drive to fill gaps in areas with a clearly defined urban fabric, as in S1 – Stare Miasto. Simultaneously, some existing housing estates are protected against densification. This is especially visible in 1970s and 1980s estates, where relatively large undeveloped areas could accommodate new projects (Szafrńska 2013), albeit often at the expense of spatial quality, residents' access to green space, or parking (Dąbrowski, Pilny 2021). Another strong tendency is the incorporation of former industrial and railway areas into the functional urban core by changing their designation to mixed residential-service uses.

Conclusions

The results indicate that, in 2010–2024, densifying the central part of Wrocław was an important objective of local regulation. The authorities responsible for shaping the city's spatial policy drafted and adopted LSDPs whose provisions explicitly addressed the densification of the urban fabric. Motivations related to densification frequently appeared in the explanatory memoranda accompanying resolutions to commence the preparation of LSDPs. These memoranda often referred to the intention to respond to pressure from real estate developers investing in Wrocław's centre and to the need to bring order to this process. At the same time, some local plans were intended to prevent densification of particular areas. Overall, the city's densification policy was largely reactive, responding to ongoing investors activity and growing market pressure to build on city centre land. In many cases, plan-making followed opposition from local communities to new development, especially on green land.

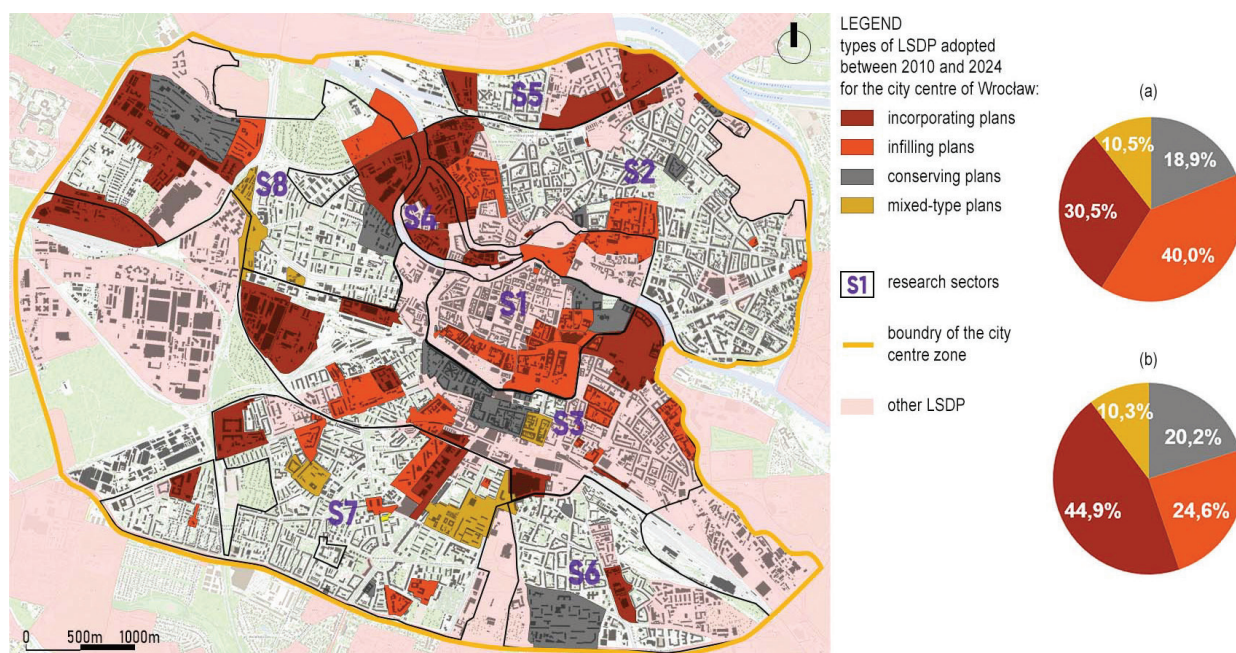


Fig. 3. The location of individual types of LSDP adopted for Wrocław's city centre between 2010 and 2024 with pie charts showing the share of each type in terms of: a) the number of adopted plans, b) the area covered by the plans (elaborated by M. Pilny)

Il. 3. Lokalizacja poszczególnych typów MPZP uchwalanych dla śródmieścia Wrocławia w latach 2010–2024 oraz diagramy kołowe przedstawiające udział poszczególnych typów, biorąc pod uwagę: a) liczbę uchwalonych planów, b) powierzchnię terenu objętego planami (oprac. M. Pilny)

The analysed LSDPs reveal different strategies for densifying the city centre. The local authority sought to regulate densification both through gap-site building within already developed areas (infilling plans) and by incorporating new areas – mainly post-industrial – into the city's multifunctional core (incorporating plans). There are also cases where densification was treated as undesirable and LSDPs were used to protect the existing state of development (conserving plans). No plans were found whose provisions would bring about a comprehensive reorganisation of existing residential areas (transforming plans).

