

Szombierki Heat Power Plant | Photo: Arkadiusz Janocha / Bytom City Hall

Cities that owe their growth and success to such natural deposits as coal are now well past their prime. The progressive decarbonisation of the energy industry, the massive increase in the cost of exploiting this raw material, and the growing risks of reaching ever-lower seams are making coal mining unprofitable. Environmental challenges pose a powerful argument to limit or even abandon its extraction altogether. The European Union aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. The fate of coal seems to be sealed. Economic, social and, above all, climate considerations are taking precedence. The doomsday scenario of cities that have been mainly sustained by the all-too-familiar mines has become a reality for many European conurbations.


TO ESCAPE THE APOCALYPSE

In 1989, Poland had 70 active hard coal mines; as of December 2024, only 19 are still in operation. These might be just raw numbers, but in the second half of the 1990s, there were six hard coal mines operating in Sosnowiec, a city with a population of nearly 260,000. In 2015, the last trolley left its last active mine, KWK Kazimierz-Juliusz. Today, mining in Sosnowiec is a thing of the past, and the population equals less than 190,000 residents. This is the case all throughout Silesia and the Zagłębie region.

For many years now, researchers have been looking closely at those cities which, as a result of unfavourable economic changes, have not only lost their high regional status but are in decline due to losing their primary sources of income as well. Painstakingly built up over several decades, they were moving towards the utopian city of prosperity based on natural wealth. The move away from their main source of income is forcing the residents to adapt to the changes and find an alternative as quickly as possible. Otherwise, they will face a dystopian vision of a grim, impoverished city heading for collapse.

In 2023, an article by Elżbieta Zuzańska-Żyśko, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor and Valentin Mihaylov, PhD, DLitt, entitled 'Is a post-dystopian urban future possible? Alternative scenarios for Bytom' was published in the *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series*. Researchers from the Institute of Social and Economic Geography and Spatial Management at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the University of Silesia conducted an in-depth study of areas with clearly present dystopian conditions. They analysed such topics as depopulation, social polarisation, ghettoisation, urban decay, and mining damage. 'Utopian and dystopian concepts are, by definition, focused on a vision of the future. Utopia involves the creation of an ideal society, which lives in prosperity and harmony, while a dystopia is to some extent equivalent to an approaching apocalypse. Our primary challenge was to seek an answer to the question: can urban dystopia be an observable state of the present that can be measured by specific indicators? That is, seen not as a vision of future – a side effect of utopian concepts – but rather as an observable and measurable state, explains Valentin Mihaylov.

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WHY BYTOM?

Because it brings together all the characteristic features of a post-industrial city and the problems faced by its residents and administrators. The city exemplifies the combination of stunning architecture of the urban fabric and an urban layout. The great scale of Bytom's demographic decline can be compared to that of such post-industrial cities as Detroit or Pittsburgh, although – as the researchers acknowledge – both of these cities are well past their dystopian period. In the 1970s, Bytom had eight coal mines, two zinc mines, and two steelworks. The Bobrek mine is the only one that has survived to the present day, but even its fate is sealed. It was supposed to remain active until 2040, but following a negative opinion by the Natural Hazards Commission, it will be closed down in December 2025.

Bytom, which developed remarkably well at the beginning of the 20th century and during the communist era, was the beating heart of the region. It not only boasted rich industry but also attracted outside people with its vast cultural offer. There was an opera house, excellent schools (ballet, music), a thriving museum, great educational institutions, high-level of services, elegant establishments...; recalls Elżbieta Zuzańska-Żyśko.

The first wrong decision, which turned out to have tragic consequences, was Bytom's rejection of the Upper Silesian Railway. Katowice, on the other hand, did not refuse the offer and consequently became one of the largest and most important railway junctions in Poland. The railway finally came to Bytom more than twenty years later, in 1869.

Bytom's social sphere underwent total deconstruction after World War II. The victorious Red Army destroyed the town and then began the forced evictions and a 'de-Germanisation' campaign. Bytom lost half of its population, which was replaced by people from the former Polish territories, mainly from the Lviv, Stanisławów, and Ternopil voivodeships. In 1951, the neighbouring municipalities were incorporated into the city: Bobrek-Karb, Miechowice, Szombierki, and Łagiewniki, which not only destroyed the local identity of these municipalities but also turned the harmoniously developing city into an unmanageable and lacking-in-character giant. The city lost its importance and influence in the region and became a typical mining and labour centre.

'While other cities were developing a broad service system, attracting new investors, developing a new technology sector, and experiencing similar innovations, time stood still in Bytom with regard to the extraction and processing of natural resources. Monopolised by mining, the labour market quickly became stagnant, earning Bytom the status of a shrinking city', concludes Elżbieta Zuzańska-Żyśko.

Example of a revitalised public space in the form of a pocket park
in Bytom's inner city | Photo: Elżbieta Zuzańska-Żyśko

DEPOPULATION

Although, according to scientists, a decrease in population does not always lead to unfavourable economic changes, it is worth noting that Bytom recorded its largest population in 1987 – the Central Statistical Office (GUS) data shows that the city had 240,000 residents at that time, while in December 2024, this number dropped to 129,000 (data from the Department of Civil Affairs of the Municipal Office in Bytom), which means that in a period of 37 years the city lost 111,000 residents. Such a loss is equivalent to the complete disappearance of a city the size of Chorzów (102,000 residents) or Dąbrowa Górnicza (105,000 residents).

Coal mining in the communist era damaged the protective pillars under Bytom, which led to the destruction of most of the tenement houses in the city. The mining damage had disastrous consequences. The city's negative image contributes to its poor reputation. Bytom is the clear frontrunner in the 'Ugliest City in Poland' ranking, despite having once prided itself on being known as Little Vienna.

According to Valentin Mihaylov, it is an unfair assessment, especially when considering the city's stunning architecture. 'We have put forward the theory', the scientist continues, 'that even if it was possible to overcome the economic problems, revive the post-industrial landscape, and restore the labour market to its former glory, this stereotype perpetuated by the residents of other cities will continue to live on for quite some time. After all, a similar concept of 'Black Silesia' still continues to live on in the shared consciousness of the people of Poland'. Adverse changes have also affected the social sphere. Depopulation leads to various dysfunctions and an increase in the number of marginalised people. Rapid impoverishment also leads to ghettoisation. Examples include isolated groups of unemployed people moved to social housing and the Romani population resettled from Karb to Bobrek (their houses collapsed due to mining damage). According to Elżbieta Zuzańska-Żyśko, this was not so much a relocation of Romani people as their isolation in the Bobrek district, which ended up creating another disadvantaged urban area.

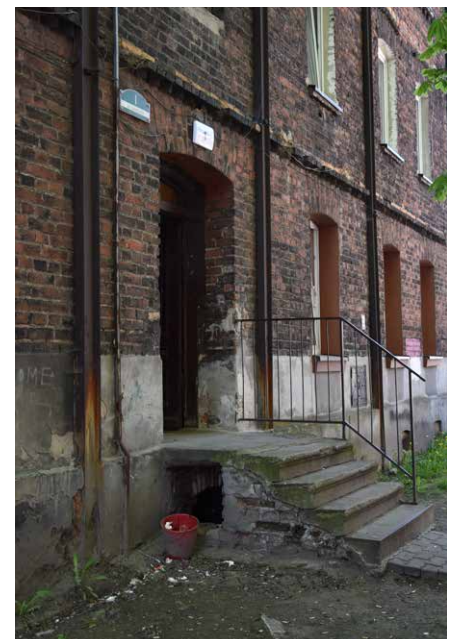
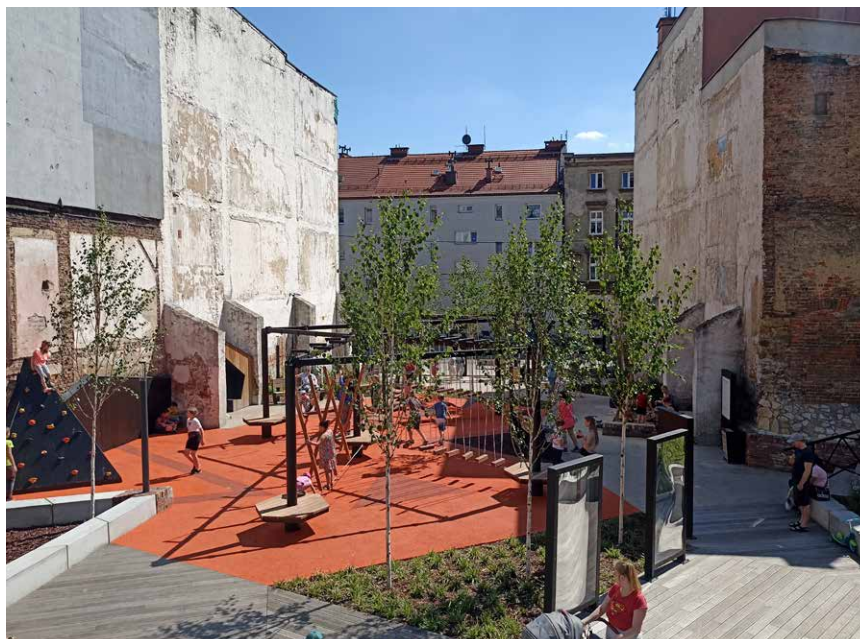
PROSPECTS NO LONGER SO BLEAK

There are several possible rescue scenarios for Bytom. Researchers are leaning towards the idea of a semi-dystopia, a much milder vision than the previous apocalyptic one. They base their opinions on the positive signs that begin to appear, short- and long-term repair programmes, the explosion of grassroots social initiatives, the activation of individual communities, as exemplified by the attractive offer of comprehensive urban revitalisation 'Bytom odNOWA' (Bytom reNEWed).

Whether the city will be able to cope with the post-dystopian conditions will be determined by a series of complementary measures, starting with wise, well-considered, and far-reaching decisions by the authorities, proper involvement of the Bytom community, the quality of new investments, and openness for innovation and new technologies. Of course, it will require substantial financial resources, but the city can count on the support of, among others, the Upper Silesian Metropolitan Union and the European Union.

The emergence of an increasing number of 'islands of success' is encouraging. They range from spectacular ones – such as the revitalisation of the 'cathedral of industry', i.e. the former Szombierki Heat Power Plant, the Krystyna Shaft, the renovation of the Silesian Opera, the Rozbark Dance and Movement Theatre, new sports and recreation facilities, golf courses, the largest outdoor sports climbing wall in Poland – to a much smaller but equally valuable initiatives, such as the 'colourful backyards' campaign.

However, scientists are cautious in their forecasts. In their opinion, the desired salvation from the dystopian reality will not come through the search for new utopian ideas and visions, but through the alleviation and improvement of significant social, economic and environmental problems.



Example of a run-down residential building in Bytom | Photo: Valentin Mihaylov