The identified LSDP types correspond, to some extent, with Michael R.G. Conzen's (1982) four phases of the urban development cycle (initiation, infilling, saturation and reduction) and with Marek Koter's (2015) three processes affecting morphological units or systems: infilling, supplementing and transformation. According to Koter, these involve, respectively, adding elements to existing units, creating new units and reconstructing existing spatial structures. In the author's view, that terminology is only partially applicable to the typology of local plans; hence the different labels for LSDP types proposed in this article.

Planned densification is evident in LSDPs adopted for areas of differing morphological types. Strategies vary with local conditions – historical context, morphology and degree of development. Wrocław's internal growth has primarily proceeded along two lines: (i) converting post-industrial land to residential and mixed uses and (ii) complementing the historic fabric with gap-site infill. Some LSDPs, by contrast, protect against densification – especially within the historic urban fabric and in already densely populated large housing estates (e.g., Huby, Popowice, Szczepin). For these

estates, two strategies were employed concurrently: protecting inter-block green space from infill and actively building out sites reserved in the original estate designs for service facilities. Such densification can functionally complete estates and foster a more varied and liveable urban environment (Jacobs 2014), provided that the new architecture is not mono-functional and improves residents' access to diverse functions (Sim 2019).

An increase in urban-density indicators was present in the analysed LSDPs across all research sectors. The highest values of BCR occurred in the central part of the city, where the historic urban fabric has been preserved, while the highest values of FAR were found in the ring surrounding the historic centre, where LSDPs typically allow taller buildings. In the author's assessment, spatial context played a decisive role in shaping these indicators. The planning intention was to protect the urban composition of the historic core, whereas in places where the historical context was less strong, taller buildings were permitted while reserving more open land.

In the study period, Wrocław's authorities clearly sought to establish a planning framework for densifying the inner-city with residential development. This process was driven primarily by rising housing demand – visible in all major Polish cities – and by revived investment activity in the housing market. This is evidenced, for example, by the adoption of plan amendments introducing residential uses on land previously designated for services. The analysis of density indicators in the examined LSDPs shows that municipal policy followed market trends by permitting projects with parameters markedly higher than those of nearby existing buildings. The adopted LSDP provisions therefore, to a significant extent, prioritised densification – even at the

expense of maintaining *urban order*, understood as matching the parameters of new development to the existing urban context.

A constructive response to the need for harmonious development of inner-city areas would be to investigate urban density at the level of individual urban units and to use the

resulting data to develop local urban standards. These could steer densification in a controlled and balanced way that improves – rather than diminishes – the quality of life in the dense city. Conscious policymaking on urban densification is not possible without in-depth analysis of the indicators that describe urban density.

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Streszczenie

Dogęszczanie urbanistyczne w miejscowych planach zagospodarowania przestrzennego. Przykład śródmieścia Wrocławia w latach 2010–2024

Tło przeprowadzonych na potrzeby artykułu badań stanowi rosnąca w ostatnich latach aktywność deweloperów w centrach polskich miast. Wrocław został wybrany jako jedno z najszybciej rozwijających się miast w Polsce. Celem badania było zidentyfikowanie podejścia władz planistycznych do dogęszczania urbanistycznego w zapisach miejscowych planów zagospodarowania przestrzennego uchwalanych w latach 2010–2024. Badania objęły analizę 95 miejscowych planów zagospodarowania przestrzennego pod kątem zawartych w nich wskaźników urbanistycznych dotyczących gęstości zabudowy – wskaźnika powierzchni zabudowy oraz wskaźnika intensywności zabudowy.

Dzięki analizie aktywności planistycznej na terenie śródmieścia Wrocławia w latach 2010–2024 określono, w jakim stopniu proces dogęszczania tkanki miejskiej jest planowany i kontrolowany, czyli oparty na obowiązujących miejscowych planach zagospodarowania przestrzennego. Zauważono, że plany miejscowe używane są w celu zarówno tworzenia ram dla procesu dogęszczania zabudowy, jak i zapobiegania niechcianemu dogęszczaniu. Zidentyfikowano występujące w dokumentach strategię dogęszczania urbanistycznego. W wyniku przeprowadzonej analizy zaproponowano autorski podział planów miejscowych na cztery kategorie, z których każdą charakteryzuje inne podejście do procesu dogęszczania.

Słowa kluczowe: planowanie przestrzenne, Wrocław, urbanistyka, dogęszczanie